

STEEP AND DANGEROUS

i

“Let it *go*, Johnny! We’ll go around, bring’er down from the top.”

“Go to hell,” Johnny rebuted in a grunt, still putting all of his strength into pulling down on the rope that turned the winch overhead.

Johnny and Stickshift hung from ropes off the side of a mesa cliff, drenched in sweat. It was evening. Hanging from another pair of ropes was a pickup truck loaded with sleeping bags, fishing rods, a cooler, and a grill. Johnny was braced fully upside down, pulling on a fifth rope which was attached to a winch that he and his brother had secured at the top of the cliff earlier that day. The winch was outfitted with a ratchet: every time Johnny managed to pull the truck up another notch, it would lock that notch in place, and the truck would not fall back below it until such a time as the lock at the top was disengaged. Normally the truck pulled itself up with a torque converter attached to the motor, but the bar on the converter had snapped off halfway up the climb.

“RRRRAAHHHHH!”

With a growl and a warrior shout, Johnny put his legs, core, and biceps into pulling down on the rope, and felt the reverberation of the *click!* that the ratchet made at the top. The truck was secured another six inches. Johnny dropped from his upside down stance and allowed his rope to catch him, flip him

upright, and swing him away from the cliff for a moment. As he swung back, he tried to raise his arms to brace for a gentle impact, but his arms remained limp at his sides, and he smacked into the rock wall. “*Mm!*” he winced; he hit the rock with his cheek. Raising his hand to his cheek, he looked at his fingers and saw they were bloodied.

“Niice goin, jackass,” Stickshift mocked.

Johnny limply swatted in Stickshift’s direction, and then began doing stretches on his arms as he hung, getting ready to hit the next notch.

The mesa that Johnny and Stickshift hung from the cliff of was situated in a gargantuan canyon. Above the canyon walls were the tulip swamps, whose waters perpetually trickled down the canyon walls in a vast series of purple waterfalls. At the floor of the canyon were bare rocks and a great many rivers, leading out to the white ocean. The tides at the great canyon were the stuff of legends: come sunset, the tide would rise five hundred feet in half an hour, flooding the canyon halfway with the white ocean’s poisonous waters. Johnny and Stickshift’s pickup truck hung a foot and a half below the water line that was visible on the mesa cliff’s rocks. They had about an hour before sunset.

“Pete’ll kill you if you sink this truck,” Stickshift said. Pete was their father. The truck had been borrowed from the family’s auto shop.

Johnny scoffed. “I’ll tell him I sank the truck and you show him a cheap bottle of rum and we’ll see who he pays more attention to.”

Stickshift nodded.

Johnny felt his muscles had recovered enough for another notch. He took hold of the rope that went up to the winch, positioned himself upside down again, and began pulling on the rope. In three successive pairs of growls and shouts, Johnny brought the truck up another foot and a half, bringing it above the water line. He sighed a satisfied sigh as he swung from his rope. Stickshift came over and gave Johnny a pat on the shoulder. “Nice goin,” he acknowledged.

Stickshift climbed up into the bed of the truck, and offered Johnny a hand to help him in. Johnny took it and climbed in after. The two of them set out their folding chairs, brought out

their fishing gear, and each took a can of light beer out of the cooler. The two clinked their cans together and watched the sunset. As the sun went down, the water came up, filling the canyon until the waveless surface came up just below the pickup's tires.

Johnny and Stickshift dropped their lines in.

After a while, Stickshift struck up conversation. "Heard that new Indignant Bastards CD?"

"One Dave's got with the red cover?"

"Ship that came in a couple days ago had a whole trunk of new bootlegs. Tony's kid snatched it up, we've all been listening at Jim's. I'll burn you a copy."

"Grazie." Johnny tipped his can towards Stickshift in acknowledgment, then felt a tug on his line, and flicked his rod to tug back. He chugged the rest of the can and then dropped it to the truck bed's floor, and used both hands to work the rod and the reel. A minute later he had something that resembled a fish dangling off the end of his line.

Stickshift commented, "Eesh. Ugly bastard."

The creature at the end of the line had rows of toothy mandibles going halfway down its body, and three pairs of appendages with pinching claws on the end. One pincher was clutching the line, but the line was special made for this type of nasty critter. They were known to eat dogs, cats, deer, anything that wandered too close to shore. Johnny was the oldest now and Stickshift was the youngest now, since their older brother Pete Jr. and their younger brother Lucas had been eaten by these ones.

Stickshift picked up the hunting rifle at his feet.

"Steady?" Stickshift asked.

"Steady," Johnny confirmed, holding the line still.

Stickshift aimed down the sights and shot the creature in the heart. It stopped moving, its claw that had been clutching the line now resting limp on it.

"Clean," Stickshift said.

Johnny brought the creature in, stood up from his folding chair, and got to work gutting and cooking. Stickshift caught one too; Johnny shot it, and then got to work cooking it as well.

When the food was ready, Johnny sat back down in his folding chair with two plates, and handed one to Stickshift.

“Cheers,” Stickshift said, handing Johnny another beer.

