

# Salt Wine

by Peter S. Beagle

If my business manager and I hadn't been schlepping ourselves and a carload of books from the Bay Area to Las Vegas for a Star Trek convention, this story would not exist. It's a very long drive, and extremely boring, and the night sky was crackling with heat lightning, and we'd run out of Sondheim songs. For conversation's sake, we turned to discussing a possible title for this collection, and after a series of remarkably lame suggestions, the phrase *Salt Wine and Secrets* suddenly popped up like a slice of fresh toast. Evocative and curiously haunting, obviously it would only work if there were a story called "Salt Wine" in the book. And I hadn't a notion of what salt wine might be, nor what secrets it might engender. I said I'd think about it.

On the way home, a few days later, slogging through a pounding rainstorm, I announced that I just maybe had the beginning of a mini-hint of a story idea. "It's some-thing about *merrows*, that's all I know."

I usually get one clue like that per story—the rest is strictly up for grabs. If the Muse is late for work, you start without her.

Looking back at "Salt Wine," I realize that almost every story I've ever written from a first-person point of view has been completely improvised according to the narrator's voice. It's a matter of trusting the source; of assuming that the storyteller knows what he or she is doing, even if I don't, and that the tale will structure itself and tell me when it's done. It's a form of possession, I suppose, but generally a benign one.

So here's Ben Hazeltine, stepping from wherever those voices that visit me live, to tell you a story. There's a secret in it.

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All right, then. First off, this ain't a story about some seagoing candy-trews dandy Captain Jack, or whatever you want to call him, who falls in love with a mermaid and breaks his troth to a mortal woman to live with his fish-lady under the sea. None of that in this story, I can promise you; and our man's no captain, but a plain blue-eyed sailorman named Henry Lee, AB, who starts out good for nowt much but reeling a sail, holyston-ing a deck, taking a turn in the crow's-nest, talking his way out of a tight spot, and lending his weight to the turning of a capstan and his voice to the bellowing of a chanty. He drank some, and most often when he drank it ended with him going at it with one or another of his mates. Lost part of an ear that way off Panama, he did, and even got flogged once for pouring grog on the captain. But there was never no harm in Henry Lee, not in them days. Anybody remembers him'll tell you that.

Me name's Ben Hazeltine. I remember Henry Lee, and I'll tell you why.

I met Henry Lee when we was both green hands on the *Mary Brannum*, out of Cardiff, and we stayed messmates on and off, depending. Didn't always ship out together, nowt like that—just seemed to happen so. Any road, come one rainy spring, we was on the beach together, out of work. Too many hands, not enough ships—you get that, some seasons. Captains can take their pick those times, and Henry Lee and I weren't neither one anybody's first pick. Isle of Pines, just south of Cuba—devil of a place to be stranded, I'll tell you. Knew we'd land a berth sooner or later—always had before—only we'd no idea when, and both of us hungry enough to eat a seagull, but too weak to grab one. I'll tell you the God's truth, we'd gotten to where we was looking at bloody starfish and those Portygee man-o'-war jellies and wondering ... well, there you are, that's how bad it were. I've been in worse spots, but not many.

Now back then, there was mermaids all over the place, like you don't see so much today. Partial to warm waters, they are—the Caribbean, Mediterranean, the Gulf Stream—but I've seen them off the Orkneys, and even off Greenland a time or two, that's a fact. What's *not* a fact is the singing. Combing their hair, yes; they're women, after all, and that's what women do, and how you going to comb your hair out underwater? But I never heard one mermaid sing, not once. And they ain't all beautiful—stop a clock, some of them would.

Now, what you *didn't* see much of in the old times, and don't hardly be seeing at all these days, was *mermen*. Merrows, some folk call them. Ugly as fried sin, the lot: not a one but's got a runny red nose, nasty straggly hair—red too, mostly, I don't know why—stumpy green teeth sticking up and out every which way, skin like a crocodile's arse. You get a look at one of those, it don't take much to figure why your mermaid takes to hanging around sailors. Put me up against a merrow, happen even *I* start looking decent enough, by and by.

