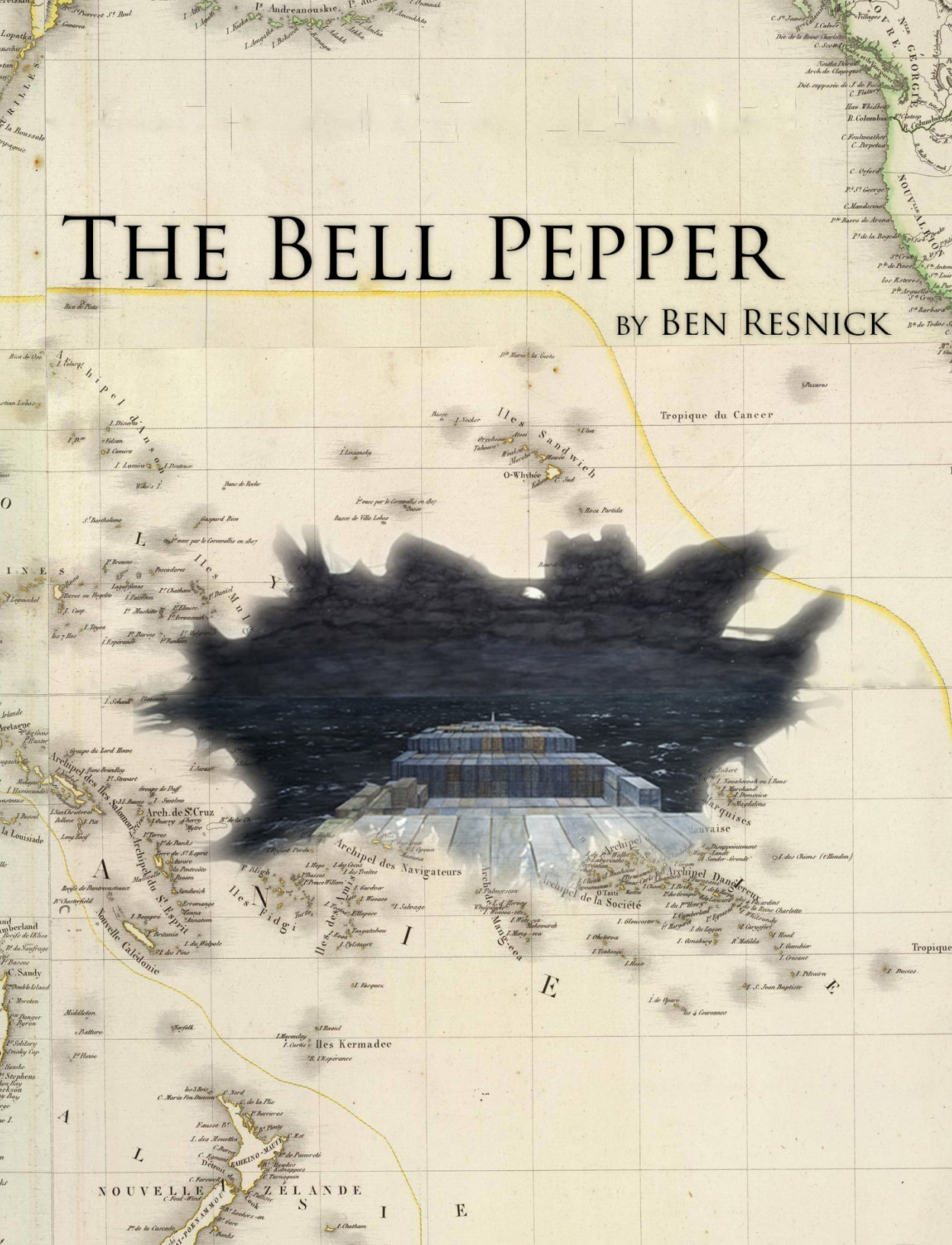


THE BELL PEPPER

BY BEN RESNICK



Illustrations by Brendon Hall and Martin Machado
Song 'Set Sail For Stun' by Karl

Because of Grandpa Bill and Meryl Streep's butt

He was profoundly dissatisfied with himself... And with the velvet softness of the April night, and the choir of nightingales in the orange-trees, and the host of stars hanging so low as almost to touch the palms

-Patrick O'Brian, Master and Commander

The Stowaway

I've noticed something about naps taken on rainy days. Once you read this, I bet you'll notice it too: as you wake up, the sound of rain gets louder.

First, dreaming and silence. Then, a gentle white noise. Then, the proper, full plinking of rain drops. You don't just start processing the world. The world fades in.

My first morning aboard the Bell Pepper, I lay on my belly while golf balls struck metal. There was a pillow covering the top of my head. Each shot traced a path across my porthole.

