



Corner Bar Magazine

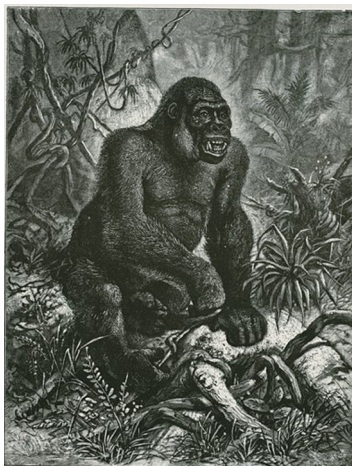
Volume 10 Number 1

Page 1 – LIVING UP TO THE CODE by Alice Nord. Ms. Nord writes, “I’m an ex-molecular biologist and specialized in creating genetic modifications; I now work as a medical writer and Japanese-to-English translator, dividing my time between France and Japan. I’ve previously published short fiction in the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Andromeda Spaceways Magazine*, and *Jelly Bucket*.” She currently lives in Paris, France.

Page 10 – THE FISHERWOMAN’S TALE by Lisa Lahey. Ms Lahey’s short stories and poetry have been published in *34th Parallel Magazine*, *Spaceports and Spidersilk*, *Five on the Fifth*, *Spadina Literary Review*, *Vita Poetica*, *Ariel Chart Review*, *Altered Reality*, *Suddenly*, *And Without Warning*, *Why Vandalism*, *Truth, Beauty and Imagination*, and *Creepy Podcast*. She will soon be published in *Epater Magazine*, *The Pink Hydra*, *Roi Fointenant*, *Small City World*, *VerbalArt Journal*, *Adelaide Review*, *Siren Call Publications*, *Blood and Bourbon Magazine*, *Bindweed Anthology*, *Engstand Magazine*, *West Avenue Publishing*, *Lothlorian Poetry Journal*, and *Propagate Fruits from the Garden*.

Page 14 – THE SOLUTION by David Macarthur. David Macarthur is a fledgling Scottish writer, made redundant from the IT field he found a passion in short fiction in his newly found free time. David crafts a web linking all his short fiction stories in the world of Neptune’s Bounty.

Page 16 – UNDERNEATH by Jacqueline DiBernardo. Ms DiBernardo lives in Portland, Oregon. Growing up on the coast of Southern California, she spent her childhood staring at the ocean and thinking about things that lurked unseen. Now she writes stories intended to evoke that same sense of fathomlessness, of trying to discern outlines in an abyss. Jacqueline is an active member of Portland Writer’s Workshop and can be found on instagram @jdibernardo.



“LIVING UP TO THE CODE”

by ALICE NORD

All children of successful parents know the struggle of living up to their standards, and many know the humiliation of failing at it. They have it easy. James had an entire designer genome to live up to, and unlike all those who merely had a haphazard cross-over of genes from two successful people, he wasn't even allowed the comfort of getting to dissect his feelings of inadequacy with a therapist.

He didn't want fame or glory, though. He just wanted to make his way up the corporate ladder at TransVision, a maker of shuttlecar software, and earn some recognition as a programmer. And today was a promising day for that; he was going to have his yearly performance review, and he was nearly positive he'd be promoted to the intercity department.

#

“A three? I get a *three*?” James stared at the tablet, which showed a scale from one to five with the middle digit circled, then at his boss, then back at the tablet. “For all that work on the shuttlecar safety project last year, turning that whole mess around, I'm rated as *mediocre*?”

Carla flinched. “No, not ‘mediocre.’” She touched the circled “3,” bringing up a text box. “A ‘3’ suggests the employee has met the expectations outlined for the role,” she read. “It's not a bad rating, James. A ‘4’ would have required something more—‘going beyond the expectations outlined for the role to deliver exceptional

results.’”

“And what I did just *meets expectations*? Doing five programmers' worth of work while dealing with a bunch of numb-nuts from Commercial who have no idea of what it takes to do what we do, that's *meeting expectations* for my role?”

Carla's expression was sympathetic but studiously noncommittal.

He realized he had said too much. “Sorry. I just don't agree with that rating. And I don't believe my skills are optimally used in the shuttlecar department. I'm not even programming half the time—I'm just sitting in meetings.”

“I know.” Carla patted his forearm lightly. “We're almost out of time and I have back-to-back meetings today, but how about we meet again tomorrow? We can go over your feedback to help you improve your performance even further. Again, let me emphasize that a ‘3’ is not a mediocre rating. No one is mediocre at TransVision, and you should be proud of yourself.”

James looked down at the table. “Yeah. Thanks.”

#

He had only intended to sit down at the bar for a while and think about things before heading home, but after his second gin and tonic, thinking had only made him feel worse.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. He was made for great things, *literally* made for great

things. And yet, as much as Carla had denied it and as angry as he had gotten over it, he was the very definition of “mediocre.” He was a white-collar drone whose big achievement was a 6% improvement in curve utilization efficiency by shuttlecars.

I need another drink.

He was about to order one when a group of people entered the room, laughing and joking. At the center of them was a programmer he vaguely recognized. She went up to the bar while her friends looked for a place to sit. “Five shots of tequila, please.”

“Hey, don’t you also work for TransVision?” James asked.

The woman looked at him and smiled, showing perfect white teeth. “Not anymore!”

“Oh,” James said, confused. “You’ve quit?”

“I just got a job with ElonGate. We’re celebrating.”

“Damn. ElonGate. That’s a step up—congratulations.”

“Thank you,” she said. “I’m sorry, I know we’ve met, but I can’t recall your...”

“I’m James.” He extended his hand.

“Pooja,” she said, taking it. “Hey, want to join us? Today was my last day, I have a week off before starting my new job, and I’m planning to get absolutely *smashed* tonight.”

James glanced at the tray of shots, salt, and lime the bartender had just set down in front of her, then at her group of friends, who were sitting in a booth, cheering and waving for them to join. Why not, he thought. Perhaps it would help distract him. “I’d be delighted.”

#

Three hours and many shots later, he found himself alone in a corner booth with Pooja. She was pouring vodka from a bottle, swaying slightly from side to side and spilling half of it out-

side the glasses. He was slumped forward over the table and watched her through half-closed eyes, rapt with admiration.

“You’re so beautiful.” The words came out so garbled he wasn’t sure she’d understand him.

“So are you,” she slurred back at him. She pushed one of the shot glasses across the table.

He felt a rush of joy. He could talk to Pooja. Pooja would understand. “I’m special, you know.” He looked up from the shot glass. “I’m not like other men.”

“Sure you’re not,” she said, laughing.

“No, I mean it. I’m, like, a superhuman.”

Pooja slumped forward over the table, cradling the tiny shot glass in her hands. “Oh? In what way?”

“I’m geneticaly...genticly...genetically modified.” He smiled when Pooja burst into laughter at his difficulties with the word. “To be *su-pe-ri-or*.” He enunciated each syllable so that he wouldn’t repeat his first mistake.

“Like how?” Pooja asked, then closed her eyes.

“Hey, don’t fall asleep, Ms. I’m-so-fancy-because-I-have-a-fancy-job-at-ElonGate.” James stretched his arm out and swatted her hand lightly.

“I’m not, I’m listening,” she said. “Go on. Also, it’s ‘doctor’. Now, you were telling me in what way you’re superior.”

“Right, yes.” James had already forgotten what he was talking about. “Well, I have extra muscle mass.” He flexed his arm and lost his balance, nearly falling over in his seat. “Oops. You didn’t see that. And then I’m faster. I have bigger lung capacity, better healing capacity. And, importantly,” he shook his finger at the slumped-over woman, “improved cognitive function. More short-term and long-term memory capacity, great at math, all that.”

“Mmhmm,” Pooja said. “And how were you genetically modified?”

“The gov-ern-ment,” he said in a stage whisper that made Pooja giggle.

“And are you the only one?”

“No, there’s one more. She’s...”

Before he could finish the sentence, someone grabbed him under the armpits and dragged him into a standing position.

“Wha...?” He turned his head to see a man that looked vaguely familiar.

“Sorry I’m late, Jimmy! Wow, looks like you’ve had a few too many. Let’s get you home.”

James shook his head, then regretted it, feeling nauseated. “Thanks, buddy,” he said, though he still couldn’t place who the person was, “but I’m in the middle of a conversation with my friend here.” He glanced down at Pooja. She was snoring. “I mean, I can’t just leave her here like that.”

“Don’t worry. We will get her home safely, too.”

“Will we? Oh good...”

#

When he woke up again, he had a foul taste in his mouth and he didn’t recognize the ceiling. He sat up slowly, his head throbbing. He was on a sofa in an office: the old-fashioned, luxuriously private kind with opaque walls and only a single desk. Across from him was the man from yesterday, sitting with his arms crossed and staring at him. In contrast to James, the man looked clean, starched, and clean-cut in an almost military—

“Agent Forsberg!” he said. It came out as a croak.

“About time you recognized me.”

“Where am I? And...why?”

“In an office. It doesn’t matter where. And do you really need to ask why?”

James tried to think, but his head was throbbing and felt like mush.

Agent Forsberg sighed. “With the state you were in, I guess you do.” He stood up and walked toward the door. “I’m going to get you some coffee, then we’ll talk.”

When he returned, he was carrying a glass of water and a mug of black coffee. James chugged the former and sipped the latter.

