BOAT

*A Novela by Grant Brown*

# I:

“I’ve lived here almost my whole life. My legal name is Kenneth, but nobody’s called me that since, well… Well, I suppose since ol’ Momma passed on.” The old man said, his boney fingers wrapped over the cane standing between his legs as he looked on at the man across the table. A nostalgic smile was on his face. The young man sitting across from him got the notion that this old fellow was rarely seen without it. “I’ve always preferred Kurt- That was what my Pops called me. Seemed to fit better, ya know?” His voice was smooth and yet simultaneously jagged; fitting his face, which could have been described in much the same way. His beard, meticulously sharpened and long, was a silvery grey that caught the natural blue light of Oregon’s coastal towns. He had bushy white eyebrows, and hidden underneath them, were the wise eyes of a man who had seen almost a century’s worth of experience.

The man nodded to Kurt, reaching for his coffee and looking out of the cafe window at the cold seas. “It’s a cold Winter this year, Captain.”

Kurt went on without acknowledging him, taking off his fisherman cap. Underneath was his hair, slicked back and put into a little bun at the back. “My father; he was a Hispanic, you see. I found myself very fortunate, sir, very fortunate, to have inherited some of his genes.” He gestured to his scalp. “Ninety-one years old, and I’ve still got myself a full head a’ hair!” He chuckled whole-heartedly, reaching for his cup of tea and taking a sip, before placing it back down on its plate. It was then that he realised what the man had said, and slyly managed to tie his unrelated comment back into the conversation at hand. “Comes in handy during these cold months, yes. I’ve no need to wear this here hat, but I like to, just to remind meself of the good ol’ days.”

The man took out a notepad, clicking his blue pen as he placed the sheets down on his knee. “Tell me more about the *good ol’ days*, Mr. Crawford.”

Kurt bellowed out another wholesome laugh, the lights in his eyes flickering as he looked about the cafe. “Oh, *boy*,” He exclaimed. “Where do I begin?”

“How far back do you remember?”

Kurt looked at the man, who was dressed in a business suit and had similar slicked back hair to his own: albeit much darker and thicker, with a humorous expression that was akin to accusation. “Oh, I see,” He said. “You take me for one of those old cooks who can’t remember his right foot from his left foot, huh?” He chuckled. “Well, that’s just fine. Just *fine*.”

“Oh, no, I don’t mean to offend-”

“Well, I’ll have you know that this is my right,” He lifted up his right hand, as if to swear on the bible during a court session. “And this is my left.” He lowered his right hand and lifted up his left. “And I’ve known that just as well as I’ve known my own name for the past ninety-some-odd years! Though, I suppose there’s a few old cooks out there who can’t even remember that. But I assure you, I ain’t one of them! I can pilot any ol’ boat better than *aaany* modern-day youngin’ could possibly *dream,* sir*.* But I want *mine.* I’ll have it no other way.” He smiled to himself, and locked eyes with the man, nodding confidently.

The man smiled sympathetically, placing his notebook down on the table. Kurt leaned forward to read it, vaguely making out that it said *Adorable.* “Mr. Crawford,” He began, feeling a strain in his voice as he tried to break the bad news. “I come from a long lineage of fishermen. My father and his father before him have all met you and worked with you to some degree.”

“Remind me your name, son?” Kurt asked, ignoring the clear silent distress in the man’s body language.

“Gill. Barry Gill, my father was Jackson Gill.”

“*Ahh,*” Kurt exclaimed, nodding as his eyes lit up once again. “Yes, I do remember the Gills. Your grandfather was one of the greatest men I ever worked with. Caught plenty of salmon; I’ve no damned idea how that man did it, I always thought he had a few magical tricks to hide. I recall one time, you see; I accused him of bein’ a witch. He told me *‘No, Kurt; you see, that’s my wife!*’” He laughed loudly. “Anywho’s, go on, Barry. You’ve got my ear.”

“Do I?” Barry asked, smiling.

Kurt raised his eyebrows, nodding as he looked down mesmerised at the steam rising from his teacup. “I *am* listening, Barry. I just love to talk, is all. Don’t got myself a whole lotta ears willing to listen in nowadays, y’know?”

Gill tilted his chin down once in understanding. “Yes. Yes, I understand.”

“Go on, I’m listenin’.” Barry cleared his throat, reaching into the backpack that sat by the side of his wooden chair. From within, he pulled out a one-inch binder, moving his coffee cup out of the way to make room for it. He opened it to the first page, noticing a catalogue titled ‘K*ENNETH CRAWFORD’*. It was a list of every single one of his fishing ventures, including the information on catchings and company, ever since his first from when he was six years old. “My *God,*” Kurt exclaimed, under his breath.

“You’ve been on the seas for eighty-five years, Kurt.”

“Eighty-six, if you count my first time on my Papa’s boat.”

“Yes. Anyway, listen- I want to do everything that I can to get your application approved, but I cannot lie to you. It *will* be difficult. You’d be the oldest person *ever* to go out on a solo trip, by far, and the fact that it’s been five years since your last doesn’t help. Everyone here knows you, but there’d be plenty of important people who would declare you unsafe to go unaccompanied. Now, of course, the city’s going to want to use that against you to prevent you from getting your boat back. They’re trying to argue that if you really want to go out on the waters again, you can just buy a new one.” He flipped through the pages, admiring the dozens of papers’ worth of information on the man before him. Oh, the stories that Ol’ Captain Crawford had to tell.

Kurt scrunched up his eyebrows, not believing what he was hearing. After everything he had done for his hometown; the food he had brought to his people, and some still had the audacity to try and deny him this. “They think I’m… Un… *safe*..?” He was shocked. “Wait, woah-” He threw his hands up, his forearms colliding somewhat loudly against the edge of the table. “*The Joline*’s *my* boat! I should be able to just take it back, shouldn’t I?”

Barry nodded. “I’m risking my reputation by doing this, but I think I’m going to lead a little movement for you in the event that they do what I think they’re gonna do. I know there’s gonna be a push of some kind. But the stories I’ve heard; I also know damn-well that you’re the best damned sailor from Little Rock, Arkansas all the way up to Timbuktu.” When he looked up at Kurt, he noticed that a great, big smile had developed on his face. “This is my first time meeting you, but I feel like, from the way my Dad and grandpa talked about you, you’re family to me. You deserve the send-off that you’ve always dreamed of, Captain Crawford. And that means that it’ll be aboard *your* boat. No rentals, no nothin’. We’re gonna get it taken out of public service, and it’ll be back on your personal dock slot come November.”

Kurt slowly redirected his glance to one of the framed pictures on the sand blue panelled back wall. Portrayed on the opposite side of its glass, was a man walking alongside his horse in a barren desert, loosely grasping onto the reins that hung by its side. Standing upon the horizon, was a great dark sandstorm that contrasted strongly against the orange Sun above it. “But I suppose there’s not much I can do right this second, huh? Sit up in my lil’ cottage near the lighthouse and twiddle my thumbs until my landline starts ringin’? Just watchin’ my beautiful boat floatin’ around with some other fella at the reigns through my lil’ windows?”

Barry shook his head, biting his lower lip as he looked about. “You just keep being the heart o’ this part of town, Kurt. I’m going to try to pull some strings,” He stood up, closing up his binder and collecting his notepad to stow away in his backpack. “You’ll get your last great voyage. I’m going to make sure of it. Just you wait. Oh,” He reached into his pocket, and pulled out a business card. “In case you want to reach me. It’d be a helluva lot easier to get you back out on the water if you had someone with you. Just sayin’,” He exclaimed with a smirk. Barry began to walk off, patting Kurt on the back before pushing open the glass door. A little bell above it rang as he did so, and the *CLOSED/OPEN* sign dangling from a suction cup swung from side to side.

“Barry,” Kurt said, before he stepped away.

“Yeah?”

Kurt swung his cane over the back of the chair, planting it down behind him and using that as a leverage to get himself turned toward Mr. Gill. “Have you ever sailed the seas on your own?”

A thoughtful look struck Barry as he squinted, trying to recall. “No.” He shook his head slowly, and then more surely after a moment. “No, I can’t say I have.”

“Well, as you may know from your…” He lifted a long finger at Barry’s black tote bag. “Little, *booklet,* the *vast* majority of my… Little ventures, should we call ‘im, over the past twenty years, I did on me own. I’ve had myself plenty a dog in my tenure, and most the time I’d bring them wit’ me.” He lowered his finger, breaking away from his gaze at Barry, and with that, his smile faded to nothing more than a thoughtful stare into empty space. “But, being out there on your own... *Completely* on your own, it’s…” Barry looked down at Kurt like a child listening to their grandparent teach them about the world. He felt like that child, and while professionalism called for him to have a cold demeanour, he could not hide it here. “I believe, in this loonie hustlin’-bustlin’ world that we all find ourselves livin’ in, there’s not a *single* thing that brings more peace than true, unadulterated solitude.”

The edges of Barry’s mouth turned upward, his eyebrows displaying a kind of pity. “Is it really that great of a feeling, Captain?” He asked.

Kurt looked back up at him, his nostalgic smile returning. “I’ve only ever found one thing that’s better, Mr. Gill.”

“And that is?” A cold brush of wind came in from the doorway, but they both ignored it; that was simply the way of the coast. Barry stepped back inside, standing by the doorway. He was not annoyed by this man. He admired him.

Kurt shook his head, his lips squirming as he closed his eyes and lowered his chin. “Somethin’ I can’t have anymore. Somethin’ I can’t have.” Barry looked down at the man’s wedding ring, which seemed to sparkle right as he had said it. Suddenly, he understood. Kurt jolted his head back up to him, chuckling bitterly. “You should take a journey solo sometime, Barry. You ought to learn to be alone. I think we all ought to.”

“Because-”

“Because it’s better to learn how to be alone when you’ve got yourself an option or two. I’ll tell ya this much: it’s a helluva lot less ideal to learn how to be alone when you don’t get a choice! No, sir-ee. Much less ideal.” He laughed again. Yes, his heart and soul were in it, but they seemed quieter in that laugh. Sitting down and watching, as opposed to giving the standing ovation that Barry had come to expect them to over the course of this brief breakfast meeting. “When you’re on the ocean; you’re alone. You’re alone, but you’re not lonely.”

Barry broke his gaze from Kurt’s sky blue eyes, and looked down at his cane. It had been fashioned out of a replaced plank from his very first personal boat, *The Joline.* “We should meet again sometime soon, Mr. Crawford. For something more casual. I’ll bring my father then.”

