The Kraken

We crossed the Panama Canal. Then, it rained for 10 days. I felt like the world was flooding and I was on Noah's ark. But instead of animals, we just had a bunch of containers.

Forty feet long. Corrugated steel, a plywood floor, and interlocking corners. Bland, efficient boxes. Our ship held 4200 of them.

Lowry spent most of his time in conference calls. An article about InBev's absentee CEO had made its way into the Wall Street Journal. My Uncle thought his surprise adventure was a stroke of marketing genius. The board of directors disagreed.

When Lowry wasn't managing a disintegrating career, he spent his time enjoying a very wet midlife crisis.

He organized an elaborate barbeque in honor of our guests. A 'portable jacuzzi' was flown in via helicopter. This inflatable thing was halfway between a kiddy pool and a hot tub. He set up tarps over an alleyway of containers. Two crew members from Guam threw charcoal into an empty oil drum. Guam natives have a unique, delicious concep-

tion of barbeque. They can turn short ribs and spam into delicacies.

We strung up Christmas lights and put on Grateful Dead. It continued to pour. The ocean was blanketed in gentle swells. Kumiko and Joe snacked on shortribs, looking down on the festivities from the relative dryness of the bridge. Lowry got drunk. He walked around, shaking everyone's hand.

He proudly proclaimed, "We've done it boys! We've recreated Shakedown Street."

Sometimes I can't handle Lowry's shit. I crowded into the tepid tub with four other dudes. It seemed like a good place to avoid him.

Lowry spent another afternoon constructing a beautiful aluminum sign. He didn't make it himself. He just paced back and forth, watching the welder whom he had wrangled.

The worker kept saying, "Sir, I really need to repair a crankshaft." Every time he darted towards the door, Lowry intercepted him with a hundred dollar bill.

The finished sign was placed outside of the galley. It read 'until we meat again.'

Another afternoon, he disappeared inside of an empty container. A worklight and six cans of acrylic paint disappeared with him.

At dinner that evening, Lowry interrupted an unrelated conversation.

"Tintin, I've painted a mural inside a container," he said. "I want you write some cursive over it."

"Oh? What do you want me to write?"

"I was thinking, maybe, the words 'does it really mean anything?'"

Lowry might have been losing his grasp on reality. Torrents of unrestrained self-expression gushed forth from the man. Divorcing Pepper had left him with all sorts of heavy emotions. Hundreds of miles from land, he was blindly striking out with affection, angst, and his signature touch of insanity.

Somewhere in a quiet morning, Tintin finished Lowry's painting. While she helped him manifest his existential anxiety, I sat in my bed looking through old letters. Five years ago, when I graduated from college, Lowry sent me this:

Dear Matt,

Congratulations! There is a bright future ahead of you.

You may work so hard that you forget to eat. You may find happiness. You may find that love is as tangible as a toaster. And you may find that nothing hurts more.

Doubt that the sun doth move,

Lowry

I drank my coffee. I listened to the sound of the Wartsila-Sulzer, dampened to a gentle hum by distance and the Pepper's reverberant metal skin. Something sounded different, but it wasn't the engine. The rain had stopped.

My feet found their way to the main deck. There was a heavy blanket of fog covering the ship. Everything was infused with a cool, calm haze. I stumbled across Kumiko.

I said, "morning."

She said, "Joe died. Quietly, in his sleep. He always knew quickly whether he liked someone. He liked you, Matt."

We stood there for a while.

"He wasn't big on ceremony. Would you carry his body out from my room and put it overboard?"

I did what she wanted. Joe had barely hit the water when Kumiko brought out a journal. She opened and offered it to me. In neat cursive, the page was titled *Joe's Obituary.*

"It's in his own words. I transcribed it about a month ago. He was too weak to write."

Her voice cracked. It was the first sign of sadness that she had shown.

I held the spiral-bound yellow notebook. A flood light lit the page through the murky, dull sunrise. As I read, words silently formed on my lips. This was Joe's obituary:

When I was in high school, I used to run the one mile race. Four laps around a track. I always pushed myself very hard. I found that lap three was particularly painful. In lap three, the finish, the opportunity to rest and recover, was still far away. The only way I could run my fastest was to forget that more pain was coming. In the third lap I would tell myself, you only need to push right now. Only in the present. Don't worry about the pain that will come. Just push for this one instant.