I consider myself a waking-up aficionado. As a waking-up aficionado, let me tell you: golf balls are better than rain. Golf balls skittering across the tops of containers. The hum of an engine. The smell of the sea. Mmmmm.

There's always a coffee machine right next to my bed. The day doesn't begin until I've had two cups. With cup number three in hand, I made my way up to the bridge. Our captain addressed me from the

helm.

“He’s insane,” said the captain. He gestured towards the quarter-deck.

Uncle Lowry was leaning against a railing, driver resting on one shoulder, looking down at Tintin. I walked over.

“Well of course we need to stop at Tupaloo. I thought it was on the itinerary.”

Tintin muttered a reply.

“Fuel? First we need fuel? This is a goddamn container ship, and I’m-”

Lowry had noticed my presence. I raised an eyebrow in his general direction. He teed up a golf ball.

“I’m a stowaway,” said Lowry matter-of-factly.

“Lowry, you own the ship,” I said.

He was wearing a hawaiian shirt, sweatpants, and tennis shoes. He took his time answering. First, he hooked a shot sharply left. The ball careened off of the main deck, six stories below us. Somewhere, a crewman swore. Lowry picked up a Daiquiri. It must have been before 9am. Sipping through a straw, he gazed at me with self-assured wisdom.

“Exactly. This is my ship, and I’m a stowaway.”

These pages are my attempt at writing a few stories about my Uncle. I love him. Lowry paid for my undergrad degree. When I got my masters in engineering, he offered to pay for that too. After I graduated, he gave me the second best job I’ve ever had.

Inscrutable means ‘impossible to understand or interpret.’ Lowry was inscrutable. Not just the stuff he said; everything about him. While we sailed aboard the Bell Pepper, he was acting CEO of the InBev Corporation. I’m not sure how he convinced InBev’s board of directors to retrofit a container ship.

When I think about Lowry, I think about his moustache and his confidence. I think about how he was batshit crazy, yet remarkably successful. I think about a man on an assembly line, memorizing poems to

pass the time.

There are moments that attract our memory like a dinner bell. A first kiss, a tearful farewell, a promotion. One of my Uncle's moments came when he saw his friend's arm get caught in a meat grinder.

It was a messy scene. PlumpCo was shut down for the day. A supervisor assured witnesses that they would receive psychological support.

On the morning after the incident, a cardboard box marked with the words 'psychological support' sat by the time clock. Inside the box were pocket sized copies of *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. That same morning, Lowry got a new job.

He didn't look far. My Uncle walked across the street from PlumpCo to Toastie Buns. Outside of Toastie Buns were dozens of jobless New Yorkers. After 10 minutes, a supervisor picked Lowry from the crowd. He was 22 and 6' 3".

At Toastie Buns, Lowry twisted springs into metal plates. He didn't know what the springs did. Presumably, something related to toast. Mildew and fluorescent insulation closed in around his workstation. Tacked to the insulation was a quote. It was attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt. This was the quote:

Small minds discuss people; average minds discuss events; great minds discuss Toastie Buns.

There were a thousand small minds on either side of Lowry. Half assembled toasters and gossip filled an endless, narrow corridor. It was numbing work and piss poor pay. The ends of the springs were sharp. His first week, he cut his right hand. The cut became infected and didn't heal properly.

By his second week, he had absolutely no enthusiasm for toast. There was a dull ache that suffused the back of his hand. He couldn't stop thinking about how his friend's arm had turned into a sausage. And there was big news on the assembly line: Ingrid Bergman had broken up

with her boyfriend.

The news broke amidst the crumb tray benders. It quickly spread to the ladies who coiled heating elements. From there, it swept across the factory.

"She broke up with him on a dock!" said Mary to Helen as they passed off a steel plate. Mary screwed in a knob, Helen stamped a logo, and the plates moved on. Each new plate was accompanied by a few words.

"He's getting over her in Cancun!"

On one side of Lowry was a small, snarky, Filipino girl. Her job was to remove plates from a drill press and brush off the metal shavings. This girl was Tintin. Tintin didn't get along well with others.

Toasters moved smoothly down the line, but the gossip stopped at Tintin. At first, Helen thought that Tintin was upset for Ingrid. But with each juicy tidbit, Tintin's scowl deepened. Her disdain was clear.

"Well at least don't make Lowry miss out," hrumphed Helen. "Lowry?"

He ignored her.

"Ugh. You two aren't even doing anything."

"We're working," said Tintin.

"But what are you thinking about? Some of us," said Helen, "are intellectual."

Tintin gave Helen a mischievous, threatening smile.

"Intellectual?"

Shakespeare's Sonnets was peaking out of Lowry's overalls. Tintin yanked the volume from his bib. By this point, they had attracted the attention of a half dozen workers. She ripped out the first page, grabbed the sharp end of a spring, and stabbed a poem into the insulation.