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

James looked up from the coffee cup. “Uh... I was at a bar. With my new friend Pooja. We were talking about... Oh.” He got a sinking feeling in his stomach. The details were fuzzy, but he recalled telling Pooja that he was a “superhuman.” He had agreed never to tell anyone, and until yesterday, he never had. “That’s why you’re here.”

“Yes,” Agent Forsberg agreed. “That’s why I’m here.”

“But...how? You can’t possible have had me under surveillance all the time, all these years?” The thought that his unremarkable life would have been under constant watch by the government was both ludicrous and a bit exciting.

“Not all the time. We only start listening to what you say if you mention certain trigger words. Like ‘superior.’ And ‘superhuman.’ And ‘government.’” Agent Forsberg sighed. “Let me tell you, it was really boring to have to listen to every lunch-room debate you had before the last election.”

“But...how?” James said again. He looked down and touched the GPS chip implanted on his forearm. “Wait; there’s a listening device in my chip?”

Agent Forsberg didn’t say anything.

James took that as a yes. “I feel so violated.”

The agent rolled his eyes. “You shouldn’t. It was covered in the fourteenth clause of your

confidentiality agreement, as a means of ‘surveillance to ensure and enforce compliance.’ You just didn’t read it closely enough. Now, are you ready to talk about why you are here?”

“Yeah,” James said, feeling sheepish. “But first...is Pooja okay?” He felt a stab of fear and guilt when Agent Forsberg didn’t answer immediately. “What have you done to her?”

Agent Forsberg rolled his eyes again. “Jesus, who do you think we are? Agent Lu took her home, made her drink half a gallon of water, and put her to bed.”

“What was in the water?” James asked, still suspicious.

“A tiny bit of a drug that induces short-term amnesia. Probably wasn’t needed, considering how much she’d had to drink and the fact that she was half-asleep while you were rambling, but just to be on the safe side. She won’t notice anything amiss. Now, let’s talk.”

James nodded but didn’t say anything. He wouldn’t have known where to start.

There was a long silence, then Agent Forsberg asked, “Why *now*? Why, after all these years, did you start talking now?”

James tried to collect his thoughts. “I guess I was just feeling...mediocre. I’d had a bad day in the office. Not bad in any dramatic way; it was just a boring day with boring meetings. My colleagues are mostly nice but sometimes a bit tedious.” He laughed. “And worse, *I*’m probably also ‘nice but a bit tedious.’ And then I had my performance review, and I got rated average, so I won’t get to do the more exciting work I had been hoping for, and then I tried to argue with my line manager, but it didn’t help and now she wants to go over my feedback for this year...”

Agent Forsberg’s stared. “*That* is why you violated a confidentiality agreement with the DoD, the FBI and the whole damn United

States of America? Because you had boring day at work and got an average performance rating?”

“When you put it that way, I admit that it sounds a bit absurd.” James rubbed his eyes, wishing he could have more coffee. “It was more like...the final straw. I want to do something big in life, and it just became so painfully clear that this isn’t it.”

Forsberg’s expression went from incredulous to alarmed.

James hastened to reassure him. “I’m not talking about becoming a despot and genociding everyone so I can feel smug all by myself. I just want to do something *meaningful*, you know? Something where I make a difference, something that only I could do.”

Agent Forsberg rubbed the bridge of his nose and sighed. “Okay, I know how you feel. Everyone feels that way sometimes. But that doesn’t mean you can go get drunk and share US military secrets with random people. Sure, no harm was done this time, but what about next time? Perhaps you’ll be with someone who *isn’t* drunk. Perhaps someone who will believe you.”

James opened his mouth to say he was sorry, but then, the thought of apologizing brought forth a surge of anger. He had never asked to have his genome modified. He had never asked to grow up in a military research facility because some neo-nationalist crackpot generals decided that eugenics deserved a revival. When they had inevitably realized how unfeasible, hopelessly twentieth-century, and generally embarrassing Project Lightbringer was, they shut it down and let one of the geneticists adopt him. When he came of age, he was served with a 347 page confidentiality agreement that guaranteed his safety in exchange for his silence. So what—was he supposed to thank them for letting him live?

“You know what? You *don’t* understand how I feel. Sure, everyone has those thoughts every once in a while, but they don’t have a superhuman genome. You have no idea what it’s like to have all the makings of a genius, to be designed to be one—or a supersoldier, or whatever—and *still* only manage to be a corporate drone. You don’t understand. No one could under—” James stopped himself. That wasn’t true. There was Akemi, too; if she was still alive, that is. He hadn’t seen her since he was six or seven, when they were split up and she was sent to a different facility.

He realized Agent Forsberg had been talking.

“...within our contractual rights to enforce your silence, and I don’t think you would like that, but look, I feel for you. Can we help you with something? A better job, where you can... better use your skills? Something more exciting? Hey, man, why not quit working altogether—move to Australia and learn to surf? Life’s not all about work.”

“I want to meet Akemi,” James said. “She is, literally, the only person who could understand me.”

Agent Forsberg shook his head. “That part was also clearly delineated in the contract, remember?”

“Well, I would like to renegotiate it. Or amend it, or whatever.”

“No can do.”

“Look,” he pleaded, setting his coffee cup down with a *thunk*. “I assume you put that part in because you didn’t want us to join up and try to create some sort of *übermensch* dyad and stage an uprising, but come on. Do I seem like I’d want to do that? More pertinently, do I seem like I *could* do that?”

Agent Forsberg stayed silent.

“Or are you worried that we’d talk to the media? Because the risk of that isn’t any greater than when I’m alone. You know that my DNA has plenty of proof; it’s riddled with LoxP sites and other scars from outdated genetic modifications. Not that I plan to do that,” he hastened to add. “I’m just saying. Unless you, uh, ‘succeeded’ with her and she’s actually some sort of supersoldier warlord somewhere, then would it really do so much harm to let us talk to each other? I don’t want you to get me job offers I couldn’t get on my own or pay for me to be a beach bum. I just want to talk to someone who would understand. Please.”

Agent Forsberg sighed. “I’ll see what I can do.”

#

Akemi was alive and well and lived in Tokyo, where James found himself only a few days later. He texted her after checking into his hotel in Shinjuku, and they made plans to meet in front of the Godzilla statue. “Let’s get dinner for starters. I have a shift starting at 21.00,” Akemi wrote, “but I might be able to switch.”

Forty-five minutes later, James walked through the neonlit archway at the entrance to the Kabukichō redlight district. He quickly spotted the Godzilla-crowned hotel, planted himself in front of it, and looked at his smartphone. Ten minutes to go.

Ten minutes. He suddenly felt unprepared. How would he even recognize her? He had only the faintest memory of her face as a child. And what would he say to her? What if this was a mistake? What if she wouldn’t understand, because she was a huge success—or what if she *would* understand, and they would just be two mediocre people together? What if—

“James? James, right?”

He blinked and turned to see a woman

looking at him from under long false lashes. She was wearing a bodycon dress in electric purple that showed off surprisingly muscular arms.

“Akemi?”

She gave a little wave. “It’s nice to meet you. Or *see you again*, rather.” She smiled.

#

“You said you might have a shift later—what do you work as?” James asked while they walked.

“I’m a hostess at a club in Kabukichō. Do you know what a hostess is?”

“I think so. You spend time with male customers, talking and drinking and generally keeping them entertained and feeling good about themselves, right?”

“*Pin-pon*,” she said, emulating the correct-answer sound of a trivia show. “But I did manage to switch shifts with one of the other girls, so we can talk all evening.”

They reached the restaurant, a yakiniku place with private rooms. There was a million questions he wanted to ask Akemi, but he resisted until they were seated and the waitress had served their beers and slid the door closed.

“What happened to you after we were split up?”

“I was moved to another research facility,” Akemi said, unsurprised at the sudden question. “It was pretty similar to the one we were at together.”

“Where was it?”

“I never found out. The research labs and all—it was also like a small city—they were in the middle of a desert, so I’m guessing maybe Arizona or New Mexico. But for all I know, it might not even have been on American soil. There were no windows near me in the airshuttle when I arrived or when I left. What about you; did you stay on in that same facility? And did you ever figure out where it was?”

He nodded at her first question. “Yeah, I stayed. No; still no clue.” He shrugged. “How long did you stay at the place in the desert?”

“Until I was eleven.” Akemi twirled the thick gold bangle on her wrist. “Then I was adopted by my surrogate mom—you probably saw her sometime; she was one of the clinical geneticists—and we moved to Oakland, New Jersey. I stayed there until I was eighteen, then moved to Japan.”

“Why Japan?”

“My mom is Japanese-American; she made me go to the Japanese school in Oakland. And it just seemed like a cool place. She was furious that I didn’t go to college, but I convinced her it would be good to take a gap year to brush up on my Japanese and that I could then take the entrance exams for some fancy Japanese university instead.” She giggled. “Sorry, mom.”

“But—how? I’m not supposed to move out of the country. It was in the agreement.”

“It was in mine, too, but I had them change that part before I agreed to sign it. I was so sick of New Jersey and going to Tokyo had been my dream for years. I had to agree to increased surveillance and regular meetings with my ‘handler,’ but I don’t mind. If Japan’s intelligence agency ever noticed me, they probably think I’m the world’s worst spy.” She laughed.