Johnny finished the one he was already drinking, took the one Stickshift offered, and then cracked it open and clinked with his brother. “Cheers.”

ii

Johnny and Stickshift and Tony’s kid and Dave and Skinny sat at their booth in the corner of Jim’s. Tony’s kid’s boombox sat at the center of the table, playing the new Indignant Bastards. Tony’s kid’s beard had gotten longer and uglier since Johnny had seen him last; Johnny hadn’t been into town hardly at all the last couple weeks, busy as he was at the auto shop with Pete’s injured hand. Pete had been blacked out when whatever’d happened to his hand had happened; still didn’t even know who had done the bandage, but they’d done a good job with it, at least, whoever they were. Pete sat at the bar holding his fourth glass of rum with his good hand.

On the floor beside Johnny, Skinny began to pant. Johnny leaned over and scratched at Skinny’s back; Skinny wagged, and then laid down and rolled over; Johnny rubbed his belly for a while, until Skinny got back upright as Sharry approached.

“Y’all doing alright?”

Johnny scanned over the table, saw nobody’s glass was empty, and nodded. “Yeah, we’re doing alright.”

Dave cut in, “You on the menu dear?”

“Har har,” Sharry said.

Johnny took a peanut out of the dish beside the CD player, lined up his shot, and flicked the nut at Dave.

“Ah! Bitch,” Dave said, and picked up a peanut and threw it overhand at Johnny, missing.

“I’m not working tonight if I’m in the waitress clothes, you know that,” Sharry went on. “Linda and Pat are upstairs, they ain’t busy yet.”

Dave sat up taller to look around the bar. “We’ll see how it goes down here first.”

“I’ll tell em you’ll be up later.”

Dave started to respond, then sighed, and clutched his glass. “Yeah you can tell em I’ll probably be up later. Pat tonight. But tell Linda I said hey.”

Johnny leaned over to Sharry, and said, “Another round, when you get a chance.”

“Sure, no problem,” she said, and then went off. After stopping at the bar to talk with Jim for a moment, she went up the stairs.

Johnny gave Skinny another few pets, and then leaned over to Dave. “Who you got in mind?”

Dave ran some fingers back and forth over his stubble. “Kim down there. Unless you were—”

“Kim’s mad at me,” Johnny said.

“Shit. And she saw me sitting here with you. Shit. Well, her sister’s with—”

“Kate’s mad at me too. It’s related.”

“Goddammit Johnny.”

Johnny sat upright and craned over the table to talk to Tony’s kid. “This is good shit,” he said, pointing to the CD player.

Tony’s kid smiled, and toyed with his glass.

Sharry, Linda, and Pat came down the stairs. Linda and Pat came to the booth; Pat climbed over Johnny to sit between Dave and Johnny, and Linda sat at the edge of the booth between Johnny and Skinny.

“Drinks?” Johnny offered, looking between Pat and Linda.

“Margarita,” Pat answered, and Linda answered, “Not tonight, thanks.”

Sharry came back over with a tray, and handed out the new round of beers. Johnny ordered a Margarita for Pat and a water for Linda.

After a few more tracks, the Indignant Bastards CD came to an end. Dave rooted through his box of jewel cases for a CD to replace it with. Pat and Dave sat snuggled up together, Dave nuzzling his stubble against her cheek and making her squeal with subdued laughter. Tony’s kid swapped out the Indignant Bastards for a calmer acoustic thing.

Johnny leaned over to Linda. “Hey Linda.”

She leaned over with him. “Yeah Johnny?”

“Pay you to give Skinny a ride.”

Linda deflated, closed her eyes, and sighed. “Goddammit Johnny.”

“What?”

“Can’t you just hire a prostitute for your own damn self like a normal person? Stick your dick in any girl but the ones whose job it is, I swear to god.”

“You still got those big socks I gave you for his claws?”

“Yes, Johnny, we still have those socks you gave us so you could hire us to screw Jim’s dog.”

“If you don’t like him, or he’s too rough or something—”

“The dog’s *fine*, Johnny,” Linda said, and then leaned in even closer with Johnny, and whispered, “I like *you*, is all.”

“Well, that’s complicated.” Johnny picked up his glass and had another sip.

“Would it help if *I* wore the socks, for you? Do *you* need to wear the socks? Do you need Skinny to watch?”

“Not interested.” Johnny took another sip.

“Swear to god, Johnny, I don’t even know what hill you’re trying to die on here.”

Johnny took a third sip.

“I’ll give Skinny a ride if that’s what you really want. It’s no trouble to me. I just don’t get it.”

On the floor, Skinny began to wag.

Johnny slipped Linda the cash.

Linda stood up out of the booth, and Skinny stood up with her, looking at her and wagging. “C’mon, Skinny,” she said, and began walking. Skinny wagged more enthusiastically, and followed her closely up the stairs, pawing at her to try to mount a few times along the way.

Once they had gone up, Johnny left cash for drinks and tips on the table and stood up too.

Dave looked up at Johnny. “What, not even gonna try tonight?”