Kurt nodded warmly. “I think I would enjoy that very much. I do miss Jackson.”

“I’ll see you, Kurt. I’ll give you a phone call when I’ve got the information we need.”

Kurt reached over to the table, and picked up his teacup, raising it to Barry. “To one last voyage.”

Gill winked at him. “One last voyage.”

Kurt took a sip from the cup and allowed him to leave, turning back around to reminisce in the relative silence of the cafe. He closed his eyes, tasting the tea-leaves on his tongue, and sighed. *One last voyage.*

# II:

The creaks and moans of the docks beneath him continued on, faint bells ringing in the distance as his cane fell on the tightly bound planks with every other step. Most of these boats he recognised; remembering their names better than he remembered the people who owned them. Kurt had always thought that people were tertiary to dogs and boats. He had one very, *very* special exception to that rule, but ever since his precious Joline had passed on, it was the love of dogs and the freedom of sailing that had encapsulated his life in its entirety. “‘Afternoon, Mr. Crawford!” A woman’s voice called out. He looked out from his mesmerised stare into the horizon, and glanced at her with his signature toothy grin.

“Good’n to you too, Mizz Abernathy!” He raised his hand to her. “How’s fishin’?”  
 Ms. Abernathy scoffed, shaking her head as she stepped off her boat. “Not great this year, Cap’n, not great. The weather, it’s changing! Seas’re more violent this time of year, news anchor says it’s coming from climate change.”

Kurt slowed his snail-pace to a still by Ms. Abernathy’s boat, looking out at the seas in question. “Oh, Carrie. You’ve’nt need worry a *spec* about the weather! You see, the ocean; she’s got her mystical ways, but she’ll always give you an escape route for when things go wrong. That’s what separates the good sailors from the *great* sailors. We’ve all got ourselves this instinct, an *intuition*, if I’m usin’ that word right; for the ways of the water. It’s the *truly* apt that can really take ‘er by the reins and understand that instinct. Harsh waters are just challenges for us to overcome. Opportunities, Carrie! They’re opportunities.”

“Ya think so?” She responded, amused.

“I *know* so.” He planted his cane down on the dock with a thump, approaching the ledge of the water. Far below him, in the murky depths of the bay, his warped reflection stood. For a moment there, he thought he could see the man he once was. An odd kind of sepia met him in the warping mirror underneath him, and he thought that perhaps that may have been the fact that he could only ever recall seeing his young self in monochromatic sheets of paper. The young man that he was, clean shaven and with a much more pronounced man-bun that stood out in the century that he lived in, with his olive green cargo pants and his typical blue plaid jacket. He noticed that he was still wearing a pair of olive green pants, and chuckled to himself. This year, when the coastal rains were coming in, however, his yellow raincoat was ideal as opposed to his plaid button-ups. The man he once was faded away, and he looked back up at Carrie Abernathy. “I’m not tellin’ ya to just go out there in the middle of a hurricane, but, *y’know.* Just don’t be afraid when you get caught up in one!”

She laughed, and then returned to her duties detaching the mooring lines from her boat. “You’ve always got a share bit of wisdom to share, Mr. Crawford.”

“I’ll share it with anyone willing to listen, Mizz Abernathy.” He began to walk again, continuing his slow journey back to his coastal cottage. On the way, he would stop by his local grocery store. “Anyone willing to listen.”

“You have a good one!” She yelled after him.

“You, as well, Carrie!” He called back. With every other step, his cane fell down on the ground, heard from the other end of the coast until he finally reached the coastal grocery store. He stepped inside, the rickety and outdated sliding doors whirring loudly as they allowed him in. He was hit by a brush of warm air as he entered, accompanied by the harsh light that contrasted the peaceful ambient glow from the harbour. He looked at the employee standing in the front section of the store. She was restocking apples. “Good morning, Barb,” He exclaimed, snatching a basket and approaching the fruit displays beside her.

The woman looked down at him, smiling warmly as she stepped to the side. “‘Morning, Mr. Crawford! How’re we doing today?”

“Well, thank you. Just grabbing meself some snacks for the ‘ouse.” He reached over and grabbed a plastic bag, filling it with two apples and a bunch of kiwis.

“Very nice,” Barbara responded, before turning away to attend to her duties. “You have a good day, Mr. Crawford.”

“You as well, Barb,” He responded before tossing the baggie in his basket and continuing on. He wandered about the store for a little while longer, being greeted by everyone who saw him, until eventually, he gave up and came away with nothing more than his bag of fruit, coffee beans and a fresh-caught salmon fillet.

“Not so big on catching your own fish these days, huh, Mr. Crawford?” The cashier said, slyly.

Kurt chuckled dryly as he fiddled with his wallet to pull out the cash he had been requested. He never used cards, and that was making life increasingly difficult for him, but he figured he would stick with his tradition. He knew he did not have much time left, and assumed the world would not completely disregard physical dollars by the time he kicked it. “Oh, Mike; I think we all know *damned* well that if the Loch Ness Sea Monster reared her ugly mug at our pretty lit’le town tomorrow mornin’, my phone would be ringin’ to no end! You’d all know I’d be the only cap’ capable of takin’ her down.” Kurt lifted a steady hand with a wad of cash in it.

The cashier chuckled a bit as he took the money, counting it up and then starting to calculate change. “True true, Mr. Crawford; touche.” He handed him back his change, and Kurt simply tossed it in with his brown grocery bag. “You have a good one, Mr. Crawford.”

“You as well,” He responded, a clear tiredness in his voice. A part of him readily enjoyed being the renowned hero of Astoria. Everyone from every part recognised his face; the eldest amongst the population had watched it grow, his perfect white smile sticking around as the sculpture around it moulded with time and erosion. But also, as he stepped out of the store and looked upon the beautiful horizon where the world itself seemed to tip away and fall into an infinite abyss, he recollected on the fact that he was simply exhausted. His body felt weighed down by the heft of his grocery bag, and so he planted some extra weight onto his cane to balance himself out. The quiet roar of the ocean against the bricks underneath the boardwalk was a perfect white noise that could have soothed him to sleep, had his mind not been gravely preoccupied with other things. He thought about his final voyage. No doubt he would receive it; it would not be a crime to deny him, but the town would think it so, and that would be enough of a motivation. Perhaps, though; in the midst of his derailed train of thought, he could simply *sail away.* Sabotage his boat’s trackers and just *go.* Take enough fuel to make it to Japan, perhaps. No, he’d be in foreign waters; he’d be considered dangerous. Then maybe Hawaii? *Yes, maybe*. Toss his identifications in the ocean and just keep sailing until he made it to Hawaii; start a whole new life with nothing but his pictures of his beautiful Joline. A weak smile crossed his face as he continued to think about the idea through rose-tinted lenses. He had become a hero of his city; but his time was nearing its end, and despite all of the ventures he had completed, he had not once left his home state since moving from Boston as a toddler. He began walking toward his home, taking the easiest paved hiking trail to get there, but his train of thought continued chugging away toward Hawaii. He recalled that once, Joline had entertained the idea of a honeymoon there, but it was unaffordable, and thus, scrapped. Perhaps this could be one last gift to his darling. The idea remained in his head until eventually, he came upon the house.

It was a quaint white brick cottage sat atop a tiny plateau. Around it, a gravel path had been fashioned by none other than Kurt himself. An outdoor dining setup had been placed just off that gravel path, giving a perfect seating place for the warmer sunsets. He had not spent much time there since Joline had passed, however.

Kurt stepped through the heavy front door, and shut it behind him, immediately unzipping his jacket and holstering it on the coat hanger beside him. The living room was small; the one-log fireplace enough to warm the entirety of his home in a mere ten minutes. Meticulously placed upon the mantle, stood a collection of framed pictures of him and Joline, and in the centre, her urn. The pictures had been placed from left to right in chronological order, and almost every night before bed, he would pick up each individual frame, looking upon it with eyes from days long gone by. Kurt lowered his bag by the couch, grabbed the salmon and stuck it in the fridge, then walked back and planted himself down, reaching inside to retrieve an apple. From there, he reached for one of the logs on his pile, which had been pre-prepared for easy lighting. He grabbed his extended lighter from his coffee table and tossed the log into the fireplace with no consideration for the ash from the previous night. After opening the flew, he lit the fire and leaned back, relaxing as the orange flame gently illuminated his dark little cabin. Sparks and crackles filled his ears as he looked up at the skylight. “I know I’ll be joining you soon, Jol.” He chuckled weakly to himself as he closed his eyes. “We’ll be with each other again soon. Just one last voyage. One last voyage, and then I get to come home to you, darling.”

Eventually, after falling into a deep three hour sleep, he lifted himself up off of the couch and grabbed his grocery bag, along with his half-eaten apple. The evening sun was beginning to shine through the windows of the house, the sky opposite it beginning to turn blue with darkness. He placed the bag onto the kitchen counter, pulling his fruit basket toward him and binning what remained of his last trip’s apples. Most had gone bad by now, anyway. He dug a finger through the plastic bag, tearing it open and then dumping its contents into the basket, pushing it back to its starting position. Next came the coffee beans, which he lazily placed next to his machine, and finally, the salmon. He folded the bag up and stuck it beside the fridge, opening it to retrieve the packaged slice of meat. Then, he reached inside one of the kitchen drawers, retrieving a selection of seasonings, oils and pans. Joline had been a culinary major who, for whatever reason, thought her talents were better suited in a Kindergarten classroom, and had taught him how to cook well. *Just keep the skin, honey; the skin’s your friend!* She would say. Now; when he sanded away the scales and looked upon the shiny silver sheen of the fish’s outer layer of flesh, he would smile. He could still see the light that she had brought into his life shining back on him. Once he was done scaling the fish, he placed a skillet on his stove and poured a moderate amount of oil into it. He seasoned the oil before it got too hot, and then returned to preparing the fillet.

Black pepper, salt, and a tad bit of chilli powder had always been his go-to. Joline had always hated his taste for chilli powder. He could still hear himself responding, *Blame my Pops, not me!* He chuckled to himself a bit, which only reminded him of how utterly silent his home was. After seasoning the fish, he took a paper towel from beside his coffee machine, and folded it in half, padding down the fillet to remove the moisture from it. He turned around, seeing a light trail of smoke emanating from his pan, and decided that his meal was ready to be prepared.