They were interrupted by the reappearance of the waitress, who unloaded sticks with vegetables and sizzling meat onto the grill net between them.

“How come you’re working as a hostess?” he asked while Akemi loaded up her plate.

Without looking up, she responded, “Because I want to.”

“Sorry—I didn’t mean to imply anything else. I mean, what made you decide you wanted to be a hostess?”

"I didn't exactly want to become a *hostess*, specifically; I just loved Tokyo and Kabukichō, and I wanted to be part of it. But I like being a hostess—most of the time. Sometimes you get some really off-putting customers, and as long as they don't touch you, you pretty much just have to smile and agree with everything they say. But I have a few regulars that are really great. And it's not the kind of job one does forever."

"What do you want to do when you quit being a hostess?"

"Ah." She got a dreamy look in her eyes. "I'd like to be the *mama-san* of my very own bar: a really fancy one, on the thirtieth floor of a skyscraper with a view over all of Tokyo and a chandelier. Like in a whiskey ad." She sighed. "But to be a *mama-san* of a place like that, you would have to be the wife of some hot-shot *yakuza*. Or mistress." Akemi pursed her lips and absently tapped her long, rainbow-colored acrylic nails against her cheek.

James thought of how he had convinced Agent Forsberg that Akemi was the only person in the world who could understand him. The gorgeous woman across from him, daydreaming of being a gangster's mistress so she could run a luxury bar, might as well have been an alien, they couldn't have been more different from each other.

"Why are you smiling?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No reason. I'm just happy to see you again."

#

Since it was his first time in Tokyo and Akemi had the night off, she insisted on showing him Kabukichō properly. Sleepy but obedient, he followed her first to a dance club, then to a popper bar.

Their waitress set two tiny bottles down in front of them, then lifted her paw-gloved hands

in front of her exposed cleavage, bent her wrists and scrunched up her nose several times in quick succession.

"*Kawaii!*" Akemi clapped her hands.

"I don't understand," James said when the waitress had left the room. "Why are the waitresses dressed like sexy hamsters?"

Akemi shrugged. "Because it's cute? Come on, inhale. It's harmless; I promise. You don't even get a headache nowadays."

He unscrewed the cap of his bottle—it was shaped like a hamster head—and sniffed. "Oh, wow."

"It's nice, isn't it?" Akemi giggled.

"It's like—the world's most intense nicotine kick. But more fun." The rush chased away the last of his trepidation. "Hey, can I ask you another thing?" He paused. "Doesn't it ever feel like a burden to you, to have these genes?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you think it's a lot of pressure? We're supposedly smarter, stronger, and faster—we should be better at everything, right?"

Akemi shrugged. "I don't know about that. I mean, should I be Kabukichō top-earning hostess just because I have more lean mass and slightly better cognitive abilities than most people?" She laughed. "Come to think of it, those things may be as much of a hindrance as help. Why do you ask?"

He picked at the tiny plastic tail of the hamster bottle. "I don't know. I just feel like I ought to be something big—not that I'm *entitled* to be something big, mind you. It's just that I have all the makings for it, but I still can't seem to be more than 'moderately good' at anything I do. And that feels almost worse than being a spectacular failure at something." When Akemi stayed silent, he prompted, "Haven't you ever felt that way?"

She took a long time before she answered. "I have never felt that I ought to be something 'big.' But of course I want to do something that feels meaningful. Don't everyone?"

"I guess," James said. "Does your work feel meaningful?"

"Yes. Well, not my work as such; my *life* feels meaningful. I'm part of the fabric of Kabukichō, part of what makes the city what it is. I work here, I play here, I eat my hang-over curry here, I go to the love hotels here. I love Kabukichō, so that feels meaningful to me."

He envied her then.

She must have been able to tell. "Isn't there something you love? Or someone?"

"I haven't really thought about it until now," he said.

#

After the popper bar, they went to a karaoke mega-complex where they screamed themselves hoarse to rock classics and drank watered-down whiskey. It was only towards three in the morning, sitting at the counter of a tiny beach-themed bar in the Golden Gai, that it was quiet enough to talk again.

James glanced at Akemi, sipping a Blue Lagoon decorated with a tropical flower. She held the straw daintily between her strong fingers, then let it go to briefly stroke a petal of the flower, a look of dreamy appreciation on her face.

Perhaps it was how beautiful she was; perhaps Kabukichō had inspired him. Suddenly, it all became clear to him.

"What if we started a family?"

Akemi started, dropping the flower. "What?"

"I know we only just met, but—you're amazing. And we're practically made for each other." He spoke fast, eager to get it all out. "And what if we could reverse our sterilizations? We could

convince them to let us do that, somehow. Then we could have a proper family—and perhaps our children would be everything we were supposed to be."

Akemi stared at him open-mouthed for a long, long moment. Then she said, "Are you crazy?" She turned to stare at the wall, then again to look at James. "Listen. I'm not even going to comment on the...feasibility of all that. But why would you want to subject a child to all the pressure you're putting on yourself, but twice over?"

"Because—maybe they actually would be able to live up to it."

Akemi leaned down to sip her drink from the straw. She didn't stop until the electric blue liquid had sunk by nearly half. "There's a word I'm looking for," she said when she finished. "Oh, man, I really need to speak English more often. *Tedious!* That's it."

"What's tedious?"

"You're tedious. All this talk about being better, doing something big, expectations and pressure, blablabla... No one cares, you know?"

"That's harsh," he said, stung.

"I didn't mean it to be. It's just—you're at a lovely bar in this crazy city with me, and all you do is obsess over whether you're living up to expectations. You're missing out." She sighed. "And I don't want children anyways. If I hadn't been required to get sterilized, I would've done it voluntarily."

"Oh." James stared at the postcards of beaches and palm-trees decorating the wall behind the bar. He had never wanted children—and still didn't—either. "Come to think of it... neither do I. I forgot," he said sheepishly.

Akemi stared at him, then they both began to laugh. Perhaps it was the pent-up tension, but it seemed like the funniest thing ever. They laughed until Akemi took out a pocket mirror

and tissues to wipe away the streaks of mascara and eyeliner under her eyes.

“How about we head out,” she said after putting the mirror back into her purse. “I know a place nearby, if you’re too tired to make it back to your hotel.”

“Huh? But my hotel is just by—oh. Yeah. That sounds like a great idea.”

#

The place turned out to be a tiny love hotel squeezed in between an *izakaya* and a pizza parlor. It had the inscrutable name *Salle de Bain* and its exterior was decorated with an archway of pink balloons and plaster pedestals with fat cupids. They giggled as they walked through the archway, arm in arm, and they giggled even more when the old lady behind the privacy screen slid them a pair of keys and told them they were getting the *Robinet d’Amour* room.

Once they had closed the door behind them, Akemi undid the straps of her sandals. She wobbled for a moment as she bent down to remove them, and James reflexively extended a hand to support her. Akemi then put her arms around his neck, while James tentatively placed his other hand on her waist. They stood like that for a moment, looking into each others’ eyes.

“I’m sorry, but this is really weird.” Akemi said, finally.

“It is,” James agreed, relieved. He was only just realizing how uncomfortable he was with the thought of kissing her.

“It’s like...hooking up with a sibling.” She slowly retracted her hands.

“How about we sleep instead?”

“Yeah. Let’s do that.”

#

The next day, James opened his eyes to a ceiling lavishly decorated with gold-sprayed plaster. He turned to see Akemi lying on her back, deep asleep. She was still wearing her electric purple dress, while her jewelry lay tangled on the nightstand like a magpie’s nest.

He stood up and found that his head ached, though not as badly as he would’ve expected. Slowly, he put his shirt, socks, and shoes back on, then wrote a note to Akemi, telling her he was going to explore Tokyo and asking if she wanted to hang out later. He closed the door behind him quietly, then walked out through the pink balloon archway. Nearby, a lady in an apron was rolling up the metal shutter on her shop, while a young man in a fashionable suit leaned against the wall of the building, smoking an oldfashioned cigarette and looking at his phone.

James breathed in the crisp morning air and felt content. He could also find something, or somewhere, to love. ❖



“THE FISHERWOMAN’S TALE”

by LISA LAHEY

The fisherwoman lived alone in a log house on a slate foundation. Her dark hut was a single room with a woodstove, her bed, and a table and chair. There was a small mirror just large enough for Enid to see her face, but she seldom glanced into it. A fishing line hung from one side of the ceiling to the other. A draft whistled continuously through a tiny window framed in plain linen drapes. Enid salted and hung up each day’s catch to dry the fish over a fire that crackled in the wood stove.

Each day, Enid fished and gathered berries, grew a meagre garden, and set traps for wild hare—which often remained empty. When she fished close to shore, she squatted on her haunches at the edge of the lake, digging through bullrushes and weeds, seeking crayfish. When she finished hunting for smaller prey, she stood and clung to the edge of a net and, its corners weighted with stones, she threw it into the lake. It unfolded and landed over anything that had swam beneath it. Enid hauled in her net and sometimes it had a flounder or a bass inside. Other times, it had nothing.

Years ago, Enid lived in a picturesque village with a low populace. An intelligent girl, Enid worked as an alchemist. She was highly respected as the village medicine woman and healed every sickness they could, with or without pay from the villagers. Enid was more concerned with healing the sick than filling their coffers.