“With who, Dave?” Johnny said, raising both hands to gesture around the bar. “Kim’s mad at me, Kate’s mad at me, Jenny’s mad at me, Lucy’s mad at me, Kitty’s mad at me, Lucille’s—Lucille! You still mad at me?”

Lucille spun around on her stool at the bar to face the one who had shouted her name. "Johnny? Johnny you got a lot of nerve thinking you—"

"Lucille's still mad at me," Johnny said to Dave, gesturing over at the woman who was getting up to come over and give him an earful. "I'm out." Johnny turned and made a beeline for the door.

"Johnny if you're thinking about those mermaids again," Dave said, and then disentangled himself from Pat to follow after his friend. "Are you thinking about those mermaids again?"

"I ain't thinking about shit," Johnny said, and pushed open the swinging doors and began walking off into the night.

"Perv!" Dave called after his friend, hanging from one of the swinging doors for balance. "You'll get your dick bit off! You'll catch crabs! It ain't right, Johnny!"

Johnny spun around, and while still walking backwards to make his exit, grabbed his crotch as a gesture for Dave, then turned again and resumed walking forward.

He lit up a cigarette on his way out of town. He realized, when the edge of the town's lamplight came into sight, that the sound of his footsteps crunching over the gravel road was a frantic tempo; normally he hung around at the edge of town for a couple minutes to finish his smoke and adjust his eyes to the dark, but tonight he had already sucked his down to the filter. He dropped the cigarette butt, stomped it out, and lit up another one. He proceeded the rest of the way to the edge of town at a deliberate trudge, and then stood and leaned against the brick wall on the dark side of Tony's old bar, boarded up a while now since Tony had passed.

By the time the second cigarette burned down to his fingers, Johnny felt sobriety creeping back up to him. He used to resent the feeling, but had come to appreciate it. It was like running a lap from the auto shop into town and back: forward and forward as fast as you can one way, then when you're there, about face, and forward and forward again, even if the way back don't feel as nice, unless you make it a point to think about the nice parts. Johnny dropped his cigarette butt onto the gravel. His eyes had adjusted to the dark, and he could see the boardwalk path

through the tulip swamp clear enough by the moonlight that came down through the foliage overhead. Johnny stomped his cigarette out and walked off onto the path through the swamp, his boots making a careful percussion along the planks.

The croaking of frogs masked a lot of other noise that went on in the swamp. The bubbling of the water also masked things; warm gasses bubbled up here and there, making the waters warm, and apparently making the swamp smell funny to folks who weren't used to it, though Johnny himself was well past used to it. Johnny walked along, keeping an ear out. He kept his eyes peeled for sudden turns or forks in the path, and kept his pace slow to not be tripped by broken planks, which became pretty common after a mile out of town; he'd have to come and patch them up one of these days, when he had the time during daylight.

After a while, Johnny heard the singing of mermaids; their familiar voices brought a jubilation to his mood. A lightness came to his steps, and he practically skipped the last leg of the boardwalk, rounding a bend and arriving at a cozy pink pond shimmering in the moonlight and bubbling with the warm gasses that came up here and there from underneath; atop a small rocky island in the pond's center, a mermaid sat, head raised and facing elsewhere into the tulip swamp, calling to the other maidens.

The boardwalk ended at the edge of the pond. Johnny deliberately pressed his boot down on a loose board, making the boardwalk creak.

The song of the mermaid before him halted, and her head snapped towards him.

He stood and looked at her with one hand in his pocket. He offered a wry smile and a shrug.

The mermaid slinked down into the pink water, disappeared below the surface, and reemerged at the edge of the boardwalk. She reached up and wrapped her fingers around his ankle, and looked up at him with big eyes.

Johnny sat down at the edge of the boardwalk, untied his boots, and kicked them off into the woods, then threw his other articles of clothing after them one by one. Once he was fully dressed in his birthday suit, he slinked down off the edge of the

boardwalk into the warm bubbling waters, and pressed himself chest to chest with the mermaid, looking down into her eyes. He snaked a hand around her and held her by the small of her back.

She gently reached up and touched his chin. In a hissing language, she said something to him.

"I missed you too, doll," he said in turn.

He didn't speak what she spoke, and she didn't speak what he did. He figured it might explain why his relationships with these girls lasted longer than those of his own type.

She rose up to kiss him, and he sunk down to meet her halfway. Soon they were on the shallow floor near the pond's edge, locked mouth to mouth, hands feeling below each other's waists. He'd heard from sailors that a mermaid's was like a dolphin's, but he'd never seen a dolphin, so he could only take their word for it. Whatever his was like to them, they were about it. He slid himself into her and the two of them splashed around for an hour or two, then he finished inside of her, and then clung to her for a while, as they floated gently across the pond. After another kiss, the two let go of each other. Johnny floated on his back on the bubbling water. The mermaid climbed back up the rocks, and resumed singing to the other mermaids.

Most fellas who came to have a try with the mermaids were met warmly the first time around, and then when they came back around again, no mermaid across the entire tulip swamp would come to meet them, and would bare their pointed teeth if the guy tried to get close. Folk legend was that they were only interested in virgins. Johnny very smugly knew the truth: that they just weren't interested in fellas whose performance had disappointed, and they sure as hell would let all the other mermaids know one way or the other.