Any road, like I told you, Henry Lee and I was pretty well down to eat-ing our boots—or we would have been if we'd had any. We was stum-bling along the beach one morning, guts too empty to growl, looking for someone to beg or borrow from—or maybe just chew up on the spot, either way—when there's a sudden commotion out in the water, and someone screaming for help. Well, I knew it were a merrow straight-away, and so did Henry Lee—you can't ever mistake a merrow's creaky, squawky voice, once you've heard it—and when we ran to look, we saw he had a real reason to scream. Big hammerhead had him cornered against the reef, curding and circling him, the way they do when they're working up to a strike. No, I tell a lie, I misremember—it were a bull shark, not a hammerhead. Hammer, he swims in big packs, he'll stay out in the deep water, but your bull, they'll come right in close, right into the shallows. And they'll leave salmon or tuna to go after a merrow. Just how they are.

Now merrows are tough as they're unsightly, you don't never want to be disputing a fish or a female with a merrow. But to a bull shark, a mer-row's a nice bit of Cornish pasty. This one were flapping his arms at the bull, hitting out with his tail—worst thing he could have done; they'll go for the tail first thing, that's the good part. I says to Henry Lee, I says, "Look sharp, mate—might be *summat* over for us." Sharks is real slap-dash about

their meals, and we was *hungry*.

But Henry Lee, he gives me just the one look, with his eyes all big and strange—and then rot me if he ain't off like a pistol shot, diving into the surf and heading straight for the reef and that screaming merrow. Ain't too many sailors can really swim, you know, but Henry Lee, he were a Devon man, and he used to say he swam before he could walk. He had a knife in his belt—won it playing euchre with a Malay pirate—and I could see it glinting between his teeth as he slipped through them waves like a dolphin, which is a shark's mortal enemy, you know. Butt 'em in the side, what they do, in the belly, knock 'em right out of the water. I've seen it done.

That bull shark never knew Henry Lee were coming till he were on its back, hanging on like a jockey and stabbing everywhere he could reach. Blood enough in the water, I couldn't hardly see anything—I could just hear that merrow, still screeching his ugly head off. Time I caught sight of Henry Lee again, he were halfway back to shore, grinning at me around that bloody knife, and a few fins already slicing in to finish off their mate, ta ever so. I practically dragged Henry Lee out of the water, 'acos of he were bleeding too—shark's hide'll take your own skin off, and his thighs looked like he'd been bugging a hedgehog.

"Barking mad," I told him. "Barking, roaring, *howling* mad! God's frig-ging *teeth*, you ought to be put somewhere you can't hurt yourself—aye, nor nobody else. What in frigging Jesus' frigging name *possessed* you, you louse-ridden get?"

See, it weren't that we was all such mates back then, me and Henry Lee, it were more that I thought I *knew* him—knew what he'd do when, and what he wouldn't; knew what I could trust him for, and what I'd better see to meself. There's times your life can depend on that kind of knowing—weren't for that, I wouldn't be here, telling this. I says it again, "What the Christ possessed you, Henry bleeding Lee?"

But he'd already got his back to me, looking out toward the reef, water still roiling with the sharks fighting for leftovers. "Where's that merrow gone?" he wanted to know. "He was just there—where's he got to?" He was set to swim right back out there, if I hadn't grabbed him again.

"Panama by now, if he's got the sense of a weevil," says I. "More sense than you, anyway. What kind of bloody idiot risks his life for a bloody merrow?"

"An idiot who knows how a merrow can reward you!" Henry Lee turned back around to face me, and I swear his blue eyes had gone black and wild as the sea off Halifax. "Didn't you never hear about that? You save a merrow's life, he's bound to give you all his treasure, all the plun-der he's ever gathered from shipwrecks, sea fights—everything he's got in his cave, it's the rule. He don't have no choice, it's the *rule*!"

I couldn't help it, I were laughing before he got halfway through. "Aye, Henry Lee," I says. "Aye, I've heard that story, and you know where I heard it? At me mam's tit, that's where, and at every tit since, and every mess

where I ever put me feet under the table. Pull the other one, chum, that tale's got long white whiskers on it." Wouldn't laugh at him so today, but there you are. I were younger then.