Although she was a successful alchemist, she was homely and awkward. Enid made few friends, and she had no husband. Families flourished in the village, but no one came calling for her. She became so lonely that it was a laborious task merely to rise from bed in the morning. Over time, she stopped preparing medicines for the villagers, and her garden fell into disrepair.

#

Alone in her fishing hut by the lake, Enid prepared each day’s meal by scraping the scales from the fish she caught, skinning it, and slicing it in half. She placed it into a wrought iron pan and cooked it on the wood stove. The smell of cooked bass filled the air, and her mouth watered. Enid devoured her dinner along with a thick, hard piece of handmade bread, and washed it down with a fermented juice made from wild berries grown in her garden. Had she not been so lonely, Enid would have been content, for her needs were simple.

Long ago, she’d learned the price extravagance could demand from a woman. A wealthy, but lecherous man finally came calling for her. Enid was a trusting woman and didn’t know that he played upon her loneliness. He was also her first suitor, and she was grateful for his attention. The man visited her with linens, food and other niceties. So skillful was he in seducing Enid, that it was easy to fall prey to his

carnal desires. Within a month of their tryst, Enid discovered she was pregnant. She expected him to wed her, but the man laughed at marrying such an ugly wife, and he abandoned her.

Over time, the girl's belly rounded until it became impossible to hide her pregnancy from the villagers. Despite all the care the girl had shown the village over the years, the villagers branded her a harlot, and turned their backs on her. They agreed that her pregnancy was the devil's work.

Racked with shame, Enid packed her belongings and left the village. Broken-hearted and empty in body and spirit, she walked over rough terrain for many miles, her feet blistering and her swollen legs aching. At night, Enid crawled beneath trees and inside abandoned animal dens to sleep. After many weeks, she found an abandoned fishing hut and it was there that she made her home. It had all the amenities she needed and even though she was utterly isolated, she was grateful to have found it. Enid settled into the little house and became a skilled fisherwoman.

*

Years passed, and some nights Enid cried herself to sleep, asking God to help her survive another day all alone. Then, one morning, when she cast her net into the lake, it fell to the bottom. She tugged on it and felt a small weight inside it. As she pulled the net toward the shore, something she'd caught twisted and turned in the waves. Finally, the net reached her feet, and she lifted layers of weeds and bullrushes aside until she could see what it held. Inside was a silent, pale baby, so translucent that she could see tiny blue blood vessels through its skin, and the hint of dark eyeballs beneath its lids.

Enid stared at it for some time. She felt

she must be dreaming, for how could an infant survive beneath the water? What had created the child? She was tempted to throw the infant back into the lake, for she feared it might be cursed. It must have been evil or had come from a supernatural realm. But when she looked at its tender face, she remembered the horrible pain of birthing a stillborn son. She had never recovered from his death and now, looking at this infant, something stirred in her.

Enid scooped the silent infant into her arms. Feeling no breath, she opened its mouth and blew hard into it. Moments later, the infant squalled and wriggled its limbs. The infant shivered, and it clung to her bosom. She wrapped her shawl around it, turned and carried the infant into the house.

Since she had no breast milk, Enid had no idea what to feed the mysterious child. Had it died quickly, which she hoped it would do, she would simply have thrown it into the lake and forgotten it. But it squawked and breathed, stubbornly clinging to life, so she found a wooden crate, lined it with a tweed blanket and lay the infant inside. Enid had no idea what to do with it and so she ignored it, salting, and eating fish, then letting the fire die down into smouldering embers. The infant moved and smacked its lips, but it didn't cry. Enid lowered the light on her gas lantern and went to bed.

By morning, the infant was still alive. She leaned over it and saw that it sucked its tiny fingers and, driven by hunger, it soon squalled. When the sound of its shrill voice filled the hut, Enid's breasts flooded with milk. She pulled open her bodice and saw milk streaming from her nipples, over her breasts and onto the flat of her stomach. She touched the milk and licked it off her finger. Tasteless and watery, Enid wondered at it. Then she picked up the crying

baby and placed it to her breast. It latched onto her nipple and suckled hungrily, breathing hard through its tiny nose.

She studied the female infant's features and saw they were like those of her dead son. Long, black eyelashes and soft, feathery eyebrows framed her beautiful face, which now bore no signs of veins or translucence. When the child finished feeding, Enid wrapped her in her shawl and set about sewing clothes made from her apron and drapes for the tiny girl.

From that day forward, Enid's loneliness disappeared, and her heart filled with love for this peculiar child. The baby seldom cried, staring at Enid with her large, dark eyes as she suckled at her breast. It mattered little to Enid where the child came from. Such a dear tiny girl couldn't be evil and the joy she brought to Enid banished fearful thoughts from her mind.

For months, Enid lived happily with her daughter. Then her luck turned. The lake was as deep and cool as ever, but when Enid brought her net to the lake, no matter how far she cast it, no fish was ever snared inside. She fished from dawn into the evening, but her net remained empty. Her small plot of wheat withered, and the lake became barren of fish.

Without fish to sustain her, Enid's body weakened, and her breast milk dried up. The baby, who was as hungry as her mother, bawled and screamed for hours on end. Maddened, Enid ran from the house and rushed to the lake, leaving the baby alone. She waded into the water up to her waist and threw herself beneath the waves, hoping they would suck her down and drown her. But she thrashed about in agony and returned to the surface.

By the third day of her famine, the infant, now starving, began to quiet. Her cry became a whimper, and Enid peered into the crate, afraid

that she would see a shrivelled corpse. As much as she hated the infant's holler, she would hate for her to die even more. Without her realizing it, a bond had formed, and Enid wanted very much for her child to live.

When Enid looked inside the crate, she saw the baby had become dreadfully pale and was lying very still. Her hands shaking and her eyes brimming with tears, she picked up her child and held it to her chest, crooning to it as if it still lived. Her tears fell onto its tender face, and she wept as loudly as the child ever had. Raising her head to gaze at her, Enid shrieked when she saw what she held; a large, ugly bass lay in her hands, its mouth open, its eyes wide, its rotting body still and dry. Screaming, Enid threw the creature away from her and crumpled to the floor. Wrapping her arms around her legs, she rocked her body back and forth, moaning and gnashing her teeth. What had happened? Had she gone mad? What had she been feeding and caring for all these months?

Had she caught a child in the lake, or had it always been a large bass? In her dreadful loneliness, had she seen and nurtured what she thought was an infant? Enid wondered now, as she had when she first caught the creature, what it was, and whether she held an infant or something else altogether. Was she indeed a sinful harlot whom God had punished with a demon child, as the villagers had claimed?

When the sun set and the little house darkened, Enid finally quieted. She thought about the child for hours and decided she must indeed have gone mad. The whole time she'd been nurturing a fish, placing it to her breast, and laying it in a cradle at night, singing a lullaby to help it sleep. She crawled over to the bass and grabbed it in her hands. So hungry was Enid, that she didn't bother to cook the animal.

She gobbled it up, bones and all, grunting and panting as she ate. Satiated, Enid reached for a mug of water to wash it down, then with a heavy sigh, lay on her bed and fell asleep.

Hours later, in the dark of night, Enid jolted awake, her heart pounding and, for reasons she didn't understand, dread flooded through her body. With a hand that shook, she lit the gas lantern beside her bed. She looked around the hut and when her eyes adjusted to the light, she froze where she stood. Enid stared at her table, which was covered in blood. Blood had dried along the sharp blade of her fish-scaling knife, and it had splattered the walls and the ceiling. Enid looked at her hands and realized they, too, were blood-smeared and hacked with tiny slices made by the fish-scaling knife. She tasted blood in her mouth and when she glanced into the small mirror, she saw that it covered her face and disappeared into her hair.

Enid turned from the mirror and looked at the fishing line. Strangely shaped pieces of flesh hung from it, and she instantly knew what she was looking at. Enid had killed and eaten her own child, hung her skin on the fishing line to dry, and slid the bones from her carcass into a



bucket. Enid's voice erupted in an ear-shattering wail as she fainted, her body falling with a heavy thud, her legs and arms splayed across the floor.

It was dawn when she woke. Enid pulled herself onto her bed and, steadfastly keeping her gaze from the table, she stared at the floor, hiding her hands beneath her bloody apron. Enid forced herself to breathe slowly and calm her grieving heart. She refused to accept what she saw with her own eyes and instead, forced herself to believe that she hadn't fished an infant out of the lake. It had all been a dream. Enid had gone mad from living alone for so long, and in her deep desire for a human companion, when she caught the largest bass she'd ever seen, she'd mistaken it for an infant.

She was certain she hadn't recognized the bass for what it was because she could never have murdered her own child. Enid was not a sinner and no child had ever suckled at her breast, or lain in the crate beside her bed. She had never dragged one from the lake in her net. It had all been a feverish madness.

Without another thought, Enid pulled the skin from the fishing line and threw it into the bucket along with the bones. Walking to the lake, she threw the bucket's gruesome contents as far out into the water as she could. Skin and bones sank beneath the sparkling waves, forever concealing the horror of whatever had happened in her house. Sunlight danced upon the water making her eyes brim over – but not with tears, for Enid had no reason to cry over a dead bass.

Enid would soon cast her net into the lake to catch her next meal. She instinctively knew that the lake would be filled with fish once again, and that she would dine as well as ever, wanting for nothing more than what she had.