Once he finished the fillet, he plated it and grabbed himself a bag of potato chips from his pantry. “Proud of me, darling?” Kurt asked the air, walking back over to his couch to watch the final embers rising from the firelog. “Still got it,” He exclaimed, chuckling. He finished the cut of salmon quickly; there was no woman to talk to in order to slow himself down. Once the plate and his chips were cleared, he did his dishes, and noted that the Sun had disappeared entirely from the horizon. The light of the fireplace had now been reduced to nothing more than a faint glow, and thus, he found that, despite the fact that the clocks read *6:32,* it was an apt time to go to sleep. He grabbed his cane, and walked himself down the hall, stopping by his wall-embedded bookshelf. He lifted his finger up to the many spines that he had spent the past eighty-eight years collecting, tracing his way over to *Lord of the Flies.* He had read it once a year for the past forty, to remind himself why he must always have remained free. He took the book to bed, changing into his pyjamas and reading until his consciousness left him on page thirty.

One week on from that night, he would get a letter from Barry Gill to meet at the cafe again; just the two of them. Kurt’s application to go on his final voyage had been approved. All that remained now, was to get a better understanding of what he wanted. Kurt himself knew, as he read the letter on that bright day, that he would need to get a better understanding of what he wanted, too. He spent that evening writing.

*October 20*

*Mr. Gill has sent a message my way, informing me that I’m free to go about my business on the sea one last time. He says that all he wants is to know just what I wanna do out there. I’m writing this here entry to help myself figure out just what that is. I’m not there to go fishing, nor am I there to lollygag. I suppose I’m just a little fed up with being trapped in this town, an I know that the open sea gives me my freedom just how I like it. I’m gonna bring Joline and our pictures with me, plenty of books, too. I suppose I could kind of view it as a sort of leisure trip, enjoyin my freedom one last time and whatnot. Since Jol n I didnt have any kids, theres no one to kick me out of my little cottage and put me in a home, so I guess Im still a little free over here. But I’m sick of being waved at and teased and asked for autographs and whatever-the-hell-else the people in this city want from me. I love them. I love them all. But I wish I could just be another working man again. Unbothered, like everybody else. I feel like Ive turned into a skeleton in a dinosaur exhibit. Everyone just stops to stare at me. Everything I did is ancient history. In all honesty, I don’t think I have a concrete reason why I want to get away so badly. Im just as capable as I used to be, I know that. I’d be no less alone out there than I am over here. I guess, I dont know. My stories over. Maybe I just want the ending to be a bit more satisfying than it would be if I just stuck around, snuggled up in my little cottage, cooking salmon and watching my fireplace every night. That’s not what Jol wanted for me. It’s not what I want for me. Still not quite sure what I’ll say to Barry when he asks me about all the juicy details on my little venture. But I know this well: I need it.*

# III:

Kurt pushed the cafe door open, the bell above him ringing as he scanned the area for Mr. Gill. Once he located him, sitting at one of the tables situated against the back wall, he made his way over, keeping his head down away from the other customers. He sat himself down in front of Barry, smiling as he stuck out his hand to shake. “Good morning, Barry,” He exclaimed, happily.

“Good morning, Captain Crawford,” Gill responded with a tired smile. “How’re you feeling?”

“Just excited to get out on the waters again.” Kurt responded, gleefully.

“I’m excited for you. But first; there’s just a few questions that you need to fill out. Don’t ask me why- I think the association just wants to waste some more of your time, to be honest.” He chuckled dryly. “Are you ready?”

Kurt nodded, looking up at the picture that had caught his attention the week prior. “Ready as ever, Mr. Gill.”

Barry cleared his throat, removing a folder from his black tote bag. This one, instead, stored a paper packet questionnaire. He removed a pen from his pocket, and cleared his throat again before asking the first question. “How long do you plan to be out on the waters for?”

“Hmm…” Kurt mumbled, as if he had not thought about this extensively already. “*The Joline* has fuel good for two weeks if y’ur lucky. I suppose I’ll be spending no more than a week; don’t want y’all missin’ me, so let’s call it five days.” He leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms as he lowered his chin once to that number. Five days. Yes, five days seemed enough to give him the freedom that he had longed for these past years. He glanced up at the painting above him again. The wanderer and his trusty steed; stepping through the infinite highlands of the desert, the steep hills and the rolling storms above them, unfaltered and yet, without a place to go. The morning sun was just barely glaring off of it, and that left the storm shrouded in a light that made it almost entirely invisible to him. And yet, Kurt remembered that it was there. He knew the fate that the man and his horse were headed toward. No need to see it again. He remembered. A chill travelled down his spine; his fists clenching for a moment against the cold, and Kurt looked back at Mr. Gill. He brought his right hand over to his left, clenching them together and pinching his wedding ring. It had been a stress reliever to fidget with his wedding ring for decades; even before Joline’s passing. Right now, all of a sudden, upon looking up at the painting which had fascinated him, and upon the cold phantom hand trailing itself across the span of his spine, he *did* feel stressed. He lacked any kind of idea as to why, but he was most certainly aware of it; and the ticking of the clocks within the cafe all seemed to become slightly louder. However, his subtle fidgeting was the only hint that was given as to how he felt on the inside, as he remained smiling and looked down at Barry’s paper. *Just answer the questions, Kurt. Get your gosh-darned freedom, Kurt.*

“Five days it is, then,” Barry responded, and began to jot down the answer on his sheet of paper. “Next, the organisation wants to know if you’re going to be catching any fish while you’re out there. If so; how many you intend to bring back.”

Kurt’s mind found itself distracted by this question for a moment; and he pictured himself bringing back another one of the hauls by which he had found his fame through. Yes, that would be a fine venture indeed; one final collection of salmon that could feed numerous hungry people one last time. But could he still do that? In five days; he didn’t think so. Most of his trips had pushed his boats to the very limit; his longest and most fruitful being almost a month. That had been a bigger boat; and even she had seemed to struggle with the mission. He recollected on his physical condition. Pond-fishing wore him down nowadays. What kind of man was he to think that he could pull a haul of pacific fish that could match his ones of old? He was Kurt-fucking-Crawford, that’s who he was. *Pardon my cursing, Jol; you know I’d never curse in front of you!* Of course he could manage another shrimp-net’s worth of steelheads, chinooks, tuna and trout. But did he *want* to?

“Kurt?”

“Yeah, I’m thinkin’.”

Did he *want* to. Yes, no, maybe so. Did the people of Astoria deserve it? That was a stupid question; of course they did. But maybe, just maybe, one last time, he could take a trip just for the Hell of it. He hadn’t done that once in twenty-two years, god-dammit, yes, he deserved it! After everything that he had done for his people, he deserved to float out on the waters one last time, not having to worry about a single-damned-thing. His smile inflated like a balloon as he confirmed the idea in his head, and his absent gaze turned into a confident look at Barry. He nodded. “I’ll only be catchin’ what I’ll be needin’, Mr. Gill.”

A perplexed look presented itself on Barry’s face for a moment, but his warm smile returned immediately thereafter. He felt as if he was hovering on the same wavelength as Kurt, now. “Yeah, I think I’ve got ‘chu. Not planning on taking anything back home with you, then?”

Kurt shrugged, his proud smirk; a pride he had in himself for daring to just make *himself* happy for once, showing brightly. On the opposite side of the cafe, a couple sat. Unbeknownst to them; they were trading stories about the experiences that they had had learning from their third grade teacher, *Mrs. Crawford.* Kurt tapped his fingers on the table. “Tell ‘em I’ll bring back two. One for me to tapsadarmy or whatever-the-heck you call it, and one for you and your father to share. My treat.”

Barry chuckled. “I would say no out of kindness, but I know my father would be pissed out of his mind at me if I refused a catch from you. You’ve got it, Captain.”

Kurt nodded proudly, glancing out at the window where the pale blue sky shone on his wrinkled skin.

“The next question; we’re almost done, one more after this.”

Kurt nodded again.

After clicking his pen a few times, he asked, “What would you say this trip means to you?”

Suddenly, the perplexed expression was on Kurt’s face, a kind of humour present in his eyes and edges of his lips as his eyebrows furrowed. “They really asked that?” He looked around, surprised. “Why; I hadn’t thought to answer that; wouldn’t think they’d bother to wonder it at all!”

Barry shrugged, grinning. “I could just write that down.”

“No, no; lemme think on this. I know damn-well why I want to go, I just need a moment to try and put all my lil’ thoughts into big words.” He tilted his chin up to the painting again; his sense of nervousness returning to him. However, this time, it seemed to present itself to him in the form of a vague curiosity; an intrigue triggered by the odd kind of feeling that the framed canvas seemed to elicit from him. He closed his eyes for a moment, and the cafe seemed to go entirely silent with him as he did. In the black space of his closed eyelids, he could see Joline’s smiling face looking down upon him. It had been so very long; but his sharp mind was kept in its way by constant reminders of her beautiful, soft voice. She spoke to him in his dreams, even in his day-to-day activities. *I think I might be goin’ a little crazy,* he would say out loud in his home. She would always be sure to tell him that he was not; that it was their love keeping her close. He had never been a superstitious person, but the events following her death, in their seemingly supernatural ways, had pushed him to make an exception for ghosts. No, that wasn’t the right word. She was not a ghost, nor was she a phantom. More of a guardian angel, he presumed; a voice in permanent presence to remind him that it was going to be alright. With his eyes closed and his head tilted up to the ceiling, he could concentrate enough and make her appear behind him; with her hands gently resting on his shoulders and her chin planted on his hair. Why would *she* want him to go? Why, because he wanted to, and all Joline ever did was support him on his numerous endeavours and crazy adventures. Of course she would approve of it simply because he wanted to. Maybe that’s what she would have liked to hear from him, finally; after decades upon decades of constantly trying to justify himself and every conscious decision that he ever made. Yes, maybe it was time to let the world know that he had proven himself. There was nothing left on the table; no great feat that Astoria had still expected from him, no rampant sea-monster named Bruce who was biting off young lover’s lower halves, no kraken, no famine to single-handedly sway. He was here, after ninety-some-odd years of doing nothing but fishing. He had fought his battles; he had tried to have his children, he had accepted the defeat that for whatever reason, it was not possible, and, of utmost importance to this town that had grown to cherish him, he undoubtedly had done his part.