In college, I once had a very potent pot brownie. I felt so high, and so horrible, that I was convinced I would die. The only way that I made it through was by becoming, in my head, a fish. I felt this great darkness baring down on me, and it slipped past my scales. I remember thinking, if I can make it through this moment, then, surely, I can make it through anything.

Years later, I met Kumiko. I felt the strongest burning that I have ever felt. I knew that the burning was dangerous; that the same warmth which provided light might also consume me. I knew that it would drive me to do things I never otherwise would have done. I knew too, this burning made me twice the man I had been.

Being with Kumiko was like climbing higher and higher. I was on my way to the top, but I was also balancing on a precarious edge. Then, one day, the edge was gone. Kumiko was still by my side, but our union was so strong that any thought of parting was beyond volition.

The top of the world grew further than it had previously seemed. 'Good enough' is a sad, sad phrase. But I felt it my bones. Where we were, what we were, was good enough. Don't get me wrong: I still pushed against each moment. I believe that when you stop pushing, you are effectively dead. But the pushing did not take me any higher.

We raised a family. When I thought I had given everything, our family drove me. I felt like a mule hitched to a wagon. Bearing the weight of my family has been the greatest pleasure I have known.

Each day, I might have experienced a dozen moments. One day, twelve moments, isn't much. People get about 25,000 days. And then, one day, they're gone. We live in a sea of humans. I have come to believe that each of us is both stronger and more fragile than anyone else could understand.

In summary, I have found that some of the truest moments come from dark places.

Later on, as the sun set, Kumiko mixed martinis for Lowry and me. The fog lifted. We sat on the bridge, looking out over the ever present containers and a crystal clear evening. We were very open with each other. Kumiko talked about Joe, Lowry talked about Pepper, and they both cried. After twenty minutes or so, their tears turned to chuckles. Neither of them felt like being sad for very long. Lowry cracked a joke about Joe's incontinence. Kumiko was sort of cool with it. We had a few more rounds. It was that type of evening. It grew late.

Eventually, I sat on the bridge alone. I hadn't noticed my friends leaving. What had kept my mind preoccupied? It had been an interesting idea. Maybe something related to valves and the intake of motor oil...

The idea wouldn't come to me. Without my idea, without my companions, I felt lonely. There was no light pollution and lots of stars. I've probably already mentioned it, but the ocean gives off a tremendous sense of scale.

I stopped by Lowry's quarters. I had never visited him there before. We said a few words to each other. At the end of our conversation he said, "goodnight, Matt. I love you."

By midnight, I was soundly asleep. I had no idea that I would never see Lowry again.

A mesocyclone is a vortex of air that is between 1 and 6 miles wide. A supercell is a thunderstorm with a mesocyclone in its center. I woke up to the sound of a supercell.

I looked out of my window. It was barely dawn. About half a mile away was a whirlpool that had been turned upside down. A massive, twisting column of water making its way into the clouds. I later learned that this is called a waterspout. I stared blankly. Behind the first waterspout, there must have been a dozen others; tornados of water, prowling the edge of lightning-streaked blackness.

In the middle of a traumatic event, shock is common. But I wasn't in the middle of that storm. I didn't receive the gentle, world-softening effect of shock. I watched the storm approach for five minutes.

I was so terrified.

The Bell Pepper weighed more than the empire state building. I remember thinking that it was about to be crushed like a paper cup.

The Pepper's emergency protocol dictated that we meet in a locker room by the engine bay. I went there.

Past that point, my memory is hazy. From what I've gathered, this is what happened:

A waterspout hit the front of our ship. Gigantic shearing forces ripped massive holes in our hull. The Bell Pepper tilted twenty degrees starboard. At some point, I carried Kumiko in my arms. There was water and darkness. I remember strapping Kumiko to a cable and a carabiner as we emerged on deck. Within the storm, lightening was the primary form of illumination. Hundreds of yards down the ship, a man lit up like a firework. Kumiko, myself, and a half dozen others got into a lifeboat.