“THE SOLUTION”

by DAVID MACARTHUR

The sky here is a dome of concrete and steel taller than most skyscrapers. A feat of engineering, and still they can't make an office that doesn't look like it's made from beige cardboard. On the site of Project Hope a woman in overalls smeared with grease and a face to match wipes her brow, splashes her face with water and adjusts a white hard hat.

Claire makes her way to what will be her final summons to the office of her boss Keith. Passing a large crying man she taps him on the shoulder in commiseration, to which he replies with a wink. She doesn't knock, he knows she's coming and they both know what is going to happen.

Two days ago she finished the installation and testing of the staging injectors and with that the job only she could do in Team D was done. They had plenty of general engineering work to be done, plenty of people she could help. Other teams are running behind but that's not how this works.

“Claire, thanks so much for coming in. Wonderful to see you.”

Like a tiger in the reeds, he thinks his grin hides the malice in his eyes.

“Afternoon Boss, what can I do for you?”

“Well Claire, I'm afraid it's not good news. I've been looking over your hours.”

“My hours, ok.”

He's taken on this look of serious concern, a furrowed brow.

“Well I'm sorry to be the one to tell you but you just don't have enough.”

“Bullshit Keith, I've worked twelve hour days for four months on this project.”

“Sorry that's just not what it says here. You don't have enough hours accrued.”

“Well that's wrong, you'll need to check again.”

“I'm sorry Claire, it's out of my hands. You won't be able to get a seat on the ship.”

Items were thrown, she let out every word she wanted to call this shark in a cheap suit for months all at once. Spat them at him with spite and aggression and finished with just two words.

“I quit.”

He tried to keep that serious look but she saw the corner of that lip curl with a smile. As she turned to leave and stormed out she did almost feel sorry for the shrew.

There are four groups in this project. The billionaires who fund it, geniuses who designed it, the managers who talk about it and the craftsmen who built it. From Claire's experience all Keith did was make a graph every month and write down some fake numbers. Difference is he can charm when he wants to and that gives him a guaranteed spot despite only working a quarter the hours of everyone else and even those you can barely call work.

She leaves, making a show of storming back to Team D. The other teams from afar looked

over, they knew exactly why she was angry. She made sure of it. They watch quietly as she passes, making her way to say her goodbyes to her team. Whispering as soon as they think she is out of earshot.

Dean would be done in three days, Buck in a week and Mo finished up and got the same treatment yesterday. As she stormed across to the others now out of sight over the other teams a smile grew on her face.

"Well boys, time to make my final good-byes."

"Been nice working with you!"

"Enjoy retirement on the beach."

They always knew just the right thing to say to make her laugh. A smaller voice came from down by her side that she did not expect.

"Wow, are you a princess?"

Looking down she sees the figure of a young boy, he can't be more than eight years old. Beaming up with a kind of awe and hope only a child can have. She crouches down small to be on his eye level.

"Princesses wear tiaras and ball gowns, little Mo, not hardhats and overalls."

The look of sheer concentration on this child's face, he could have very well been building this ship in his mind right now. He was in overdrive.

"No."

"All that build up for a no?"

"No, I think princesses are brave and kind and smart. You're a princess."

The whole group let out in raucous laughter, Big Mo included who had been lurking in the shade of the fuselage. But it's Buck who breaks the silence.

"Real charmer your boy is, Big Mo, real charmer."

Claire turns to him, now recovered from

both the laughter and minor embarrassment.

"Time to go then. Be seeing you soon boys, and take care out here."

A round of hugs and handshakes makes clear this conversation is done with and it's time to go. Dean and Buck heave open a panel in the fuselage revealing a small passage. Slim enough for someone to walk down single file, just.

Claire enters, followed by little then big. Pulling the hatch closed behind it's like nothing is there from the outside. A smooth seamless surface. Perfectly measured, perfectly fitted, perfectly engineered. A light turns on on head torches illuminating the otherwise black interior to reveal pipes, wires, the innerworkings. The pumping veins of the ship itself. After just a few turns and twists another panel is moved and the three step into a large room.

"Welcome to The Neptune Little Mo."

The room is lit, boxes after boxes the exact width of the small tunnel that brought them here are piled up. Water containers, blankets and bedding along with a man who rushes to meet them.

"Claire, Mo, it's so good to see you."

"Nice to see you too Arthur. Been up to much?"

"Oh same old really, little fishing, some ice hockey."

Arthur was the first forced to quit, Arthur was the first to let them know what was really going on here. There are only so many spaces on the ship that will save humanity and many fewer engineers are needed to maintain it than to build it. A call was made far above the engineers' heads to cull the herd. Let loose the people who got them off this dead world.

The funny thing about engineers though, when they see a problem. They find a solution.



“UNDERNEATH”

by JACQUELINE DIBERNARDO

The boat pounded the water. It was always like this going over to Santa Cruz Island. A lot of chop and white caps. Gabriel hated it as a kid. He kept his eyes forward while the waves splashed and sent spray flying around him.

Some people focus their eyes on the horizon to ease their seasickness, but nausea was never a problem for Gabriel. He just didn't like the ocean. He mistrusted its enormity and all the things below the surface he couldn't see. Even when he walked on a beach, Gabriel found himself looking away from the water at sand dunes, beach grass, houses or anything else. He tried forcing himself to look west toward the water, but that never lasted long.

It was a July morning, and the overcast hanging over the coast hadn't burned off yet. Gabriel zipped his hoodie as protection against the clammy mist that would be gone by the time they reached the island. He sipped coffee out of a thermos Dad had packed for him. Gabriel didn't have the heart to tell him it was undrinkable.

He stood by his father who was at the wheel of the *Diastole*, his 32-foot cabin cruiser. The engine noise, wind and crashing waves made it hard to talk unless they shouted. Dad's still-strong hands guided the wheel. Gabriel could tell his father was counting waves, a tactic he used to help steer the boat when it was rough.

His father had been a cardiologist, starting

out when medical science offered little more than stethoscopes, EKGs and echocardiograms. He'd spent his life observing rhythms and listening for sounds in people's chests that shouldn't be there.

“Gabriel!”

Dad was yelling and pointing at the *Diastole*'s stern. Despite the boat's speed, a seagull had managed to perch on the rail of the live bait tank. It dipped its yellow beak into the water-proof canvas enclosure, trying to grab one of the hundreds of anchovies swimming around.

Gabriel walked toward it shouting, minding his balance and picking up the pike pole his father kept stowed in a gaff holder on the deck. The pole had needlelike tip at the end with another sharp hook sticking out several inches below it at a right angle. Gabriel wasn't planning to hurt the bird, just scare it away.

A few lunges sent the seagull off with an anchovy dangling from its beak.

“Bastard bird!” his father yelled.

Gabriel returned to his spot by the wheel. He focused on the 12 miles of water they still needed to cross. It reminded him of all the fishing trips to the island spent hiding his aversion to Dad's favorite pastime.

#

His younger brother Rico was supposed to be on this trip with them. Growing up, their father had taught them that boating alone was

unsafe. But after their mother died last year, Dad started taking the *Diastole* out by himself.

That was until he'd gone on what he told his three children was a day trip. Dad said he'd be fishing for rock cod in the gap between Santa Cruz and Anacapa islands. Only he didn't come back that afternoon. Gabriel, along with his sister Esme and brother Rico, called and texted frantically, but Dad didn't answer them or the marine operator's attempts to hail him on his VHF radio.

Rico ended up contacting the Coast Guard who found their father anchored at Smugglers, a cove at the east end of Santa Cruz.

The boating incident led to an emergency family meeting where Esme demanded to know why Dad had ignored their calls. Gabriel was still pissed at the way their father had laid his hands palms-down on Esme's dining room table and given them a flat, fuck-you answer: "Because I didn't feel like talking to you."

Dad had clearly planned the whole thing. Smugglers was a big anchorage where you could swing on one anchor. That made setting down there easier for a solitary boater. Plus, the Coast Guard said their father had stowed more food, water, bait and batteries on the *Diastole* than anyone needed for a day trip.

"Dad's never been secretive," Esme stated later, during a phone conversation. "You think it's dementia?"

As a pediatrician, Gabriel was used to Esme hitting him with medical questions about her two kids. But discussing their father like this gave him an unmoored feeling.

"It is uncharacteristic behavior," Gabriel had told her. "We need to have him looked at."

After a few more dismissive responses from their father, Gabriel, Esme and Rico showed up at his house. Esme, a deputy D.A., laid out an

ultimatum. Dad had to promise he wouldn't take the boat out alone anymore and that he'd visit a neurologist for an evaluation. Failure to comply would result in loss of contact with Esme's two kids, his only grandchildren.

"My kids will be devastated if something happens to you, so I have to protect them from the pain now," she stated, while Gabriel and Rico stood behind her.

Esme was never afraid to go nuclear. It made Gabriel envious.

"Of the three of us, she's always had the biggest balls," Rico remarked later.

Esme's threat worked. Dad visited a neurologist whose exam showed no signs of cognitive decline or mental health issues. He also stopped the solitary fishing excursions.