With an unfamiliar kind of clarity and self-satisfaction, Kurt opened his eyes, lowering his chin to the sight of his scarred and thin hands. He caressed the inside of his palm with his opposite hand’s thumb, and cleared his throat. “I guess…” He began, weakly, in spite of the confidence that Joline was instilling within him from his head. “Well, I suppose it’s because it’s what my beautiful Jol woulda wanted.” He scoffed, repositioning in his chair as a sheet of nostalgia covered him. “*Man,* if that girl knew just how *long* I’d waited just to tell the world; *You know what, I’m gonna do somethin’ for me for once,* she’da slapped me upside thee ‘ed!” He let out a great laugh, looking down at the paper. “You just tell your sea-organisation peoples or whoever, that I’m doin’ this for *me.* Me, me, me, and nothin’ but me.”

Barry wrote down a brief paraphrase of what Kurt had said, nodding slowly as he did. “Captain Kurt Crawford, after nine decades, *finally* doing something for himself.”

“Darn-right, Mr. Gill, darn-right. Savin’ myself a talking to when I meet my darlin’ in Heaven, I am!”

They both shared a laugh. “I couldn’t blame you one bit for that, Mr. Crawford. Can’t *stand* being yelled at by my wife; hurts my soul every time.”

Kurt shook his head slowly. “Mr. Gill; I’ll have you know this. My wife yelled at me all the goddamned time. I yelled at her sometimes, too; but I don’t think there’s any hidin’ the fact that she was the hothead between us two.” He cleared his throat. “But; the important thing was; I understood that she yelled and got angry because she *cared,* and while it’s a lil’ weird, and I din’ understand the inner workin’s of that woman all that well, I knew that much; that she did those things and got her anger out on me because she gave a crap; if you’ll excuse my language.”

Barry silently listened on. He knew he could use the advice. “She yelled?” He echoed, softly.

Kurt chuckled. “Barked like a dog, snarled like a tiger, whatever ya wanna say. That girl was the sweetest person around, but everyone’s got themselves a little bit o’ red inside em. Not the Commie kind, mind you.” He leaned forward, lacing his fingers together as he looked into Barry’s eyes. “Here’s the thing, Mr. Gill. Marriages, love, even parenthood; all those beautiful things end because our heads get hot a helluva lot faster than our beds can.” They both shared a chuckle, and he continued on. “I think we ought to accept that there ain’t no such thing as a perfect pick. No Cinderella, no Prince Charming; none a’ that; that’s all just a buncha cartoon-Disney-bullcrap we got spoonfed as babies. That shit’s, sorry, been around longer than I have, and that’s sayin’ something, Mr. Gill! I wouldn’t be surprised if we found fossilised televisions playin’ *Snow White* alongside the dinosaurs. There’s you; and no matter what the TV says, you can’t do *nothin’* about the person your heart chooses, no matter how hard you try.”

“Amen to that,” Barry said, but Kurt wasn’t done.

Kurt threw up one of his hands toward the shop, shaking his head as a powerful emotion seemed to present itself behind his eyes. A kind of passion that had not shown itself since he was last out on the waters; though less cheerful, a more sincere ideology of lifelong dedication. “We go on about our lives like prostitutes, ya know? We don’t even realise it; but here we are; selling every little part of ourselves to every person who catches our eye. We sell our hearts for love; we sell our skills for money, we sell our bodies for… Well, I suppose, all kinds of things, nowadays, we sell our memories for spare change… There’s millions and millions of people out there in the world, and I suppose the modern way is going out and exploring every in an’ out of every single one of ‘im. But that’s not my way, no sir-ee. I don’t mean to put my beliefs on you, Mr. Gill, but I don’t think that should be your way, either.”

Gill smiled, and nodded. “I agree, Kurt; I whole-heartedly agree.”

Kurt cleared his throat; making an internal note of the last remaining question box on Barry’s paper. “You love your wife?”

“Yes, of course,” He responded, in a low and curious tone of voice.

Kurt sighed, his posture relaxing as he looked about aimlessly. “But she yells?”

A look of shame placed itself on Gill’s face, as he began to fidget uncomfortably. “She doesn’t. She’s wonderful. A very quiet person.” He looked as if he was about to cry for a moment; the lenses of his eyes becoming shinier in the warm light of the cafe. “*I* yell.”

Kurt lowered his chin once in understanding. “Why?”

Barry turned his hands up to the ceiling, as if to surrender whatever justifications he had to the heavens. “I… I don’t know. I just, *do.*”

“My wife couldn’t control the way she was. Maybe you can. And if you can, then change. But if you can’t; just try. And at the end of the day, that’s all that you can do, Mr. Gill. You can only try.” Gill cleared his throat, leaning back his chair as his look of guilt seemed to take him over completely. He seemed to turn white as a ghost before Kurt’s very eyes; his eyes sinking and his tongue hiding away into his oesophagus. Kurt reached over to him, and placed his palm over the top of his hand. “You can only try, Mr. Gill.”

“I don’t deserve her,” He whispered. Kurt began to pick up on the fact that this was it; this was the single thing that haunted this man in the midst of his day-to-day life.

Crawford folded his upper lip over his bottom and raised his eyebrows, cocking his head to the side. “Maybe so, maybe not. But you’ve got her, don’t you? And you do your best to love her.”

“I do my absolute best, Kurt. But it’s not-”

“You’re right; maybe it’s not good enough. But you just need to keep trying to be better. Wake up every morning and just… Be better.”

Barry scoffed, smiling. “I wish it were that easy.”

Kurt cocked his eyebrows up, and leaned back into his chair, crossing his arms “And why ain’t it that easy, Mr. Gill?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know how to change.”

Kurt simply shrugged it off in response. “Most of the time; we don’t. But we do anyway. It’s like evolution.”

Barry’s face scrunched up in confusion.

“Well, you know!” Kurt exclaimed, throwing his hand up again. “The animal kingdom, and whatnot. Most of that stuff happens by chance, doncha know? Random leaps of faith; most of the time it’s mistakes, that end up makin’ things live. It all comes naturally, Mr. Gill, and it comes with time. As soon as you decide that you *really* want to change, you start changin’. You think I managed to stay married for sixty years without makin’ a few tweaks up in the ol’ noggin?” He shook his head, laughing. “Man, I wouldn’t recognise myself from seventy years ago in a mirror; and I’ll tell ya; it’s not because I look like a dried up prune compared to how I used ta!”

Barry’s face lightened up a bit. “Easy as that? Just… *Change?*”

“My wife. She didn’t get it much either. But eventually she came to understand. We can’t make conscience choices,”

“Conscious.” Barry corrected.

“Right, yeah. We can’t make conscience choices about who we are as human bein’s. That stuff has to come naturally! So just let it come. Let yourself change, Barry. It’s the fear of changin’ that stops us becomin’ better humans.” Barry seemed to have entered a trance of deep thought; a consideration of the concepts with which he hadn’t been presented up until this very moment. “Now go on,” He exclaimed. “Ask me that last question, I’m all ears.”

Barry looked back up at Kurt, and gave a brief nod; his focus returning in an instant. “It wants to know.. It…” He cleared his throat, and began again. “Alright. I suppose this is their big legal question; they want to know what they should do in the event of your death.”

“What to do?” Kurt repeated.

“If something happens out there and medical aid doesn’t reach you in time; I think they want to know what to do with your body, since that’s the only belonging you have that isn’t already legally sorted out. You could opt for cremation, burial, you get the idea.”

“Wow-sa, all this time and I haven’t decided what to do if I kick the bucket?” He laughed a bit, and made a queer face. “Wow…” He muttered.

Barry shrugged. “Burials at sea are a thing. You’d need to get it approved by the state, but I don’t think that’d be too hard, given your history with the town.” He clicked his pen twice, and cleared his throat, looking out the window at the more distant shores.

“I had no idea those were a thing; definitely woulda opted in had I known!” He nodded enthusiastically. “Let’s do it! Toss me out with the fishes, Mr. Gill, let’s call it a day with that.”

Barry chuckled weakly under his breath; a sense of discomfort still present in his mind from the tangent Kurt had gone on earlier. In the back of his mind, the same guilt lingered on, present and unfaltering. “Burial at sea, it is. They should have you approved for it by the time your trip starts.”

“One week from today,” Kurt remarked.

“Yes, one week.” Barry confirmed, jotting down a tiny drawing of a boat on his paper, dropping his pen after writing it and cracking his thumb in his palm. He yawned quietly, resting his hands on the table and looking at the old man before him. “Well, there we go, then, Captain Crawford. I’m going to send this over to the right authorities, and you’ll be out on the waters in seven days.” Barry took the paper and slid it back into its folder, smiling warmly as he placed the folder into his tote bag.

“‘You alright, Mr. Gill?” Kurt asked.

Barry took a deep breath, pressing his tongue against the insides of his front teeth as he pondered the question. “Yeah.” He finally said. “I’m alright. What you said earlier; just got me thinkin’.”

“About?”

“Well,” Barry began, lightly scratching the front of his scalp. “What you said about change. You’ve got me feelin’ like a kid; asking all the stupid questions and being astounded by the simplest answers.”

Kurt shook his head with a smile, closing his eyes for a moment. “No, no, Mr. Gill. We’re all kids if you’re thinking in that way. You see,” He stuck his palm out to the open air, waiting for Joline’s phantom palm to find rest in it. “Every answer to every question is simple. The definition of simple changes a lot as time goes on. It grows. Just like us, Mr. Gill.”

Barry squinted a little bit, looking up at the painting that sat above Captain Crawford. “But how do we know if the change is for good?”

Kurt shrugged a bit, and gave a little laugh. “I guess you just wait and see, Mr. Gill.”