Johnny fell asleep in the warm water, listening to the bubbles, the frogs, and the songs of the mermaids.

The next morning Johnny awoke with his head on the shore like a pillow and his body in the waters like a blanket. The mermaid laid atop the rock at the center of the pond, beautiful in her nocturnal slumber. Johnny got up, stood around on the boardwalk a while until he'd dried off, and then put his clothes and boots back on and walked back into town, keeping his

footsteps quiet the first while so as not to wake his companion of the night before.

iii

Johnny laid on his back under a truck, flashlight in his teeth, muttering curses about the fact that every single bolt and screw on this entire damn machine was stripped. He pressed a screwdriver into one stripped screw harder, and worked it until he found an angle. It'd turn a couple of degrees before the screwdriver would slip and he'd bang his knuckles against the undercarriage. It did not contribute positively to his headache and sore muscles. But if that was what it took. He turned the screwdriver again and again.

Just as he was finished banging his knuckles for a twentieth time, he felt a tap of someone gently kicking his boot to get his attention. "Y'alright under there?"

"Peachy," Johnny answered around the flashlight in his mouth, and then swore as he banged his knuckles for a twenty-first time.

"It's Sunday, Johnny," Stickshift said. "Come on into town with me, we'll sit and listen to Tony's kid's new CD's some more. Hell, stay here and have a drink, read a book, whatever you like. But leave these cars alone."

"We're behind."

"That's not our problem today, Johnny. Leave it alone."

"Go to hell."

The screw dropped out of the undercarriage and plinked Johnny on the nose before rattling to the ground. Johnny sighed with relief, put the screw in the dish with the other stripped ones, and then inched himself deeper under to work on the next screw.

Johnny heard Stickshift sigh too, and then heard the footsteps of Stickshift leaving.

With the day to himself, Johnny wrenched on cars without any interruption for chatting or rest. In the zone, he fixed up machine after machine, making each and every engine growl like a song. Hours went by, until he had the hood up on the

second to last car, running its engine and watching it work to see what in the hell was wrong with it. It seemed fine as far as he could see from here. He went to go shut the engine off, and as he came around the hood, he saw someone running up the path from town.

It was Dave. Looking at him fully, he didn't so much run as hurriedly shamble. Blood soaked his shirt and pants, and left red streaks across his face. His eyes were panicked. He looked at Johnny, and shouted something, but Johnny couldn't hear it over the engine.

Johnny sprinted forward to go meet Dave. As he made his way there, Dave collapsed. Johnny came to a skidding halt and knelt down at Dave's side. There was a bullet wound in Dave's shoulder and another one in his leg. Dave looked up at Johnny, clutched Johnny's hand, tried to repeat whatever he'd said earlier, but didn't have the breath before dying.

Johnny swore, tried to wake Dave up, took a pulse, looked at the wounds. It was over.

Johnny stood. Being away from the running engine now, and facing towards town, Johnny's heart sank as he realized the faint sound of distant gunfire, popping off again and again. Johnny ran back inside to get his hunting rifle, and then threw himself into one of the fixed trucks and floored it into town.

By the time he got there, the gunfire had stopped. Johnny got out of his truck at the edge of town, parked beside the town's main gravel road.

The slain were laid out on either side of the road. Johnny walked down the road slowly, bug-eyed, hands trembling, looking around and around at the corpses with slit throats and bullet wounds. Tony's kid was killed. Kim was killed. Kate was killed. Jenny was killed. Lucy was killed. Kitty was killed. Lucille was killed. Jim was killed. Sharry was killed. Pat was killed. Linda was killed. Skinny was killed. Stickshift was killed. Pete was killed. Johnny took the glass of rum out of Pete's dead hand, smashed it on the ground, turned his head to the sky, and screamed, again and again, long past the point when his throat hurt, long past the point where there was any catharsis to it, again and again, until when he tried to make even a whimper he

hacked and coughed, and his breathing for a long time after was ragged, wheezing, labored.

With his hunting rifle slung over his chest, Johnny staggered out of town, following after the tracks of the killers.

iv

Johnny crouched hunkered down on the side of a bluff, looking through the scope of his hunting rifle down at the parade of marauders. The marauders had arrived at the next town up the coast, and were massacring the folks here too. Johnny's finger rested heavy on the trigger, but even if he were the best shot in the world, he had ten bullets. He wasn't stopping much from up here.

Johnny stopped looking, reslung his rifle, and scrambled down the slope towards town. They wouldn't get away from him this time. He at least needed something to track them by. A country they were from. The name of their leader. All he knew about them presently was that they wore grey clothes, and most had a black and orange bandanna somewhere on their person as well.

As Johnny stalked through the spongy soil of this northern reach of the swamp, he kept his posture low, hiding in the long grass. The gunfire died down as he advanced. These marauders didn't seem to stick around long.