Gabriel, Rico and Esme coordinated so they could be available for boat trips. Up until now, his busy pediatric practice saved Gabriel from having to go. But the truth was, having no kids and a recent divorce left him with more free time. Other than his distrust of the ocean, there was no reason not to be there for his father. So, he agreed to come on this trip and fish with Dad and Rico.

But then his father started talking about hearing prowlers at night. Instead of coming fishing with them, he wanted Rico, who was a cop, to watch his house while he and Gabriel were gone.

"He has an alarm," Gabriel complained at a breakfast date with his siblings, two days before the trip. "And hearing prowlers? That's a classic dementia signal. We shouldn't have let him see Rick Sanderson for the workup. The guy's almost ninety — plus he's Dad's pal."

"Dad's complying with our demands, so for now, just do what he wants." Esme said. Gabriel could hear a note of disgust in her voice.

“What?” he asked.

“We all know you hate the boat,” Esme answered. It was the lowest insult in the Avalos family. Nobody wanted to be the kid who couldn’t handle the water.

“Shut it,” Gabriel snapped at her.

Rico cut in, telling them both, “That’s enough.”

“Yes, officer,” Gabe responded. He knew it was a dickish response. Even before becoming a cop, Rico’s natural role had been family peace-keeper.

“Dad isn’t asking much. Gabe, you go this time, and I’ll go twice after that. If Dad’s still worried about burglars, you can stay at his house while we’re gone.”

The arguing stopped, but Esme’s comment stung. Because it was true. Once he’d left home for college, Gabriel always found reasons to avoid the boat.

#

Gabriel and his father rounded San Pedro Point. The windy, damp, gray world they’d had to push through to reach the island melted away. Instead, the sun warmed the island’s golden cliffs and brown hills against cold blue water and burning blue sky.

The plan was to fish for calico bass on the outskirts of giant kelp beds off Yellowbanks before heading to Coches Prietos to anchor for the night.

Gabriel stripped off his hoodie and grabbed a baseball cap and sunglasses. His father handed him a rod and they set up their lines. After securing his sinkers and hooks, Gabriel reached into the bait tank. He grabbed a live, squirming anchovy and hooked it through the gills before flipping it into the water and releasing it. He wiped his hand on a fishy-smelling rag they’d been using for cleanup.

He kept his thumb on the reel as it spun, careful not to let it snarl. He had too many memories of forgetting about that when he was a kid. Sloppy reel control led to a bird’s nest and a frustrated father. Dad didn’t get angry, but he didn’t like his fishing time wasted unraveling lines. It was the sigh Gabriel dreaded — the one that told him he’d let his father down.

By afternoon, they caught a couple good-sized calico bass – both within the legal-size limits. Gabriel dropped his line again and after a few minutes, felt a strong tug. He locked his reel and started winding.

“Got something?” his father asked.

Gabriel nodded. His dad secured his own rod in a holster and grabbed the net, moving quickly. The fish felt like a big one and it took a fair amount of strength to keep reeling. Gabriel stopped a couple times to let the fish fight and tire before he brought it to the surface.

“Dinner!” his father shouted, scooping up the thrashing sea bass and bringing it to the cooler.

Dad’s smile was warm like the sun. Fishing gave him that uncluttered joy common in children but out of reach for most adults. Gabriel hadn’t seen his father like this since before his mom died. He felt guilty for not fishing with him in so long.

There was a splash and Gabriel saw a blue shark off the stern. It’s angular face looking up from the water. It was maybe 10 feet long.

“He’s come over to see if he can steal what we pull up,” his father said.

Gabriel threw the shark a handful of anchovies that were dying anyway. The shark ignored them, continuing to stare at him and his father.

“He doesn’t want those,” his father said, laughing. “He knows what we’re catching. He wants meat-fish.”

The shark's black eyes were perfect circles of understanding. Gabriel found it hard to look away. The shark moved closer, extending its pointed nose out of the water and opening its mouth.

"Why is it doing that?" Gabriel asked, knowing there had to be a scientific reason. A way to take in extra oxygen, maybe?

"He's laughing at us. Nothing we catch now is going to make it onto the boat."

"Fish don't taunt people, Dad."

"Who says?" his father asked. He dropped the fish in the cooler and slammed it shut as the dying bass flopped around inside.

#

Gabriel and his father made it to Coches Prietos in the afternoon. The anchorage was on the island's back side. That meant fewer group tourist excursions and protected marine areas where fishing wasn't allowed. Plus, it was mid-week, which also cut down on the number of other boaters.

His dad brought the *Diastole* slowly toward the beach, avoiding kelp beds near the cove's eastern cliffs and submerged rocks near its western reef. Coches wasn't large enough for them to swing on one anchor and still stay clear of other boats, especially if more joined the two that had arrived ahead of them. So they dropped one anchor off the bow and another off the stern as they positioned the boat near the western scarp.

Anchoring involved his father yelling a lot of orders while Gabriel went up on the bow to make sure the line didn't get tangled.

Once they finished, his father took out a folding deck chair and sat. When Dad bought the boat, he'd refused the option for comfortable, built-in seating on the main deck on the boat's stern, saying it would get in the way of his

fishing.

Gabriel wondered at his father, who opened a can of coke and started sipping. The man knew sugar caused inflammation but refused to give up his favorite beverage.

They were quiet for a minute. Gabriel angled his chair toward the beach, taking in the pale yellow of its sand framed by rugged, scrub-covered hills. The boat rocked in the breeze, carrying the sagey scent of island chaparral.

Then his dad said what he always did after anchoring.

"Sixty feet of chain and 300 of rope."

"I know," Gabriel answered, smiling and shaking his head at his father's reference to an incident that happened when Gabriel was a kid back in the 90's. His family was anchored at the island and an inexperienced boater brought his Bayliner too close to their stern line. The idiot unintentionally severed the rope with his prop.

Gabriel's mom sent his younger brother and sister below while Gabriel's dad was at the wheel, putting the engine into gear and yelling at Gabriel and his mom to grab boat hooks so they could push off of any other boats they swung into — or worse — keep them off the jagged black rocks on their side of the cove.

They were fortunate that another boater, who was a diver, retrieved their anchor for them. He spliced the rope and helped them reset it before advising his dad to invest in more chain.

While his dad relived the anchor story, Gabriel stood in the cockpit, pumping up the slate-colored Avon dinghy. He watched its tough rubber hide inflate, grateful its was thick enough for rowing around the island coves and landing on its beaches.

He ran through other memories of boating

mishaps — rough weather, injuries, equipment failures. His parents had treated these incidents as part of their hobby, not bothered that what they loved doing was inherently dangerous.

#

That night, lying in his sleeping bag up in the bow bunk, he listened to the popping noise of crustaceans eating the algae that grew on the boat's bottom.

Gabriel rolled over. He didn't plan to sleep well. Watching his father on childhood boat trips had taught him: nobody smart sleeps well on a boat. You had to listen for things going wrong, like your anchor pulling or the wind kicking up.

Gabriel didn't bother making a plan with Dad to share anchor check duty. He'd let his father get a good night sleep in the main cabin bunk where the dining table and cushions converted into a bed. Given his father's age and strange behavior over the last month, Gabriel would keep the night watch.

He set his phone alarm for midnight, 2:30 and 5. The overnight low was supposed to be 50 degrees, but the damp surrounding the island at night would make it a bone-stinging 50.

At 2:30, he moved lightly past his sleeping father in the main cabin, not wanting to go out through the bow hatch above his bunk. Dad stirred, but oddly didn't wake. Gabriel stepped through the main hatch onto the aft deck and checked their position. The *Diastole's* anchors hadn't dragged. There was no moon, so the anchor lights and one of Dad's head lamps were all he had to see with.

Standing on the deck, Gabriel listened. The other doctors who knew about Dad's ear said Gabriel had inherited the family superpower. Even with all the current technology to scan, test and monitor a child's bodily workings,

Gabriel was known for hearing things in a kid's chest that others missed. Sounds that, in some cases, led to tests and treatments that made a difference.

Tonight, since there wasn't much wind, what he heard was the water's gentle, rhythmic splish-splosh against the rocks at the base of the cliff. Listening harder, Gabriel turned toward the beach where waves washing onto the sand created a rustling sound.

A big splash off the bow startled him. As he made his way toward the foredeck, the noise continued, like something was thrashing in the water. Gabriel reached the bow, grabbed the railing and looked down. A bluish glow radiated just under the surface. Only for a split second — then it went out. At first, he thought it was what Dad called "fire in the water," single-celled animals that lit up when you agitated the surface. But fire in the water didn't just shut off like that. And these looked more like fine, iridescent strands. Worms maybe?