# IV:

One week went by. The days were slow, begrudgingly painful, almost to a degree where Kurt could feel it physically. He spent his seven days locked away in his little cabin, making occasional ventures out into the open world to make his celebratorian rounds and buy his groceries. But today was the day. He made himself one last breakfast; smoked salmon and scrambled eggs, and finished packing his things. He had three duffel bags’ worth of content to haul to the docks. Stored inside of the one meticulously placed on top of the rack, he had every picture, every letter, every gift, and the urn, of Joline Crawford. As he packed the final bag on the floor of his petite living room, he spoke softly to her; his voice travelling up into the air and into the rafts of the ceiling. “I know you’ll be with me while I’m out there, darlin’,” He said, as he skimmed the bookshelves for the collage book that they had made for their wedding. “Just you and me, floatin’ out on the sea, like the good ol’ days.” He packed her away on top of the many many pictures; noting that she rested beside their framed High School prom photograph. “Just like the good ol’ days…”

When he was all finished packing, Kurt took a brief tour around his house. He knew he’d be coming back home, but there was an odd sense of finality in the fact that he had managed to, for the most part, empty out his house into the confines of three modestly sized duffel bags, not to mention in the space of less than an hour. It had seemed like his entire life was building up to this one last voyage. And thus, in that realisation, a comfort began to come over him; a certainty in the fact that this *was* something that he needed, and a memory that he would look back on proudly when he went to his deathbed. As he toured the house, he found himself wondering how many times he would subconsciously try to justify himself for doing this. He looked into his bedroom, placing his steady hand on the side of the doorway as he eyed every detail of the scoured room. He noted that Joline’s side of the bed was as still as ever; as if he had left the room completely destitute since she had departed from Earth. In many ways, he thought, he had. There had been at least some kind of sign of ownership on his side of the bed; no matter how tightly he pulled the sheets and the blankets and puffed up the pillows, there were still those wrinkles that he simply could not get out. The wrinkles of life could only be washed away with great spans of time and stillness. He had his stillness. But there was a certain recognition of the fact that he did not have great spans of time. He had spent his. And as he stepped out of the front door and locked up his house, not to be seen for another seven days, he took a few steps back to admire it in its petite humbleness. *Maybe I’ve wasted my last great span,* he thought, pitifully. He had spent these past twenty years doing nothing but sulk away and wait for his beloved to return to him. He checked his watch. *7,409 days and counting, darling.*

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His cane fell down onto the ledge of the dock as the frigid morning winds blew the unkempt strands of Kurt’s white hair back to meet his bun. Behind him, stood a gathering crowd of onlookers; the many and the inspired, watching gleefully as he began to embark on his journey. He slowly turned back, looking at them. The eldest amongst them cried; their faces painted with nostalgia, subtly brandished with the many memories of watching his distant ship tackling the violent seas upon the horizon, only to come back just as smiley and energetic as he had been when he left, albeit much more dishevelled.

As he looked at them; the few who were cheering growing in number with every one of his small movements, he found a single small tear sliding down his face, as well. He knew that he had been loved by the people of Astoria. But this much? The crowd spanned across the vast distance of the docks; some cheering him on, but most eagerly awaiting his stepping onto the boat. Suddenly, a second set of footfalls entered earshot, and Kurt jolted his head to the left, seeing Barry slowly approaching. He walked up beside him, and silently turned to the crowd. “I took the liberty of organising a little send-off event for you.”

Another tear slid down Kurt’s cheek, his mouth hanging slightly agape. “I… You…” He lowered his small two-wheeled cart holding his duffel bags and lifted his freed hand up to the crowd, waving weakly. “They’re all here for *me?*”

Barry scoffed, shrugging as he turned to Crawford. “Who else? They even shut down the docks for your departure!”

“My, my…” He muttered.

“I got you something,” Gill exclaimed, patting his tote bag. He unslung it from his arm, and pulled out a frame. He turned it around, displaying the picture of the man and his horse in the desert. “I saw you lookin’ at it during our meetings.”

Kurt let out a laugh, taking the picture into his hands. He sniffled, admiring the image. “I *was* lookin’ at this! Thought it was fascinatin’!” He proceeded to carefully place the picture down on top of the third duffel bag; atop his dearest darling’s urn through the fabric. From there, Kurt slowly turned back to Barry, smiling gleefully as he patted him on the back. “You’re a good kid, Mr. Gill,” He said, pointing at him with his opposite hand. “Now, I wouldn’t be surprised if this was our last time speakin’, because I *fully* intend to go sulk away into my little cottage when I get back here in a week’s time. But, I’d like to say this.”

“Yeah?”

“You’re a politician, ain’t ya?” Kurt asked, squinting with his little smile.

Barry nodded. “Wanna run for mayor some day, but right now, I’m just a rep.”

Kurt tilted his chin down, looking out to the sea. “Well, I’ll leave you with this, then.” He stepped onto his boat, and in turn, the crowd exploded with uproarious cheer. He carefully lifted his two-wheeled cart, placing it down onto the floor of *The Joline.* He walked up the steps to the roof of the shelter where the controls lay. From there, he fired up the engines, and while they warmed up, he cautiously stepped back over to Barry, who was waiting patiently for Kurt to tell him what he had on his mind. When he reached the rear, he lifted his cane, and poked Gill in the chest. “You’d be better off as a fisherman. Ya keep your hair that way!”

Barry chuckled, stumbling back a little bit from the cane. “Oh, I’m no good with the ropes, Mr. Crawford. Always been better at the paperwork.”

Kurt shrugged. “Excuses, excuses, Mr. Gill.”

“Honest to God! Even my Dad says so!”

Crawford shook his head vigorously, smiling. “Well, you whack your Dad upside the head for me, then! You’d be a *damned* good seaman, I know it! Now you get outta here, Barry. I’ll be seein’ ya!”

Barry smiled, and began to walk away from the dock. He then turned back, though, and lifted his hand slightly. “Wait, one more thing.”

“I’m listenin’, Barry!”

Barry sighed, looking at *The Joline.* “Why’d you take off the masts before giving her back to the public? ‘Always thought it looked a bit awkward without them.”

Kurt looked at the boat, and smiled, nodding slowly. “Well, Mr. Gill… To be perfectly honest which’a…” He looked about nostalgically. “I never was much good at handlin’ the masts. That was my Joline’s job.” Kurt took his cart into the living quarters of the boat, planting the duffel bags onto the vinyl wood flooring, and setting the framed picture on his twin sized bed. From there, he walked over to the front of the cabin, and looked down at the controls. Before he touched the accelerator, he looked out at the crowd once more through the slim doorway. Their cheering peeked as he did, and he waved to them one last time. He had never seen the people of his beautiful town so commonly united. Butterflies flew about in his stomach at the realisation that they had been united around *him.* He breathed in shakily, in part due to the frigid winds, and in part due to the fact that he was resisting feeling like breaking down into a teary mess. Kurt turned around, looking at the accelerator for a moment. A sense of hesitation hit him. An odd sensation, that was almost supernatural in nature, like a phantom hand pulling him back and telling him not to leave.

“Oh, my beauty,” He whispered, as the sound of the engines began to fill his ears. “I know that if anyone’s hand tried to pull me away from this, it wouldn’t be you. I’d only ever take yours, darlin’.” And with that, he set out unto the seas, pushing his hand into the accelerator and holding on to the control modules as the boat began to accelerate away from the bay. The sound of wind slamming angrily against the windows began to crowd his ears.

The ocean ripples crashed against the side of his trusty boat; the long-awaited rejoice between the two feeling as natural as ever. Kurt found a gentle solace in the fact that it seemed entirely untouched since he last mounted the deck; much like the sound of the water rushing underneath it. The only change was that the bedsheets of the tiny twin in the back corner were now sky blue, as opposed to the deep forest green they once were. The frame had remained, rusted over a little, now, *all scratchy n’ orange,* as Kurt would say. He closed his eyes for a moment as his head remained turned back to the bed; remembering feeling Joline’s heartbeat over his. She had to sleep on top of him when she accompanied him on his trips, but it only ever brought them closer. A subtle guilt had remained in his heart all those years, because of how much he expressed his uncomfortability during those times. He knew, now, with the power of hindsight, that no amount of uncomfortableness could ever have taken away from the beauty of being able to feel her heart with his own.

There was a familiarity in everything, and while that did not necessarily surprise him, it was comforting nevertheless. After a little while, he turned back halfway, and noted that the Astoria Docks had turned into a mere and indefinite black line, subtly curving over the horizon. The hints of his farsightedness were shown clear here; he could see the blurry spots of the taller shoreside buildings, but their silhouettes were unclear and vague like phantoms. The boat engines continued whirring, throwing cascades of mist out into the openness behind him, and he turned around to once again continue admiring his chase of the horizon. The Sun was high in the air, hanging from its invisible tether; but he knew that by the time he found himself far enough out for his own satisfaction, it would be on its steady journey below.

Once his GPS had completed chartering him, he turned on the autopilot for his boat; a technology that, to this day, confused him, and made his way over to the living quarters’ section. Inside, he found the roar of the rotors muffled with an ease to remove them from earshot; his windows displaying the darkening sky. From there, he began to remove his things from his bags, carefully setting them down in secure places around the shelter. The gentle rockings of the boat from side to side as it travelled deeper into the blue abyss soothed Kurt to the point where he felt he could have fallen asleep on his own two feet, had it not been for the inevitable and monotonous task of packing his clothes away into the cabinets. Upon opening the overhead drawers, it became obvious that whoever had been using this boat beforehand clearly never noticed them. He reckoned the same could be applied for every changed hand *The Joline* experienced over the past five years. When he pulled the door aside, it creaked on its hinge and bellowed out a great cloud of dust, that seemed to gently rock from side to side with the boat in mid-air for a moment, before disappearing off into an indiscriminate cloud of nothingness.

Kurt billowed out a collection of heavily strained coughs in response; briefly scaring himself into thinking he had blown something out in the process. He laughed it off for a moment, and ran his index finger along the ledge of the tiny wardrobe. From it, he gathered that an even sheet of dust had since developed across its floor. A cat had lived here, too, it seemed; a stray hair clung underneath his fingernail. He chuckled, and continued to put away his clothes, starting with his many pairs of olive green cargo pants, followed by three pairs of denim jeans, and finally, a set of black dress pants. *For whatever reason.* He moved on to the cabinet adjacent, and put away his numerous shirts, jackets and tunics. It had been 1982 that he bought his first tunic; he was volunteering for a mediaeval play as an extra. Kurt smiled as he looked upon the intricate stitchings of the collarline. “*She is a witch..!*” He whispered to himself with a laugh, though he could barely hear it over the sounds of the boat. “*If I am any sort of man, then I am to give her up! Cast her upon the boat, my Lord!”* He laughed maniacally, and stepped out into the centre of the room, offering his open palm to the ceiling and firmly placing his other hand over his heart. The only thing that he was missing was a Shakespearean skull. “*Cast her upon the boat - No! Cast her upon a raft, offer her nothing in the way of care! Burn it! Burn it all, my Lord, for she is a witch! She will burn on the horizon, and we will watch!* We will…” He lowered his hand, as confusement took him. “Ah, Hell,” He exclaimed, shrugging violently as his arms flew out to the side, and collided against his hips with a clap. “I forgot the damn-*damned* lines!” Kurt chuckled, closing the cabinet and moving on to the next, where he had firmly decided by now that he would simply toss in everything that didn’t have Joline’s name on it, or wasn’t something that looked like it belonged on a fishing boat. “Still a helluva lot better than Jack done did! I *swear*, I deserved that part, I did! I can remember *his* lines some eighty years later or whatever - seventy? And he could barely remember ‘em on *stage!* Damn you, Mr. Hallow! Shoulda called you *hollow,* woulda fit you a dang-good margin better, castin’ me as a damned *extra.*” He threw his arms up again, laughing. “Oh, dear me, Mrs. Crawford. I don’t know *how* you managed to put up with me and my craziness for all those wonderful years.”