The lifeboats on a modern container ship looks more like subma-

rines than anything else. They are enclosed metal tubes with an access hatch, attached to the ship by a single cable.

The Pepper's lifeboats were pretty far aft. This was fortunate. By the time we reached one, the crest of each erratic wave was burying the front half of the Pepper in a dozen feet of water.

We strapped ourselves into the lifeboat and dropped into the ocean. For five minutes, we were thrown about the ocean like a pebble. Then, our pebble floated into the eye of the storm. I looked out of a porthole, across an expanse of flat water, against a backdrop of swirling black storm. I saw the capsized Bell Pepper. The Pepper broke apart in the tentacles of a kraken.

Endless rows of suckers hooked on to the ship from all sides. The creature writhed and squeezed and pulled.

As the ship went down, a massive squid-like head emerged. One soulless pupil, the width of a telephone pole, swept past our lifeboat.

The kraken's beak opened. I heard a sound like the creaking hinge of a doorway from hell. The creature belched and a stream of krumplenurfners poured forth. The nurfners floated every which way. From a distance, they almost looked like balloons; balloons with sunken eyes, and long, rolling tongues. One of these creatures approached us like a magnet. It looked at me. I wished with all of my willpower that it would go away. I closed my eyes.

When I opened my eyes, the nurfner had slipped past. The kraken was gone too. I sat there with a vague, unfocused sense of gratitude. Kumiko asked me if I'd like to stay with her in Pohnpei for a while.

She said, "Judging from the krumplenurfners, we're already somewhere in Micronesia."

Memory is unpredictable. It is hard to tell what will stick, and what will fade. When Lowry looked back on falling in love with Pepper, some of the clearest moments weren't particularly significant. Without much substance, it was harder for those memories to distort with time. Lowry remembered giving Pepper a ride home, after they had spent their third or fourth night together. They were tired and hungover, and mostly drove in silence. Pepper should have returned hours ago. She needed to study for an upcoming calculus exam.

Lowry said, "math." Pepper rolled her eyes.

The two had grown close enough that he could tease her with a single word. He remembered learning to share the same slow, empty thoughts with someone else.

When the storm struck, Lowry watched it approach from the comfort of his bed. He didn't move. The view from his cabin was pretty good. He was curious to see what would happen next. As death incarnate approached, he felt as if he was waiting for an important meeting. His mind wandered. He concocted a fantasy.

In his fantasy, Lowry was playing in the World Series of Poker at the Rio: the biggest poker tournament in the world. He disguised himself in a banana costume and sunglasses. No one knew that, in point of fact, he was Lowry, CEO of InBev. He drank a constant stream of daiquiris, pretending to be drunk. His opponents underestimated his ability. He won the tournament. Then he got up on a podium to accept the prize. He gave this speech:

I have been accused of drinking virgin strawberry daiquiris
Those allegations are substantially true
I stand before you today, an almost entirely sober banana

Tonight I won 10 million dollars
I plan to piss away a million dollars gambling
The remaining money will be split evenly

Between Doctors Without Borders
And the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

I believe that the greatest failure of human compassion
Is that it seldom exceeds the bounds
Of the small worlds in which we occupy our lives

Ours is a world of limited resources
Every dollar spent on Starbucks or slot machines
Is a hungry child whom you are choosing not to feed

If your world is a clean, healthy place
You are selfish in a way which is undeniably human

I will now get off my high horse
Thank you to the Rio

The night before the storm, the last time I saw Lowry, he was sitting on his bed. His knees were tucked in towards his chest. He was 56 years old. His mouth was curled into a grimace. There were books strewn around him. Most of them had a sailboat on the cover. A few were about poker.

I asked him if he was okay. Lowry told me that he was sad, but not unhappy. He told me that sadness can actually be quite fulfilling. Then he opened up one of his books.

"A Starboard Attitude, page 53," said Lowry. "Attitude is the difference between an ordeal and an adventure."

When I think about my Uncle, I think about the people who let that confused, melodramatic idiot into their hearts.