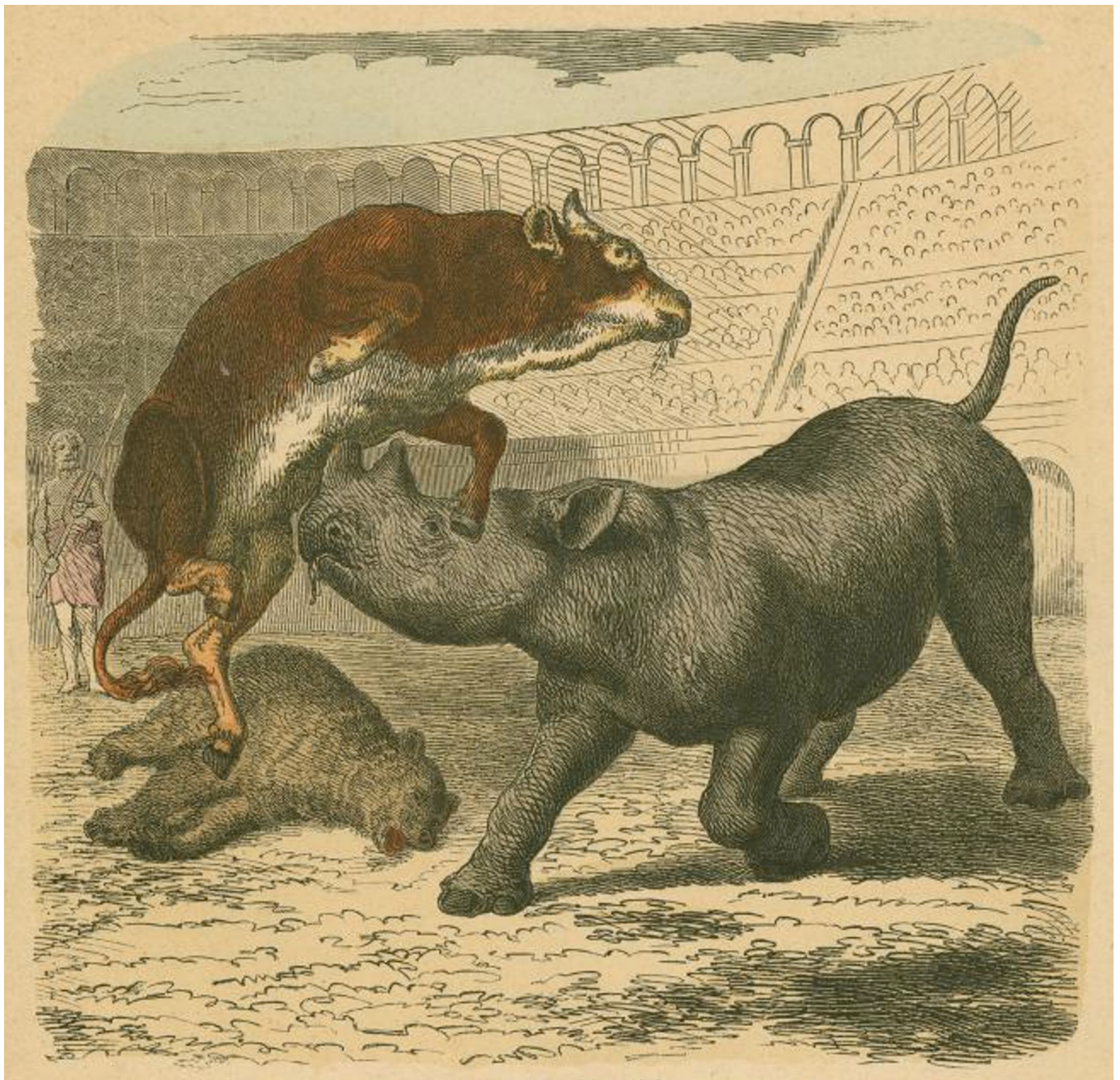
Gabriel described it to his father the next morning, but Dad sipped his terrible coffee and shrugged.

"It's the ocean. All kinds of things glow."

#

The next morning, they decided to fish from the dinghy in the sprawling kelp beds on the east side of the cove. When Gabriel went to pull in the small rubber boat, he saw a gelatinous blue substance spread unevenly over the white fiberglass swim step that ran the length of the stern. He knew better than to touch it. When they were kids, he and Rico once handled a worm that crawled out of a rock cod's mouth as the dying fish flopped on the deck. The worm was covered in a protective slime that stung their fingers and gave them welts.

"What is that?" Gabriel asked his father



who had come up behind him with the smaller rods they would use to fish in the kelp. Gabriel thought he detected a dead-fish smell, like on a wharf.

"Fish slime probably," his father answered, dipping a bucket into the empty bait tank still filled with sea water and pouring it over the swim step.

"You think some fish just randomly flopped onto the swim step, slimed it up and then jumped back into the water?"

"Sure."

"Don't you even want to know what it is?" Gabriel asked. His father's nonchalance surprised him.

"Nope."

"You're normally more intellectually curious," Gabriel told him, trying to not sound peevish.

"It's blue goop that I don't want on my boat," Dad answered in his "conversation over" voice. Gabriel was annoyed, but didn't press it.

Once in the dinghy, Gabriel sat in the stern, steering with the small outboard motor. As he and Dad neared the kelp, he cut the engine to keep the prop from getting tangled in its winding, rubbery stalks.

"It's good you're here," his father said, dropping a line over the side and down through the kelp.

"I'm glad I came," Gabriel lied. He moved to the center seat, inserting the oars into the oarlocks and holding the handles on his lap. There were no waves in the shadow of the cliff, but he didn't trust the up-and-down surge of the water. It made him think of a giant animal sitting on the bottom, breathing in and out.

He added, "We're spending time together, Dad. And you shouldn't be out here by yourself. You always said going alone was stupid."

"Well, your mom died and she's who I liked to come with. And she liked coming with me."

"So do I," Gabriel said. The loss of his mother had wrenched his heart. Watching his father soldier on, trying to make a life out of what was left was another racking kind of hurt.

Dad changed the subject.

"You can put the oars down and drop a line."

"I'm good here," Gabriel responded. I'll keep us away from the rocks while you fish."

They floated over the seaweed bed as it moved with the rise and fall of the tide. The kelp rubbed against the small boat's underside, making snapping, slithery noises.

When Gabriel was nine, his father had explained to him that California's giant kelp was actually algae. At 35, it still amazed him algae could grow so large, and in a shape so similar to land-dwelling plants. People even called the kelp beds "forests."

Reaching up from the bottom of the cove,

the kelp's 50-foot stalks had big leaflike blades and bulbs that were filled with gas to help them float. They created an environment where small fish like buttermouth perch could find food and hide from predators.

His father grabbed the extra rod and tackle box and began rigging another line with a hook and sinker.

"Ya gotta fish, Gabe," he told him as he tied a hook and sinker to the end of the monofilament they used for catching the smaller species that lived in the kelp. "It doubles our chances."

Gabriel secured the oars and accepted the rod. He baited the hook with a small piece of the frozen squid they'd brought. Then he dropped the line down through the seaweed until he felt the bottom, pulling up a bit so his bait would hang just above it.

After catching a few perch, they decided to row around the cove.

His father took the oars. Gabriel grabbed his old aquascope and bent over the rounded side of the dinghy. With his face in the black plastic oval, he looked through the clear lens at the other end. This simple device brought what was underneath the surface closer, keeping it from hiding so completely.

Gabriel watched the gold-green kelp fronds reach up from the bottom and wave with the current. In the darkness, he saw a few bright orange Garibaldi darting in and out of the stalks. A crab picked its way over a cluster of the gas-filled bladders that grew at the base of the seaweed's blades. A small stingray coasted by. Gabriel felt his jaw twinge with revulsion, making him want to tear his face away from the viewer. But an equally strong fascination sped up his heart and drove him to keep looking.

Farther down on the bottom, a leopard shark swished its slender tail back and forth.

Gabriel guessed it was about six feet long. Despite the shadows cast by the kelp and lack of light beneath the surface, Gabriel was surprised by how much the spots resembled an actual leopard's.

Leopard sharks didn't bother people. They preferred eating small fish and invertebrates. Even so, Gabriel's back prickled with the old childhood unease about things swimming beneath him.

Without warning, the shark whipped its narrow body several times, stirring up a furious cloud of debris from the bottom. The cloud hid its body

"What the fuck was that?"

"What?" his father asked.

Gabriel pressed his face hard into the viewfinder. The murk settled, revealing the shark in pieces. Its skin was shredded just above the pectoral fins. Something had torn the shark's head from its body and left it lying a foot away on the bottom.

"What?" his father asked again.

"I don't know."

Gabriel's heart pounded. He strained his eyes, but all he glimpsed was a shadow just to the side of the head. So quick he wasn't sure if he saw it — the shadow flashed a glowing magenta and then disappeared.

He took his face out of the viewfinder.

"Something just took out a leopard shark."

"A barracuda, you think? The young ones like hiding in the kelp canopies."

"I don't know. It's gone. I couldn't see it, but I think it had a pink glow."

"Guess we'll never know," his father said. The conversation ending-edge in his voice was back. "Anyway, enough with the toy. Let's go back. You can row us out of the kelp."

#

They had some sea bass left on ice from the day before, so his father wanted to barbecue again for dinner.

The tide was going down. Gabriel breathed in the smell of fish charring on his dad's grill. He didn't mind the way their dinner's aroma mixed with the salty odor of seaweed. The kelp smell got stronger as the water receded, exposing gold-green clumps left atop the rocks on either side of the anchorage.

"We've got the place to ourselves," his father said, clearly happy that the two other boats staying at Coches had left that morning.

Gabriel would have preferred that the other sailors stay at Coches. Not because he thought they could do much to help Dad and him if something went wrong. It was more likely he and his father, as two doctors, would be pressed into service if there was a medical emergency. But having no other boats in the anchorage made Gabriel's mind dance lightly up to the fact that it was just himself and his dad surrounded by the enormity of the water and its unpredictability. He distracted himself by tending the filets on the portable grill.