As he shook his head at himself, Kurt walked up to the kitchenette window, placing his gloved hands on either side of the sink. He looked out onto the horizon as he flew by the water closest. Far, far away, the water seemed not to move at all, and he wondered if someone up in space was looking down on him. Not *God*; growing up Catholic, he had already had his fair share of proof that no one was up there filtering through the cue up at Heaven’s gates. An astronaut looked down on him, perhaps. Was he moving at all? Or, as the satellites and rocketships flew by at thousands of miles per hour, did he seem entirely still, simply a marker of distance, like a pin stuck into a seemingly random spot on the giant blue board? *Am I moving?* He questioned, completely going against his senses and clear signs that he was. For a moment, Kurt startled himself. “I must be goin’ crazy,” He said, smiling. “‘Course I’m movin’, what in the goddamn am I talkin’ about?” With that, he returned to his absent stare into the sapphire Pacific, indiscriminately entrenched in a great wonder.

A heaviness, like hooks underneath his eyelids suddenly tasked with holding great boxes of lead, came unto him, as his mind seemed to lighten. He was taken aback by the beauty of it all; five years of nothing but the deafening silence of his little cottage, which was once filled with noise and laughter. He checked his watch. By now, he reckoned, the GPS on his control panel would tell him he was far enough out from the shore. Kurt stepped out onto the deck, noting that his boots were suddenly working a lot harder to keep him steadily attached to the ground. The flooring beneath him became slippery as he opened his narrow door and walked out onto the fishing deck. The boat seemed to rock more out here: wind crashing against his face and his fingers feeling purple.

He stuck out his right hand, slowly turning his palm out. Joline took it, rotating his hand back down and caressing her fingers over the top of it as she rested her chin on his right shoulder. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” She whispered, her beautiful cascading red hair hanging over her shoulder. She took her other hand and wrapped it around his waist, placing her delicate fingers over his stomach. He knew that she was thinking of how little he ever ate. Resisting telling him, *You’re an old man, Kurt, you’re supposed to have a beer-belly! You exercise too damn much!*

He resisted chuckling at the idea of her saying that, and dug the tip of his cane between the vinyl floorboards to prevent himself from falling. He rested the side of his head on hers, feeling the gentle wisps of her fiery hair against his scruffy and boney cheek. “Not *nearly* as beautiful as you are, darlin’. But yes. It *is* pretty.”

He slowly turned to her, and that heaviness in his eyes returned as he looked upon the woman he had loved since he was sixteen years old. He took his free hand, and drew the back of his fingers down the side of her cheek. She closed her eyes in comfort, leaning into his caress. “You haven’t aged a day…” He whispered, in awe.

Joline chuckled her adorable laugh, shaking her head. “You always imagine me as that pretty girl you saw on the beach. You know my hair was a helluva lot greyer when I kicked the bucket.”

A tear, followed by another three, slid down Kurt’s face. He was almost at a loss for words, which was nothing like him. “No…” He drew himself toward her, and gently placed a kiss onto her forehead, pulling back away to admire her once again. “You’ve always been that gorgeous girl runnin’ ‘round barefoot on the beach cobbles.”

She scoffed, her flawless smile showing itself clear as she brought herself into him, clinging her arms around him in embrace. “And you’ve always been that mysterious boy; admirin’ me from his little sailboat in the distance.”

“We’ve changed so much,” He whispered.

She smiled. “And yet, so little…” And with that, as soon as she had appeared to accompany him on his admiration of nature’s beauty, she was gone, leaving Kurt once again leaning into his cane for support on the rocking vessel, accelerating toward nowhere.

Kurt sighed deeply. These episodes had occurred before. Every time, there was a slight shock in his system, as if it had been real. And while he knew it was not, there was also a tangible disappointment every time she went. She was undoubtedly returning to the Heavens to wait for her lifelong lover. And all he could do; as he looked up to the blue skies and the clouds moving by him, was wait, as well. It had been so many years since, so many days spent uselessly and without tire, simply waiting in bed to go in his sleep, though little sleep would ever come without her, and when it did, no Reaper would ever come to guide him away. Had he wasted his final years of life?

A pessimistic and grey outlook took him as he looked down from the sky and limped his way back into the cabin, closing the door behind him. A stern frown was on his face, now, as he sat down on his bed and looked at Joline’s urn, sat still in her bag. “Was it *really* a waste?” He asked, though the crisp ocean air had no answer for him, and he was left to answer it himself. “Any time without her felt like a waste, that’s for sure.” And thus, it was. He had spent twenty years alone like a hermit, only ever making ventures to the grocery store and occasional boat trips, before he finally gave in and donated *The Joline* to the city. No calls from his son, because there was no son ever to be had. No visits from family, because he had outlived them all. He had turned into nothing more than a relic. He wasn’t even the legendary Captain Kurt Crawford anymore. No: He was simply a vessel that contained all of Kurt Crawford’s memories, eager to get them out into the world, because if they didn’t survive out there, then they would die with him. In many ways, he supposed, Kurt had died with his wife. And who was he? He looked out of the window and furrowed his eyebrows bitterly. He supposed he was the only immortal thing that remained of the former Captain: His love for Joline-Marriane Crawford. That was beautiful, in a way, and thus, he was okay with it. But what good was love, if its recipient was not there? A letter, cast into the mailbox of a home that was no longer lived in: a car, trying to drive with an empty gas tank: a loyal dog, with no master to request its tricks. A man, ready to give his infinite love to his woman, though she is gone, and never to return.

He stood up, and steered his boat South, turning off the accelerator. This is where he would reside, now. Good silence, to clear his mind of the bad mud. One last voyage.

# V:

He closed the cover of his book, looking out at the dusk sky through the windows of the cabin. Kurt placed *The Lord of the Flies* on the ground and sat up, his wool socks colliding gently against the panelled floor as he placed his palms down on the edge of his stiff mattress. Last night had been rough; his appetite had subsided entirely following his sudden mental episode. But today was a new day. A smile crossed his face at that realisation, and he groaned, stretching his arms out to the side with a great yawn. “Well, well,” He exclaimed mid-yawn, before pushing himself up to his feet. He looked at the control panel, noting a small flashing red light beside the GPS screen, as his ears began to tune into the sound of the beeping. “Ah, Hell….” Kurt whispered to himself, approaching the panel and leaning into it. *God, walking’s become so hard without my cane these past few years…* He thought to himself. *Maybe I’m that old man Barry mistaked me for, after all?* “Hey, at least I can remember my own damn name!” He looked about, waiting for someone to laugh at his comment awkwardly. “Anywho…” He eyed the GPS, pressing the cancel button on the weather alarm. It was a thunderstorm; one that had gone unforecasted. Twenty-two klicks out. Kurt squinted at the screen, then tilted his chin up to the window, where, in the distant horizon, he could see that the oceans seemed to rise ever so slightly, and the sky was black.

Captain Crawford slowly stepped away from the control panel, and then grabbed his cane to step out onto the deck. Once he did, he was suddenly hit with a gust of warm wind, then another, and another. It didn’t take long for him to infer the stability of the conditions about him. The oceans were going to be rough when the storm reached him. “Harsh waters are just challenges for us to overcome…”

He checked his watch. 9:32. Come 10:45 if he remained in his general location, he’d be on the edge of it, and, according to his GPS, he’d be out by noon. He could have gone around it, yes. He could have even gone back home. But, as he looked out at the dark dusk and contemplated the storm’s severity, the three words he had been muttering to himself for months on end continued to plague him. *One last voyage.* Captain Kurt Crawford never once strayed away from a storm. Would he really let up that streak now? He looked down at his Ham Radio, continuing to silently contemplate. Finally, reaching out his right hand with a powerful sense of reluctance, he grabbed the push-to-talk, and lifted it up to his mouth. He cleared his throat, and began. “This is Captain Kenneth, ‘Kurt’, Crawford, piloting *The Joline.* I’m notin’ a big storm out ‘ere, twenty-two kilo’s out.” He took a deep breath, keeping his finger pressed against the input button. Finally, he took the leap of faith. “I’m maintainin’ my course.” He put the push-to-talk back into its slot, and sighed heavily.

No going back, now. Over the course of the next hour, the seas would get noticeably more difficult, and he would have to remain at his post piloting *The Joline* from start to finish. From there, he decided it was best to prepare himself another meal. He reached into one of the duffle bags, pulling out a small cooler. Inside, he had one of his pre-prepared seram-wrapped cuts of salmon. He put it on his kitchenette’s counter, and opened up the cupboard beneath, making sure the propane tank was properly attached to the stovetop. Once he ensured that everything was in mostly working order, he took out a pan, which looked to have seen better days, and placed it on the stovetop, turning it up to medium heat. He pulled out his home cookware; olive oil, spatulas, forks, plates, the likes, and got to work preparing his food. *Let the oil simmer, shine like Jol’s eyes in the mornin’ Sun.* An even coat of oil distributed across the pan as the ship rocked gently back and forth, from edge to edge, and he thought funnily of how unfortunate it would be if a shark came up underneath him and jerked the ship to the side, spilling boiling oil all over his bedsheets. He shook his head as a little chuckle escaped him, and returned to seasoning his fish.

“Keep the skin, hon… The skin’s your friend…”

“I know that, darlin’! I remember all that you’ve taught me.” He ran his blade against the scales of the fish, leaving only what would eventually become the crispy goodness of the cooked outer flesh in a mere six minutes. Salt, pepper, chilli powder, *blame my Pops, not me.* He placed the cut of fish down on the pan, slowly lowering it from end to end away from him, as the wonderful smell of smoking meat and the even more wonderful sound of even sizzling, occasionally interrupted by crackles and sparks, filled the air.