Off to his side, Johnny heard a canine yelp in pain. Johnny raised his sights and wheeled around to face that way. Stalking through the swamp, he came around a rocky outcropping to find two marauders in a small clearing with an injured dog, each of them taking turns striking the dog with their rifles. Johnny aimed, waited for one of them to stand still for a second, and then shot the marauder in the head, ending the sadist's life in a cloud of pink mist. Before the other marauder could orient himself to what had just happened, Johnny pulled off two shots on him too, and got him in the chest. He went down.

Johnny stalked away from the scene for a moment, laid low in a patch of long grass, and waited, listening to see if he had alerted anyone.

It seemed not. Johnny got up and stalked his way to the clearing, head on a swivel to keep aware of anyone else stalking around.

When he arrived, the two men and the dog were dead. Johnny knelt at one of the men, turned his body over onto his back, and began rummaging through his grey clothing. In a breast pocket, he found a medallion. The medallion was stamped with an image of a skull, and a phrase in an unknown language above the skull and below it. Rummaging through the other body, Johnny found an identical medallion in a trouser pocket.

Johnny perked up at the sound of grass rustling nearby. He stood and turned and began to raise his rifle, but the marauder got a shot off first. A bullet seared through Johnny's left hand and the side of his stomach, and Johnny was knocked onto his ass like he'd been clipped by a truck. He screamed, and fumbled to find a grip on his rifle with his good hand before the marauder could arrive.

Before that happened, another gunshot rang out.

Johnny's breath came in shaking stutters, but he tried to keep it quiet so he could hear what was happening.

"Johnny?" a new voice called, from the direction of where the latest shot had come from. "Johnny, was that you? Pete's kid?"

Johnny writhed in pain. "Yeah! Johnny! I'm shot pretty bad over here! Is that you Sylvester?"

"It is!"

Another mechanic. This town had a bigger port, and Pete bought parts from this guy every now and then.

Johnny stood up, hand off of his rifle. Standing in the grass was Sylvester, wearing a suit made of long strands of the same grass that he hid in. Sylvester stalked up to Johnny, and helped him to a safer place where they could go see his wound looked to.

In a few minutes they arrived at Sylvester's shop outside of town. Sylvester bandaged the wounds, the one on Johnny's hand and the one on Johnny's side. When the wounds were patched, Sylvester suggested Johnny lay down for a while, but Johnny insisted on standing. The two of them wandered over to

the garage. Johnny handed Sylvester one of the medallions. "You read this?"

Sylvester took the medallion. "Pirates' Cant. *We are the tide. Bleak Francis.*"

Johnny had heard legends of him. Wherever there was contentment in the world, Bleak Francis appeared and put an end to it. He slaughtered entire cities and made off with the ships. Many sailors had come to stock false ropes on deck as preemptive revenge: should Bleak Francis kill them and steal their ship, someday a rope would snap at the worst time and kill Bleak Francis, though this had never yet happened, of course. He appeared from nowhere and departed to nowhere, he was born nowhere and lived nowhere and would never die, and would always kill. That was what the legends said. Johnny had other ideas about whether or not Bleak Francis would die.

Johnny staggered out of the garage. As he went out into the sun, he looked down at his bandaged hand, and then turned back to face Sylvester. "Thank you, Sylvester."

"Where in the hell do you think you're going?"

"I'm going to kill Bleak Francis."

"Not without me you ain't."

Sylvester walked out into the sun with Johnny, and the two began towards town.

V

Sylvester's town was left the same way as Johnny's had been. Sylvester kept his eyes high, avoiding looking down at the bodies as much as possible. Johnny took them through town following the bulk of the marauders' tracks. The tracks brought them to port, where the ships were missing. On the horizon out at sea, Johnny could see Bleak Francis and his men getting away.

Johnny yelled slurs at them at the top of his ragged lungs, raised his rifle, and emptied his remaining rounds after them, but at such a range, landing any shot would be a miracle. Sylvester raised his rifle too, aimed, took a shot, waited, and then shook his head.

The ships continued on, over the horizon.

Johnny began towards the port, where there was still a rowboat left.

Sylvester remained where he stood, and called, "You wanna kill Bleak Francis or you wanna kill yourself?"

Johnny raised both arms in a shrug as he kept walking. "Right now I'm a little indifferent, to be honest."

"You wanna kill Bleak Francis," Sylvester said, calling Johnny's bluff.

It was true. Johnny did want to kill Bleak Francis.

Sylvester began walking after Johnny, just so he didn't have to shout any louder. "I'm going to see Kara."

Johnny stopped. Kara was Sylvester's granddaughter, and worked as a medium. Johnny turned to face Sylvester. He felt a sting of tears come to him as he considered his next words. "Kara's probably dead."

Sylvester nodded, and wiped a tear from his own eye. "Maybe she's still taking business calls."

Sylvester led the way back into town, still keeping his eyes up. Johnny saw Kara's corpse outside of her house, but thought better of mentioning it to Sylvester. The two men proceeded inside through the battered open front door. The home smelled of incense and flowers.