"Your mother always wanted to barbecue out here. She used to say, 'Mario, don't you love the smell of charred meat mixed with the ocean?'"

Gabriel inhaled. His mother hadn't been wrong.

They ate on the deck, Gabriel enjoying a Corona while Dad drank another coke. Gabriel kept his gaze on the cove's rocky beach. His father looked west toward the horizon and admired the sunset.

"There it goes. Nothing between us and Hawaii," his father said. A breeze had come up and he burrowed into an old Dodger's sweatshirt, looking small.

Gabriel didn't find an ocean between them and Hawaii a comforting thought. Especially at night. Some people grew less afraid as they aged. But on the boat, his father continued to embrace all the things that scared Gabriel.

He put his disquiet aside and told his father to smile, snapping a picture with his phone. Then Gabriel took a selfie of the two of them with the island in the background, bathed in the sun's dying light.

There was no cell service on this side of the island. He'd have to send the pics to Rico and Esme tomorrow on the way home.

#

Before going to bed, Gabriel and his dad checked that both anchors were set.

"No drag," his father said. "We're good."

In the bow bunk, Gabriel made sure his alarm would go off at the same times as the night before. Knowing they were going home tomorrow made it easier to feel some satisfaction at being on the trip with his father.

Like the previous night, Gabriel fell into an uneasy sleep listening to the tiny shrimp grazing on the boat hull. Just before midnight, something thumped against the bottom of the boat, not hard enough to make them pull anchor, but hard enough to wake him.

Gabriel put on his jeans and grabbed the high-powered flashlight his father kept in the bow coaming. Rather than risking waking up Dad, he pulled himself up through the bow hatch above his bunk and stood on the fore-deck.

Moonlight lit up the cove. Something made a big splash off the port side.

Gabriel listened. He thought he could hear it gliding through the water, making tiny swashing sounds along the surface.

He used the flashlight to make a 360-degree

sweep around the *Diastole* but didn't see anything. There was another splash off the stern. He moved toward the sound, holding the side railings so he didn't fall over.

Gabriel trained the Acebeam in the direction of the splash. What he saw didn't make sense.

A memory flashed — he recalled an illustration of a prehistoric eagle shark. Those ancient sharks had thin pectoral fins, with a "wingspan" that was longer than the length of their bodies. Like the eagle shark picture, this animal looked an airplane flying through the water.

Of course, it wasn't an eagle shark because those were extinct. And it wasn't really shark-like. A mass of glowing strands trailed from its head, the color flashing from aqua to blue to magenta, almost like a signal.

"Mario."

It was his mother's voice ... Mom calling his father's name. The impossible sound came from where the glowing tendrils had been.

"Go back to bed, Gabriel," his father said behind him, stepping out of the main cabin. In the still-brilliant moonlight, Dad's mouth was set. His voice was low and his shoulders resolute.

Gabriel ignored the command and whispered, "Christ, Dad. What is that?"

"Go back to bed," his dad said again, his tone unfamiliar and threatening.

"Mario."

The sound rose from off the stern this time. Gabriel pushed past his father to the aft railing of the boat, pointing the flashlight toward where he heard someone calling his father's name.

The animal had swum close to the *Diastole*. He couldn't see its length anymore and it was no longer spread-eagle in the water. Instead, its

face looked up from the surface, big green eyes and long black lashes tilted toward them. The luminous strands surrounded the visage like a halo.

“Mario.”

The face was young, but the voice wasn’t. It was his mother’s voice — but her older timbre. He could hear the cracked softness her speech had developed toward the end of her life.

The creature’s flashing, watery mane made it hard to think. Its Mom-like voice filled the air around him.

Gabriel’s father stood next to him.

“It’s Mom,” Dad said to Gabriel. “She loved coming out here. It’s where she is now. She’s just different but she’s here.”

“Evie!” his father called out. Gabriel hadn’t heard that “Evie” in a long time.

The voice responded, “Mario. Help me up, Mar. We can barbecue.”

Gabriel moved closer to the railing, afraid to lean over. Instead, he extended his hand so he could train the flashlight more squarely on the face that looked upwards, floating gently with the current.

“Mario. Help me up Mar. Let’s have Malvasia tonight.”

The mouth didn’t move. Did it matter? Gabriel stood, awash in his mother’s affectionate tones, staring at the face.

But the mouth didn’t move.

“Help me up, Mar. Let’s drink *Malvasya*.”

His mother never said the name of her favorite wine that way. Her enunciation had always been crystal-clear, giving breath to every syllable. *Mal-vas-i-a*.

Gabriel stepped back and pulled his father with him.

“It’s not her, Dad. Listen. It’s saying *Malvasya* not *Malvasia*.”

“It is her.”

His father shoved him away, moving toward the railing and staring into the water.

“Your mother was in both places. Right before we got her diagnosis, we came out here for the last time. Mom was talking to me on the boat and we heard her at the same time in the water.”

Gabriel felt a fissure tear through his mind. His father was spewing crazy fantasies, but he wasn’t imagining mother’s voice calling from the water.

“We left the next day and then she got sick,” his dad said, verging on tears. “Later, I knew it meant she wouldn’t really die. Just be different. Be out here waiting for me. That’s why I was gone for three days. I was looking for her, but I couldn’t find her until now.”

Gabriel focused, pushing the faux-Mom voice to the edges of his mind so he could think. He pivoted and grabbed the pike pole from its holder beneath the railing. Then he called to it.

“It’s Gey-bree-uhl, Mom.”

He pronounced his name with a long “a,” the American way — the way his mom never said it. She had always called him by the Spanish version, “Gah-bryehl.”

His father stopped. They both waited, a soft wind blowing from the west.

The voice replied, “Gey-bree-uhl,” using the long “a.”

Before Gabriel could speak, his dad said, “No. No, Gabriel.”

Because Dad heard it too.

“It has to be her,” his father insisted in a desperate whine. “She’s just different.”

The face floated in the water and the voice called again.

“Gey-bree-uhl.”

The creature disappeared below the water and then there was a “slap, slap” as its two long pectoral fins reached up onto the swim step. The thing pulled itself out of the water, and onto the length of swim step, lying there for a second. The two long pectoral fins felt along the side of the boat, almost like octopus arms.

Gabriel grabbed his father and stepped back. The strong pectorals found purchase and the animal lifted itself onto the deck.

“Help me up, Mar.”

A reek of decayed fish and blood hit Gabriel in the face. He and his dad backed up to the hatch. Glistening in the moonlight, the long slender body ended in a flat, forked tail fin. She writhed back and forth, slithering herself toward them on the fiberglass deck of the cockpit, hair trailing.

Not real hair. Not a she. Gabriel thought, knowing those things were lies.

The “hair” was long, bioluminescent strands sprouting from her head and neck. A salty scent overlaid the stench of rotting viscera.

The face that had looked up from the water was not the one that gazed at them head on. The gentle female countenance they’d seen was actually a bony plate atop the head of the thing, almost like a hat or upturned mask with frozen features and lifeless eyes.

Underneath the hat-mask and looking at him and his father were two narrow, glittering eyes set above a vicious jawline armed with dozens of needle-like teeth.

In that eternal second of horror, Gabriel grasped that the benign feminine face and the voice calling to them from the water’s surface were like the lure used by an angler fish to draw its prey.

His mother’s voice came from the monster’s jaws.

“We can barbecue, Mar.”

The creature lurched forward. His father screamed and his knees buckled.

Gabriel jumped to the side and aimed the sharp metal tip of the pike pole at the glowing right eye, using his full weight to drive it into the creature’s brain. He held the pole there with both hands as the animal flailed on the deck, smearing it with its bluish slime. Gabriel tightened his grip, twisting the pike pole. It made wet squelching sounds.

Twice the animal thrashed so violently, it nearly dislodged the pole’s pointed end. Only the pole’s sharp hook helped Gabriel keep the spike stuck in the monster’s head as gore ran from its eye. Hours pass before it stopped moving. When the tail swept the deck a final time, the sun was just coming up over the island.

Dad slumped near the wheel. He was crying.

#

“Have you heard from the university?” Dad wanted to know.

“Nothing,” Gabriel responded.

It was two months since the fishing trip. He and his father sipped coffee at what had become their weekly, early-morning breakfast date. The hideous, six-foot creature that had slithered onto the deck of the *Diastole* had opened a space where his father’s fascination with the ocean and Gabriel’s fear of it could coexist.

After Gabriel called in a mayday that night, the Coast Guard took the dead specimen to the local university. A few days later, a marine biologist interviewed Gabriel and his father, wanting to know everything they could tell her about the animal’s behavior before Gabriel killed it.

“Professor Leung said she’d get back to us when they figure it out.” Gabriel told his father, enjoying the earthy smell of his coffee and the

cheerful human buzz of the café.

“Haven’t *you* figured it out?” his father asked. His eyes radiated. The dead film that had veiled them after his wife’s death was gone.

“No. You have?” Gabriel asked, happy that Dad was more playful, his mind willing to go in unorthodox, curious directions, the way it used to.

“Sailors, fishermen ~ they’ve told stories forever about women in the water calling to them, beautiful voices, beautiful faces, fish bodies ...”

“You think?” Gabriel asked.

“Sure. Until a better explanation comes along.” ❖

END TRANSMISSION