Tintin forcefully scrubbed shavings from a plate. As she handed it to Lowry, she said, "doubt thou the stars are fire."

Other workers performed their tasks, looking on. Tintin delivered the next plate with more Shakespeare.

"Doubt that the sun doth move."

Lowry repeated the line to himself. Helen pretended to ignore them. And while other workers exchanged gossip, my Uncle and his new friend exchanged lines of poetry.

Lowry and Tintin kissed just once, after work, approximately six weeks into their friendship. He said that the absence of sexual tension was palpable. Afterwards, they ate sandwiches at Tintin's place.

Tintin lived in a small sloop that was permanently drydocked. The sloop lay at Corlear's Hook in Lower East Manhattan. In 1821, her great-grandfather had thrown a buoy from the sloop, saving a boy from drowning. That boy happened to be the son of the Mayor. Mayor Cadwallader D. Colden declared that the ship would always have a safe harbor in New York.

The upside was that Tintin didn't have to pay property tax. Long after she had plenty of money, she would insist on living in the small boat for 'tax reasons'.

Her cozy hideaway sat between two apartment complexes. A barbwire fence and tall shrubs sheltered ship from city. If it weren't for a towering mast, no one could have guessed the nautical nature of 2958 Hook St.

Ham sandwiches in hand, Tintin and Lowry dangled their legs from the crosstrees, 30 feet above the deck. In the distance, the East River was just visible. Since that morning, they had learned three Shakespearean epigrams.

"Next week, how about you read off the poems?" said Tintin.

"I can't read," he said.

"Wow," she said. "That's pretty pathetic."

"Yup."

Putting the sandwich between her teeth, Tintin wrapped herself around a forestay and slid to the deck. Momentarily, she climbed back up with a bottle of rum.

Later that night, she tried to teach my Uncle to read. She led him through their favorite poems, pointing at each word in turn. He did his

best to focus on the wriggling letters.

As they reached the end of the bottle, Lowry shouted out, "I get it!"

Perhaps he did. He woke the next morning, convinced that alcohol was the key to overcoming dyslexia.

We tend to pay most of our attention towards work, family, and a few friends. I think a big part of growing up is realizing that, whatever we do, most people won't care. Most acquaintances occupy the periphery of our lives.

Leaves fell. The city grew cold. Helen spent vast amounts of energy ignoring her poetic coworkers. She ignored them each day as Tintin ripped a new poem from Lowry's book, tacking it to the wall. She ignored the fluorescent insulation as it transformed into a collage of iambic pentameter. But she paid very close attention to the shrinking width of Shakespeare's Sonnets. They were running out of poems.

The rest of the factory wasn't paying attention to two workers reciting poetry. No one cared, until one day when Helen ignored them just a little too hard.

The last page was ripped from Shakespeare's Sonnets. The emptied book's cover was pinned to the wall, and Helen ignored Lowry and Tintin with vitriolic pleasure. Halfway through the day, Tintin finished the last poem. She stopped reciting lines. There was an hour of blissful silence.

"What now?" said Tintin.

"Hmmm... I guess we could start again at the beginning?"

"Sure!"

Helen hadn't seen that coming. For the rest of the day, her frustration simmered. The poetry was a joke. She felt like the punchline. That night, she ignored her predicament so fiercely that she didn't sleep.

The next day, Helen arrived at work an hour early. While the night shift looked on with curiosity, she quietly tore all of Shakespeare's 154 sonnets from the wall. Lowry arrived to the sight of Helen, sitting on

the ground, shredding poems by hand.

“What are you doing?”

Helen’s lips curled into a full-toothed, crazed smile.

“No more! No more of your FILTHY FUCKING POETRY” she yelled. She punctuated the last three words by poking Lowry in the chest with an accusing index finger.

Unfortunately for Helen, a supervisor overheard. Security came over while management apologized to Lowry.

“We appreciate that you brought a little culture into the workplace. Sorry that she destroyed your poems.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” said Lowry. “I’ve learned them all by heart.”

Helen’s eyes bugged out of her head. As she was escorted off the premises, she started cackling. Walking past the other workers, she muttered under her breath, over and over, “he knows them all by heart.”

That morning, the gossip was about a man who had memorized all of Shakespeare’s sonnets. The women on Lowry’s right asked if he’d recite some. That lady’s neighbor wanted to hear poetry too. Over the course of an afternoon, a very unlikely transformation took place.

Enthusiasm for Shakespeare had achieved critical mass. Immigrants who could barely speak English debated whether Shakespeare’s 18th sonnet was overrated. Certain lines became known by the entire factory. At the center of it all was Lowry, reciting poems which echoed through the halls.