

*Summary: A couple is separated by military duty.*

You took me to the end of a dock where furled sails and hawsers clinked nautical concertos on metal. Between beats you told me you were leaving, and I watched you scratch your brown beard in the sunlight, massaging the words like lather around your mouth. The gulls stopped screaming, and I heard your heart thump behind the cloud of your breath. Boats undulated on the water, and I kneaded the tendrils of muscles in my arm, shifting my weight from right foot to left.

You kicked the dock's faded planks until splinters levigated and the wind picked up the dust with a gentle luff. You couldn't bring your eyes to meet mine. It was the same sideways half-glance that met my eyes askance when we bore the palls of my mother's coffin four years prior. You looked so handsome in your suit and tie, shoes shined so that you could see your own frown when you looked down into them. Remember how you told me that look meant you were sorry?

I asked to where you were sailing, and you said your boss was sending you out on the longest trip yet — Colombo. A place so infrequently spoken of I didn't think it was real until you said: Sri Lanka. You were to bring a shipment of plastic there, tea on the way back.

And the way you ran your thumb in quick circles around the button of your peacoat told me you were anxious to go. Were you? You said you had spent too much time waiting in coffeeshops and bars in this New England port town while the fall turned to winter and then to spring again. I didn't blame you.

EPISODE 17: SHORT STORY (COMPLETE) – LITERARY: *HAWSERS* BY SAMUEL SIMAS

You said you would miss welcoming the morning rain and the smell of roasted coffee after we let blankets collect by our ankles. You, thinking about the sandpapery feel of my beard on your chest while I laid next to you at night, pawing at your arms and broad tattooed shoulders to ensure I wasn't alone again. Would I miss your warm chuckle when I snuck up behind you to kiss the corners where your ears met your face? Yes.

From the way you were standing, I swore you would get scoliosis. Your shoulders were slouched, neck tilted to the side. Your hips, off-kilter. Everything about your face made me smile, even the crooked frown you made when you thought too hard about taxes or music or the color blue. But now neither of us were smiling or frowning. You were watching waves wash seaweed and pebbles and shells onto the shore.

I stared at the cerulean blue-river-veins running under your skin, pumping your life for me to see. I saw the rough patches, the callouses and scars where you nicked yourself building our lopsided shed in the backyard under my favorite oak tree. Ten summers turned to fall while we lived in the house that used to be my parents. We uprooted the azaleas when they grew too high, we dug into the ground and laid flagstones for a patio, a fire-pit, but we never touched the tree. It was the tree with the red bird-feeder, the one I ran into playing ball with my Dad at the age of eight. It left a scar above my eyebrow, which you found the first night you slept under the down comforter with me, rubbing your feet against mine to keep them warm.

I saw the band around your finger from when we married at the town hall, days after Rhode Island told us we had the right. Funny isn't it? It was a small "I-do" surrounded with an extended, pretended family and none of our parents who had sucked in hate through their mothers' milk. We stood together in the town-hall, in a line next to lesbians who cried and clapped and then exchanged the rings they had made for each other out of ornate silver teaspoons.

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Days later, when I cried on the phone while my mother spewed damnation and retribution, you took my shoulder, and I felt the ring on your hand. It's a product of a generation different than ours, you said, let it go. And so I did because you taught me how to trust myself like a ship taken from its mooring, hawser reeled in and kept coiled, until I met a shore where I could cast it out and draw myself in again.

You looked at me with baleful eyes steeped brown like coffee, your smile caramel. You took my hand and kissed it between the thumb and pointer because you knew the secret — how it was my favorite place to be kissed. And then you held me close to you. Your shirt, the scent of cool smoke from our wood stove, and beyond your shoulder the sun was broken in the rippled water, leading to a thatch of reeds bending to the wind. A man landed his boat and moored it on the end of the dock. He glanced at us, once, twice, and then a third time because he thought neither I, nor you, could see his suspicion. But I did. And I didn't care.

I pulled you closer to me and breathed you into the deepest curve of my soul, thinking the deeper I took you, the longer you would stay. You swayed with me in your arms, like the reeds in the breeze, like the boats shifting on the water. How long did we stay like that upon the dock? Was it long enough for you to remember how you came home only months before, bringing back disease that tricked our insides and ate them away until we devoured ourselves whole. When you told me you were sorry, for the first time, we sat upon a cheap set of lawn furniture, watching the trains pass on the railroad and sipping beer. I didn't blame you then, either.

I pulled myself away from you and leaned on the banister of the wharf, running my thumbnail through the aged, gray wood. Odd to see swans swimming in salt water, but there they were, one floating not too far from the other. It dipped its head underwater and came up with seaweed wrapped around its bill. You kissed my neck from behind. You said you would be back

in two months. Was it really that long? I stared into my reflection below until the ripples blurred it away. I shook my head, but I didn't respond. The space between my ears and my brain was full of to-dos, lonely doctor's visits, and long nights spent wrapped in electric blankets, waiting for the crunching of your key in the lock.

I turned from you, my feet echoing hollow and hard on the wood while I walked to our truck next to a line of neon-colored kayaks. You trailed behind, jangling keys in your hand to fill the silence left between the clanking of boats in the harbor. I climbed in, and you drove up the gravel road that bent hard like a horseshoe. You could see the whole marina from the top. I saw your boat bobbing between two orange dinghies like tiny fish chasing a whale.

You asked me if it was okay to leave, and I couldn't tell you no.