When Kurt was done with his meal, he sat himself down on his bed, resting his spine against the wall and trying his best not to make a mess of the salmon while he ate. On the floor beside the bed, lay the framed picture from the cafe, so he made a note in his head to hang it on the wall after he was done. As he slowly worked away at clearing his plate, he found his mind subtly soothed with the sways of his trusty boat, and began to daydream away.

It had been January fourteenth. It was not a particularly unique day from what he could recall, but it had always remained in his memory, for whatever reason. Joline, from the days of yore where she had been a crazy young girl with bright orange streaks in her hair and emerald green eyes that glistened in the slightest of lights, planted herself down on the bamboo outdoor dining chair, giddily tapping her fingers on the edge of the table as Kurt slowly sat himself down, as well. “God, you act like such an old man!” She exclaimed, giggling. As she did so, she bent her right wrist back and covered her mouth. This had been a habit Kurt had recognised her by for their entire life together. As he absently stared down at his greasy plate, a tear silently fell onto its lip, triggered by the simple reminder of this little mannerism that she had.

Kurt finally managed to sit himself down at the table, but stood up the moment immediately after, picking up his chair and bringing it over to a spot adjacent to her. From there, he sat down again, and gently brought up his right hand to her face, carefully brushing one of her locks aside. Even in the Summer afternoons, the coastal winds crept in and swept the citizens of Astoria with frigid waves, like frozen fingers tracing ever softly across their bones. They could feel it, now, but it offered nothing in the way to interrupt the midst of their early years; the forever young love that they would share. Kurt slowly caressed underneath her jawline with his ring and pinky fingers, using his middle finger to slowly pull her face toward his. Their lips pressed together softly, eyes closed and at peace, *wonderful peace.* It wasn’t the slightest concept in either of their minds that it could have been temporary. Forever seemed like forever, and that made sense, after all. Everyone had been too young to understand; everyone is too young to understand that forever is an hourglass, as well, when we are placed in a world full of ticking clocks and beeping heart monitors. They pulled away, keeping their foreheads together and their eyes closed, chuckling softly before returning to their symbol of love. That had been humanity’s biggest mistake of all: Convincing itself that forever was possible, when a human’s entire purpose and way of life is dictated by the fact that they don’t have forever. *Maybe that’s for the best,* Kurt thought. If we were trapped in fear of life’s impermanence for our entire existence, then we would live with paranoia, daring not to allow ourselves to feel, to love, to embrace, to continue, to risk, to *live.* *Maybe we need forever, even if it’s just another Loch Ness.* He finished his plate, put it in his kitchenette’s sink, hung up his gifted picture above his bed, used the restroom, and then walked out onto the deck.

*Just another Loch Ness,* he pondered, staring out into the emptiness of his personally allotted portion of the Pale Blue Dot. Kurt placed his scrawny hand on the edge of the deck. Kurt placed his warm hand on Joline’s knee. Kurt drew his opposite hand up to his chin, scratching the underside of his beard, considering deeply. Joline drew her hand up to his chin, admiring his adorable, however crooked, smile. He looked down at the swaying ocean surface beneath him. Joline leaned back in the bamboo chair, placing a palm over her stomach, and smiled. “Do you think I’ll still be pretty when we’ve got our little baby in the oven?” She said in her soft voice, bringing her hand up to her mouth to cover her chuckle again.

Kurt leaned forward over the deck. Leaned forward toward his love. Placed his hand over her upper thigh. Tightened his grip over his cane to prevent himself from losing balance. Smiled warmly. Scowled pessimistically. “Why, darlin’...” He looked up at the sky above her, into the blue curtain by which one hundred billion stars and ten times as many other worlds cleverly hid behind; perhaps places where other aliens thought similar things and felt similar emotions, but never quite the same, never quite to be understood, never quite like us. Though maybe that wasn’t true; maybe love was the singular constant across the infinite span. Maybe instead of bamboo chairs, they sat in dry flower beds, and instead of drinking tea and coffee, they drank tree sap, and their oceans were rainbow, but love, love was the constant. *That* never changed, and *that* was a nice thought. “I don’t think there’s *anythin’* that could make you anythin’ less than the most beautiful woman in the whole wide world.” The memory of his precious darling left him, and the ocean had no response for him, either. He had gone to be by himself, to enjoy himself. But all that he wanted was to be with his precious Jol.

The sound of the wind crashing by his ears alerted Kurt back to complete awareness, and he looked up at the storm on the horizon. He could still turn back, but something deep within him felt that there was a point to be proven; one final hurdle to conquer to show that no matter what, no matter how many years attached themselves to him, *Kenny Crawford was still Kenny-fucking-Crawford, and that meant something, god-dammit.* “Sorry, love,” He exclaimed to the air. He turned his head out to the direction from which he had come. Not a single shoreline in sight. And, in spite of the great grey clouds hovering not far above him, Kurt found a steady and reliable comfort in the knowledge that he would not be seeing any kind of shore any time soon. Here he was, after all this time. Content with the state of affairs at hand, without the slimmest question as to his motives, nor his prior ones, as there were not any. Not anymore. He went into the cabin, and began his steady approach, constantly repositioning *The Joline* in favour of the winds. They were beginning to pick up. Soon, the storm would come.

As Kurt remained at the wheel, he closed his eyes for a moment, finding himself interlaced into a place between worlds; dreaming as he was fully conscious. Sensations all about his body as memories filled his mind; the feeling of his first scar, the tearing of the rope across his right hand as an eight year old boy. The tingling pain, the warm blood gushing down his wrist, the subtle pounding in his head. He could *still* feel queasy, just thinking about how much blood had been drawn from his palm by that moment. The sudden sensation of searing pain; as if he had just placed his hand on a hot grill. He turned his hand out from the steering control, admiring what remained of the scar. It seemed to be a relic of some kind. As if it were a memory belonging to a man who no longer existed. *Did he?* “You’re gonna scare the *Hell* outta yourself if you keep thinkin’ like that, Kurt!” He yelled out, laughing. He continued to laugh as the black sky hovered ever closer, the rumbling clouds desperately clambering over each other as they used all of their might to pull the seas up to their effortlessly massless bodies.

It was all at once that the sky seemed to fade from any semblance of blue from then on; the oceans warping themselves into an inescapable bubble where the pitch blackness underneath him was made mutual on all sides. There was a silence in everything now; the wind had dared not to speak for fear of the loudness above them, the crashing and the banging of angry Gods hiding within the cloud cover. Kurt knew this feeling all too well. The knowledge that you were too far in; that the calm before the storm was only this churning creature’s camouflage from what was inevitable to come.

Then and there, the gods expressed their discontent, and a mere moment after the sky turned completely white for a flash, a great noise rivalling the sound of a fighter plane flying overhead rattled Kurt’s sternum to the point where he felt he could shake to pieces. A cold hand placed itself on Kurt’s shoulder, and he jolted his head to the right to see who it had been. To his complete fear and dismay; there was no one present, and for a moment, the boat, the oceans around it; all seemed to quiet in favour of enhancing his fear. With every miniscule turn to analyse his surroundings, Crawford planted the tip of his cane into the hardwood. His scowl grew ever colder, until eventually, he stuck his finger out into the air and waved it angrily. “You’re not s’posed to be on my here boat! I’m *Kurt-friggin’-Crawford!* This is *my* God-darned vessel!” Hobbling back into his boat’s cabin, Kurt pushed the door in. The wind accompanied him, blowing it back into the cornering cabins that one of their handles broke apart on impact. He made his way over to the kitchenette, where he grabbed his pistol. Beside it, rested a framed picture of he and Joline on their thirty-first anniversary. He stepped out onto the deck of the ship, continuing to angrily wave his now pistol-equipped hand around aimlessly, with intent to threaten whomever had intruded on *The* precious *Joline.* Could he kill? In ninety-some-odd years, he had never been tested to, and a scarily significant part of him doubted that he could.

He walked like this around the boat for a considerable time; but it soon became clear that he would not find the phantom figure who had touched him. This had been different from his daydreams of Jol. That touch; it was completely and undoubtedly *real.* Kurt proceeded to aimlessly wander about the boat for a while, stricken by a curiosity that he could not quite put his finger upon. He knew he was alone, yet the urge to simply find any sort of trace of existence to which he could identify the phantom encapsulated him. It was as if, in the depths in his subconscious psyche, a deeper battle was beginning to warm and boil inside.

Before he knew it, Kurt was in the midst of a great series of gusts, the wind violently rocking him about the boat with no showing of mercy; offering not a single thing for him to balance himself on. He was now entering the storm. He stumbled onto his knees, noting the miraculous achievement of not blowing them out in the process, and then promptly proceeded to rush into the cabin and reevaluate what the next best thing to do was. He, with no semblance of grace, clamoured into the control panel, using his tired and grey eyes to make out the details of the waters ahead through the windscreen. It was difficult to see, but that didn’t so much as slow him down a bit in his reflexes, no matter how ancient his joints may have been. They didn’t *feel* ancient, and for stubborn ol’ Crawford, that’s all that mattered.

Muscle memory took over, but it was a hot minute before Kurt had even realised it. The boat seemed to steer itself, but his decades of experience with it began to shine through. Most operated their boats like they were dangling a block of steel from a two-story chain. No precise movements, not in a million years: only general instructions, and the hope that everything would go the right way. But not Kurt, no. No steel blocks, no two-story chains; only a master calligrapher and his dip pen, ready to write faultless poetry with not a single shiver or hesitation in his swoops unto the vanilla paper beneath him. That’s what it was to him; not so much a violent battle with the ocean, but merely a quiet dance across the quiet sheet of blue, effortlessly and quietly carving through with an invisible trail of ink via a sharpened edge and an unornemental purpose to create quiet art. *Quiet.* He blinked, and suddenly the world around him was dark, but entirely without movement or sound. He couldn’t even hear the subtle brushes of the water against the sides of the boat. It had all happened so quickly, a part of him simply refused to believe that it had happened at all. He *knew* he was seeing things. But this? This was far more than a bit much. Something truly odd was beginning to take hold here. He scoffed to himself, and the contrasting loudness of the sound nearly made him jump out of his skin. Cautiously, he manoeuvred his footing and slowly rotated toward the door. A stupefied expression of a kind of glee was laden across his face, pure wonder. He opened the door, its creak ringing out through the cabin and allowing Kurt to step out onto the deck. There was no doubt he had just passed through the storm; a giant lake of water had formed, sloshing from side to side in tandem with the supple rocking of the vessel it sat upon.