Sylvester went to a shelf, and picked up a pair of metal objects. "Dowsing rods," Sylvester said. As he held them loosely in his steady hands, the two rods began to point around and around, until both settled on pointing towards a stairway leading upwards. Sylvester and Johnny proceeded up the stairs, down a hall, around a corner, and up another stairway, which brought them into a room which took up the entirety of the third floor: a large window on one wall let in light, and a black carpet over the floor absorbed the light. Every inch of wall, besides that where the window was, had a bookshelf before it. The shelves held books, as well as crystals, vases, bones, and miscellany. At the center of the room was a grey stone basin. The dowsing rods pointed to the basin. Sylvester and Johnny went and stood by the basin. Once there, the dowsing rods began spinning independently of one another, no longer pointing to anything in particular. Sylvester lowered them.

The two men looked at the basin, and then at one another.

Johnny reached into a pocket, took out one of the medallions, and dropped it in. It landed with a clatter of metal on stone.

In front of them, one book flew off of its shelf and landed open on the floor, turned to a particular page. An extreme gust of wind blew off the roof of the house, shattered the window, and rustled Sylvester's hair. From the clear blue sky, a single raindrop fell and landed on a particular place in the open book.

Sylvester set down the dowsing rods, brought his hands together, and spoke into his clasped hands a brief prayer of thanks and farewell.

Johnny and Sylvester went to the book, and each took a knee before it. The raindrop had landed on the heading of a section entitled, *The Oracle of Ma'ir*.

There are the calm oceans of the world, and there are the roiling border seas; between the calm white and the calm red, the roiling pink fraught with whitecaps and whirlpools. If one's ship is taken into such a whirlpool at a border sea, and they have grave business unfinished, they will arrive at the Island of Yai, where the Oracle of Ma'ir resides.

Sylvester noted, "Not far from here to the black sea. Fancy a trip to the roiling grey?"

Johnny fancied a trip to the roiling grey very much.

Sylvester led the way to a smaller dock, in a reclusive inlet outside of town. There, they boarded a catamaran, swapped out the false ropes for good ones, and set sail towards the roiling grey.

vi

"It's getting hairy alright!" Sylvester said, eyes pinched nearly shut as the spray of grey saltwater became a constant force.

The deck rocked greatly back and forth, threatening to roll the boat over. Johnny worked the sail with a white-knuckled grip. His jaw chattered from the cold ocean water that had been spraying them the last two hours, as they'd gone deeper and deeper into the border sea. They were nearly at their

destination: ahead spun an immense whirlpool big enough to fit two towns in.

Sylvester cackled as he crouched at the very bow of the boat, leaning forward, willing himself ever closer to the whirlpool. "Take me away, Kara dear! Either your grandmother or your murderer has an appointment with me, and I dread being late!"

The catamaran rolled as it entered the raging whirlpool. Johnny lost his grip on the ropes, and was pulled down, down, down, into the dark cold sea.

vii

Back in Jim's, sometimes, back when Johnny would come in during the day to sit down for a while sometimes, if he was there at just the right time of day, the sunlight would shine in through the window and leave a little rainbow, a little collection of every color, on the bar counter in front of him.

Presently, Johnny awoke on a beach, and the ocean in front of him was like an entire landscape consisting of that rainbow, as though every rainbow little or large that had ever shone in the world had come here afterwards and been pooled together.

Sand clung to Johnny's naked body and his ears rang. He sat upright, worked his jaw around, rubbed his ears trying to clear the ringing. He could still hear, at least. He could hear the waves. And he could see. Lord could he see.

He looked to his left and right. Down the beach a ways to his right, he saw Sylvester, also sitting on the beach naked, also looking out at the ocean. Behind them, when the beach ended, was a green forest.

Johnny stood and began walking towards Sylvester. Sylvester noticed Johnny then, and with stiff joints, stood up as well.

"Your ears hurt?" Johnny asked loudly.

Sylvester spat out a tooth. "Everything hurts. Let's go."

Johnny and Sylvester proceeded up the beach, and marched over the short grass through the green forest, brushing the sand off of themselves as they went. Johnny was stricken by the silence of the place, compared to the tulip swamp. No frogs croaked, no crickets chirped, no insects buzzed. There was the

rushing of the wind through the leaves, and there was the ringing in his ears, and there was the sound of their footsteps.

After a mile or so, Johnny and Sylvester arrived at a clearing, which was kept in dapple shade by the large trees adjacent. At the center of the clearing were two figures. One was a dog: she was the size and build of a golden retriever, though her long hair was not gold, but rather was an ever-moving array of pure colors, the same as the ocean nearby. Behind the dog, her face buried in the fur at the dog's rump, was a woman: the woman kept one hand on the dog's flank, and the other hand reached up to stroke the dog's back, as she licked and kissed the dog's vulva.

Johnny and Sylvester stood at the edge of the clearing. "Oh lord," Sylvester muttered to Johnny. The dog looked at them, wagging, swishing the long hair of her tail back and forth over the woman's head. The woman seemed not to have noticed her visitors yet.

Sylvester gave a loud, pointed cough.

The woman continued about her business.

Johnny gave a whistle to the dog.