His boots came down onto the flooded floor, as his eyes drew to the grates slowly swallowing up the overflow. Then, he lifted a shaking hand to his gaze, slowly turning out his palm to face him. The darkness surrounding turned his pale skin a shade of blue, and he brought his chin up to meet the sky. A perimeter of storm clouds seemed to have surrounded him in a mile’s radius on either side, and directly above, he could see the Milky Way. Purple streaks hazed along, interrupted by sprinkles of glowing white, a beautiful arch of astronomical oceans, billions of rocks and billions of stars, an unimaginable amount of life above him, no doubt. One star seemed to flicker and shine brighter than the others, and it caught his attention for a beautiful moment. A thought attempted to cross his mind, as to how it had been so very long since head even tried to crane his neck up to that angle, but it surpassed him instantly once he realised just how awestruck he had become. How long had it been since he had seen the Milky Way? The vastness of space above, the vastness of the depths below. What mystifying phantoms and encapsulating mysteries lie within each. Kurt’s mouth slowly began to hang agape as a near-silent sentence tried to escape him. “Are you up there, Joline? *Watching?*”

The boat rocked a bit in response, the little bit of storm-rain that remained on the floor sloshing in consequence. “I’m right here, darling.”

Kurt’s eyes slowly shut, as a gasp of laughter left him. He kept his face tilted up to the beautiful sight above, the moon’s phantom presence shining unto the violet waters. “You’re watchin’ it all, *ain'tcha*?”

The sound of Joline’s soft footsteps into the water came up closer, and her ghost’s arms wrapped themselves around him. She placed his face next to his, and they breathed slowly, together.

“You’re watchin’ me turn into some ol’ senile loonie.”

Joline chuckled, and snuggled herself up closer to him. “You’re not going crazy, honey. The end. It’s callin’ for you. We’re waiting in the stars, Kurt. We all are. This is the end, my love. This is the end.”

# VI:

Kurt’s eyes flew open, and he found himself on his side, in his bed. The boat was still calmly transitioning from side to side, the outside sky still black, his boat still hovering in the peaceful and rested eye of a violent storm. Joline’s phantom embrace still remained, slowly fleeting like a memory as he readjusted to his new surroundings. He got up, shivered against the cold, and removed his raincoat. After taking his duffle bag out of its compartment and planting it down on the bed to find a thicker wool jacket to place underneath, Kurt pulled his raincoat back on over. Then he stepped out back onto the deck to see if it really had been all a dream. Perhaps a part of his mind was finding itself in a permanent state of dreaming. The water had cleared, now, and there was no call from his sixth sense that Joline was here with him. In fact, out of all of the years that he had spent on this Earth, he had never felt so terrifyingly isolated. The beauty in the stars was now no longer there, though still they remained but simply with a lack of their former selves: he noted their shortcomings but couldn’t put his finger on why, and the storm seemed to be closing in, but without the noise or the theatrics that Mother Nature commonly found herself relying on. It was as if someone was simply turning down the lights, removing any semblance of awe from the Earth. Kurt slowly turned himself around, first facing the back of the boat where the shore inevitably lay a vast distance away. It was in this sight that he made a note of something; the moonlight itself seemed to have faded, but only in a harsh and rather significant portion of the circular perimeter that the storm had crafted for him. The water seemed brighter as a stretch of distant line separating itself from the portion he was in, and then cut off as another path was drawn, vaguely in the shape of a thin, almost anorexic… Arm.

Kurt turned, step by step, around in a counterclockwise circle, the fear and anticipation of what he would see growing with every inch he crossed. Finally, as he was about to lay eyes unto the giant, a great moan was let out across the ocean. It seemed to emanate from within the water, much like a whale’s song, though the sound was demented; not so much angry as it was sorrowful, exhausted of its energy. Kurt finally made the last effort of his body to meet with the creature.

It was shown just above its waistline, the water enveloping its lower half, with a frail body and an elongated neck, but the true fear was found in the giant, bulbous head that its body somehow supported. The groan it let out vibrated the entire ocean, shaking what were the last water droplets on the boat’s deck with such an intensity that they may have evaporated or flown off. Kurt stood his ground, but a primal fear took him, stopping him dead in his tracks. His mouth opened slightly in terror, as his eyes traced themselves up the creature’s blueish grey body, noting its veins all about its body the size of industrial chimneys, the bones nearly protruding out of its flesh, and its horrifyingly long fingers, with their knuckles sticking out like bulbous chunks of bone.

Where the true fear lay however, was in the creature’s face. Stretched across an oddly short and wide ovalcular skull, was a gigantic mouth that split the head into two sections. It seemed as if the top jaw was the one on a hinge, and not the bottom. The mouth was lined with hundreds of thousands of tiny teeth, though they were only tiny in comparison, as they had to have been at least four stories tall for each. “Oh my…” Kurt muttered, failing to bring himself to say any more. But suddenly, as he analysed each little portion of this demonically-natured alien, with its state-park sized mouth and beady black holes of eyes, an odd kind of peace overtook him. Such violence and chaos standing just before him, and yet? His eyes drew down to the surface below. The black depths and mystery. Undisturbed. No waves crashing into the side of *The Joline* with every slight movement of the demon.

The demon angled its giant head up further into the sky, and suddenly, its gaping mouth began the vast majority of what Kurt could see of its horrifying expression. Its sunken, tiny eyes fell into their own shadows, blending in with the rest of its leathery and greying blue skin. The darkness casted unto itself by its own hinging head forced it to take another shape from Kurt’s point of view. The moonlight and the increasing distance between its upper and lower halves created a cloak of negative light; a vast distance of noir reality where no colour, hope, or vibrancy would ever dream of entering, nor escaping. A cloak of darkness, an absent face. The demon let out another almost pained groan, and the terrible sound still resonated in Kurt’s chest, but failed to even disturb his boat or the sea beneath it. As if he and this scarce spirit were now existing on their own plain of reality.

He attempted to lift his hand. The sensation flew through him, everything working accordingly, but when he went to place it down on the boat, he found that he had not moved at all. His arm still rested by his side. “I’m dreamin’...” Kurt mumbled. “I know I am.” He turned to the cabin of the boat, not before lowering the masts on his boat. He wished not to move with the wind, instead to stay right where he was. No farther and no closer to the beacon of fear that stood in the depths of the distant and surrounding storm. He reached for the door handle.  
 “Kurt!” Jol’s voice cried out from behind him. His brow furrowed in confusion, and he whipped around. Suddenly, against the bright blue backdrop and the beautiful green seas, was his soon-to-be wife there, in her favourite red plaid. It was almost pink, but a hint of darkness was easily found in its striping. He fully turned away from the door, seeing a strand of dark brown hair fall to the side of his face. He pulled it back behind his ear, and shifted around in his dark blue plaid jacket.

“What is it, beautiful?” Kurt responded, walking over to her. The way her bright hair shined against the sun above. Why, it was marvellous. Entirely without flaw; as if she had been crafted with the perfect woman in mind by an ancient Greek sculptor.

“The masts! I need your help with the masts!” She yelled out.

“You know this ain’t my area of expertise, darlin’!”

Joline laughed, grabbing ahold of one of the ropes and pointing to another loose one by Kurt’s feet. “I know, love. Just grab that rope and hook it for me, will ya?” Kurt looked down at his boots, making note that his olive cargo pants had been soaked by the rough waters of the afternoon. He knelt down and grabbed the rope Joline had requested, hooking it onto a steel hook attached to the base of the fixture. “Thanks, darling.”

Kurt climbed up to her, balancing himself against the stubborn insistence of the heavy waves, and leaned in to kiss her. Their lips pressed, and, even though it had been years since high school where they had first met and started dating; years since they felt the need to sneak out in the waning hours of the day just to be able to get up to the no-good that their teenage selves were so very prone to, years since the freckley Joline-Marriane Smith and Kenny Crawford shared their first awkward kiss in the back corner of a movie theatre… Here and now, on the tip of this boat that had been named in his future wife’s honour: it felt like they were sharing their first kiss all over again. A redo. The most perfect redo one could have ever asked or. Joline placed her only free hand on the side of Kurt’s face, and smiled. “I love you, *Mizz Crawford.*” He said to her.

“I love you, too, Mr. Crawford.” She responded, with a chuckle.

“Whaddya say I make us some salmon while we wait for the waters to calm down?” Kurt suggested, smiling.

Joline let go of him to walk back to the cabin, nodding. “Just keep the skin, honey! The skin’s your friend!” She yelled out, before continuing her duty at the mast.

Kurt laughed, reaching for the doorknob. “Darlin’, how could I *ever* forget!” He turned back to the door, stepping into the cabin. He looked about the beautiful mahogany interior, and then directed his attention to the bed with which he had always found himself crumpling into a ball for Joline to spread out on whilst they slept.

Therein it now, however, under the covers, facing the wall, lay a heap of grey hair. It was only upon closer inspection that he saw the man beneath it. His neck was a pale blue, and he was wearing a yellow raincoat. A slight sense of confusion struck Kurt over the head, but not any sense of panic, nor a single word escaping from his mouth. He stepped over to the man, reaching his hand over to him, and slowly rested his palm on his neck. Utterly without movement. Frozen in time, frigid to the touch. And then, without a single moment to gather himself, it was over. The lights cut out. All within a matter of a second. The scent of the air freshener in the cabin, the subtle sounds of the water rushing underneath him, the sight of the foreign yet somehow familiar body before him, and finally, the sensation of touching his icy skin. It was simply no more. It*,* whatever *it* was, had ceased to be.

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*January 14*

It’s been a year since we found him. I volunteered to lead the search party because an awful feeling had hit me and I felt like it wouldn’t be long until we found something. I was the last person ever to speak to him, though. So I felt it was right that I was the one to find his boat. He had spent so much of his life on the water, so much of his life *there*. Some of his old religious friends said God’s taken him away to the Heavens and whatnot. Autopsy said he died of natural causes. I don’t really believe in either. What I think is that he’s still out there on *The Joline,* with *his* Joline. They’re still floating along, swimming, laughing, talking and fishing. Where-ever they are now. He was laying in his bed. Skin was cold as ice: I’ll never forget that. I’d like to think that Joline came to him. ‘Told him it was time to go. I suppose that it was. There was nothing waiting for him on this side of the shoreline anymore. Nothing.