The dog stepped away from the woman's hold—her hands clung to the canine for a moment, but then fell away as the dog persisted in leaving. The woman looked around as though waking up from a nap. The dog bounded happily towards Johnny. Johnny crouched down and met the dog, petting her rainbow coat and receiving a lick on the cheek.

The woman came over, and Johnny stood to meet her. The dog sat down at the woman's side.

"Welcome," the woman said.

Johnny gave her a nod, and Sylvester said, "We come seeking the Oracle of Ma'ir. Are you her?"

The woman smiled. "What strange visitors, who come on such a difficult journey while knowing so little. My name is Carolyn. I may have learned much of the future lo these many years, but I am not the Oracle of Ma'ir. Do you wish to hear the tale of the one who you seek?"

Johnny gave a gesture to indicate she had the floor.

Carolyn brushed a few strands of hair out of her face, and began. "From the clay of void, Ma'ir created three beings: a mountain, a flame, and a dog. He made love to the mountain,

which brought forth every planet and moon. He made love to the flame, which brought forth every star. He made love to the dog—this dog—and from her womb spilled forth the fish who would fill the oceans; over time, the other gods would make love to the fish, bringing forth all the different creatures of the air and the land. In this dog is contained genesis, as well as echoes of all time and space. *She* is the Oracle of Ma'ir."

Johnny knelt, and bowed his head.

The Oracle of Ma'ir licked his forehead, and he smiled.

Sylvester crossed his arms, and asked, "Does she speak?"

"Does yours?" Carolyn countered.

Johnny stood back up. Loudly, he said, "I do speak, but I think my sense of volume is a little off right now." He rubbed one of his ringing ears. "Howdy."

Sylvester asked, "If she is an oracle, and she does not speak, then how might one consult with her?"

Carolyn leaned down and pet the oracle's head. "You observed me consulting with her as you arrived. Place your mouth on her sex, and you shall know what you wish to of anything which is descended of Ma'ir; all the universe, shown as an echo of his presence in her."

"Good lord, I might actually be sick."

Johnny leaned over to Sylvester, and loudly said, "We came this far. You got this. Like riding a bicycle."

Sylvester sighed, then shuddered. He knelt down on the grass. "Show us your bum then," he said to the oracle.

The oracle wagged, stood, and then faced away from Sylvester, tail turned aside, presenting.

Sylvester faced away, and dry heaved over the grass. "I can't," he gagged. "Even if I could bring myself to kiss its snatch—" he paused to dry-heave again—"how am I supposed to put my face that near a dog's arsehole?"

"Carolyn didn't seem to mind it."

"What would really be better about a human's anus?" Carolyn added.

Sylvester sighed, spoke a brief prayer, and then screwed his eyes shut and leaned forward, placing his lips on the pitch-black vulva of the Oracle of Ma'ir. He held his lips there for one

second, then two, three, four, five. After five he shot back as though from an electric shock, gasping, eyes wide.

“NOTHING!” he shrieked, and pointed at the dog. “I SAW—I SAW VOID, TRUE EMPTINESS, *NOTHING!*”

“Then she *felt* nothing,” Carolyn scolded, and crouched down to pet the oracle. Looking up at Johnny, she asked, “Do *you* wish to consult with her, or are we done here?”

“Uh, well ma’am, dogs aren’t exactly my type, but if you insist —”

“Fucking liar,” Sylvester spat from the ground. He still trembled, but he looked up at Johnny with contempt. “I didn’t suggest that *you* do it because I know *you’ll* actually get off on it. I know about what you used to pay Jim’s girls to do with his dog.”

“Dogs aren’t my type!” Johnny insisted. “I still *respect* them! I still want *them* to have a good time, I just don’t want to be part of it!”

“Go on and eat a dog’s cunt here then, fucking liar.”

“I will. But this is on *my* terms,” Johnny said, pointing an insistent finger down at Sylvester. “I’m doing this so we can find Bleak Francis and we can get our revenge and put an end to his marauding, and I’m going to do a good job since I’m doing it anyways. But this is a one-off thing for me. A *departure* from the usual. Go to hell.”

“Meet you there,” Sylvester moaned, and then turned and vomited in the grass.

Johnny made a noise with his lips, and the oracle came over, wagging. Johnny got on his knees, petting the oracle, and said gently, if loudly, “Turn around girl.”

The oracle did turn around, and presented to Johnny.

Johnny placed a hand on the oracle’s flank, a hand on the oracle’s back, tilted his head, wet his lips, put his mouth to the oracle’s vulva, and got to work, prodding and massaging with his lips and tongue. In a few seconds, Johnny’s field of vision was replaced with a sight of swirling rainbows, like the ocean, like the oracle’s coat. His hearing—the ringing—faded away to silence. All of his perception was on the feeling of pleasuring the oracle’s sex with his tongue and his lips, and the sight of rainbows. As he went on, bands of the rainbows grouped closer

together, and closer still, until forming into an image of a castle near a beach on the red sea. Bleak Francis and his men resided here. Johnny could reach out across all moments of time at once, and see the hundreds of times Bleak Francis and his marauders had come and gone from here. He could reach across all of space, and at once see the castle, and the medallions in every man's pocket, and the handsome scarred face of Bleak Francis, and the continent on which the castle resided. He shifted his focus away from Bleak Francis's castle, and towards the Island of Yai, in the near future: he saw himself and Sylvester marching off into the rainbow sea, accompanied by an army of faceless ghosts.

When he had seen all that he needed to, Johnny gave the oracle one last departing kiss, scratched her flank, and sat back. Wagging ecstatically, the oracle turned and lapped at Johnny's face. "Yeah, alright," Johnny said, and returned a few of her kisses, opening his mouth for her, their tongues playing off of each other. Then he leaned away, keeping her at bay with a firm hand on her shoulder. "Thank you," he said to her.

"Not your type?" Sylvester asked.

Johnny noticed the ringing had come back to his ears.

Carolyn sat down behind the oracle, kissed at her vulva for a few moments, and then backed away. "Wow. This... *actually* is his first time with a dog," Carolyn mentioned.

"Bullllshit."

"*Hours* at a time with the mermaids, you go man," she mentioned to Johnny, and then offered him knuckles.

He fist-bumped her, and then faced Sylvester. "I learned where Bleak Francis is, if you were wondering."

"Do we kill him?"

"It's a massacre."

Sylvester stood up, and Johnny and Carolyn stood up too.

Johnny turned to Carolyn. "Who are the ghosts of this island?"

"Souls lost to the whirlpools who did not have grave business left unfinished, but who are happy to help if someone else has a cause that they like."

Johnny nodded. To the oracle and to Carolyn, he said, "Thank you both."

“Any time,” Carolyn responded, and gave Johnny a nod back.

Johnny and Sylvester marched away through the woods. As they marched across the beach, their ghostly army formed up beside them, marching in step with their two leaders, who also, of course, were ghosts now. The rainbow sea ahead of them parted, and left in the gap a mist of pure red saltwater.

viii

Johnny, Sylvester, and their army emerged up out of the red sea before the castle of Bleak Francis. Grey-coated men met them in the yard and fired at them, but each bullet passed through the approaching ghosts: death had finally come to reap Bleak Francis and his men. The ghosts soared forward through the air, killing those who tried to fight and killing those who tried to flee: every marauder had chosen and sealed his fate long before this day.

Johnny and Sylvester arrived at the heavy castle gate and passed through as though it were a curtain. Bleak Francis’s men attacked with bullets and blades, and were shortly slaughtered by razor-sharp ghostly claws.

Johnny and Sylvester marched into the castle, and arrived at the throne room. Bleak Francis sat upon his throne, flanked by twenty guards who had their rifles trained on the approaching ghosts. Bleak Francis himself smiled, and held up two goblets of wine, besides the one resting on the arm of his throne.

“Perhaps we could talk this over?” he asked cordially.

Johnny scowled and quickened his march, thinking of his dead father, his dead brother, and his dead friends. Sylvester quickened his own pace beside him.

Bleak Francis’s expression dropped from ambassadorial optimism to frightened realization. He turned to his nearest guard. “Kill them.”

Every guard emptied the magazine of his fully automatic rifle at the ghosts, to no effect: the ghostly army soared forward, killing every gunman. Bleak Francis rose from his throne and attempted to flee: Sylvester and Johnny leapt forward and knocked the pirate captain onto his back, each ghost breaking

one of the captain's ankles. Bleak Francis shrieked in pain. Sylvester raked his claws against Bleak Francis's face, tearing apart that which was once unduly handsome. Johnny dug his claws against Bleak Francis's guts, opening several of his internal organs. Bleak Francis died a long, painful, well-earned death.

The ghostly army fanned out to sweep for stragglers. Johnny and Sylvester turned to face one another.

"I think that's about it for me," Sylvester said. "Look me up in the great beyond sometime, I'll buy you a beer."

"I might be a while," Johnny said. "I still got more business here."

"Heh. I think you always will, Johnny. Take care."

Sylvester and Johnny shook hands, until Sylvester's ghost faded, and passed on to the next place.

Johnny turned, walked out of the castle, back down the yard, and back into the red waters of the red ocean.

ix

Johnny returned to the Island of Yai, walked through the green forest, and sat at the edge of the clearing for a while, watching Carolyn consult with the oracle. The oracle saw Johnny and wagged, but remained with Carolyn. Eventually, Johnny brought his fingers to his mouth and gave a whistle, and the oracle came bounding over. Carolyn looked around, gathered her bearings, and then stood and came over too. Johnny sat petting the oracle. As Carolyn arrived, Johnny stood.

"You're back," she said.

Johnny nodded. "She's not my type, but I think you might be."

Carolyn crossed her arms. "I looked into you a lot while you were gone. Past and future."

"How's it look?"

Carolyn smirked. "We get along for a while."

Johnny stepped forward, brushed aside a strand of Carolyn's hair, and the two of them shared their first kiss.

On the Island of Yai, Carolyn consults with the Oracle of Ma'ir,
as Johnny consults with Carolyn.