Well, Henry Lee just gave me that look, one more time, and after that he didn't speak no more about merrows and treasures. But he were up all that night—we slept on the beach, y'see, and every time I roused, the fool were pacing the water's edge, this way and that, gaping out into the bloody black, plain waiting for that grateful merrow to show up with his arms full of gold and jewels and I don't know what, all for him, along of being saved from the sharks. "*Rule*," thinks I. "*Rule*, me royal pink bum," and went back to sleep.

But there's treasure and there's treasure—depends how you look at it, I reckon. Very next day, Henry Lee found himself a berth aboard a whaler bound home for Boston and short a foremast hand. He tried to get me signed on too, but ... well, I knew the captain, and the captain remem-bered me, so that were the end of that. You'd not believe the grudges some of them hold.

Me, I lucked onto a Spanish ship, a week or ten days later—she'd stopped to take on water, and I got talking with the cook, who needed another messboy. I've had better berths, but it got me to Malaga—and after that, one thing led to another, and I didn't see Henry Lee again for six or seven years, must have been, the way it happens with seamen. I thought about him often enough, riding that bull shark to rescue that merrow who were going to make him rich, and I asked after him any time I met an English hand, or a Yankee, but never a word could anyone tell me—not until I rounded a fruitstall in the marketplace at Velha Goa, and almost ran over him!

How *I* got there's no great matter—I were a cook meself by then, on a wallowing scow of an East Indiaman, and trying to get some greens and fresh fruit into the crew's hardtack diet, if just to sweeten the farts in the fo'c'sle. As for why I were running, with a box of mangoes in me arms ... well, that don't figure in this story neither, so never you mind.

Henry Lee looked the same as I remembered him—still not shaving more than every three days, I'd warrant, still as blue-eyed an innocent as ever cracked a bos'un's head with a beer bottle. Only change in him I could see, he didn't look like a sailor no more. Hard to explain; he were dressing just the same as ever—singlet, blue canvas pants, same rope-sole shoes, even the very same dirty white cap he always wore—but summat was different about him. Might have been the way he walked—he'd lost that little roll we all have, walked like he'd not been to sea in his life. Aye, might have been that.

Well, he give a great whoop to see me, and he grabbed hold of me, mangoes and all, and dragged me off into a dark little Portygee tavern—smelled of dried fish and fried onions, I remember, and cloves under it all. They knew him there—landlord patted his back, kissed him on the cheek, brought us some kind of mulled ale, and left us alone. And Henry Lee sat there with his arms folded and grinned at me, not saying a

word, until I finally told him he looked like a blasted old hen, squatting over one solitary egg, and it likely rotten at that. "Talk or be damned to you," I says. "The drink's not good enough to keep me from walking out of this fleapit."

Henry Lee burst out laughing then, and he grabbed both me hands across the table, saying, "Ah, it's just so grand to see you, old Ben, I don't know what to say first, I swear I don't."

"Tell about the money, mate," I says, and didn't he stare *then*? I says, "Your clothes are for shite, right enough, but you're walking like a man with money in every pocket—you talk like your mouth's full of money, and you're scared it'll all spill out if you open your lips too wide. Now, last time I saw you, you hadn't a farthing to bless yourself with, so let's talk about that, hey? That merrow turn up with his life savings, after all?" And *I* laughed, because I'd meant it as a joke. I did.

Henry Lee didn't laugh. He looked startled, and then he leaned so close I could see where he'd lost a side tooth and picked up a scar right by his left eyebrow—made him look younger, somehow, those things did along with that missing bit of ear—and he dropped his voice almost to a whisper, no matter there wasn't a soul near us. "No," says he, "no, Ben, he did better than that, a deal better than that. He taught me the making of salt wine."

Aye, that's how I looked at him—exactly the way you're eyeing me now. Like I'm barking mad, and Jesus and the saints wouldn't have me. And the way you mumbled, "*Salt wine?*"—I said it just the same as you, tucking me head down like that, getting me legs under me, in case things turned ugly. I did it true. But Henry Lee only sat back and grinned again. "You heard me, Ben," he says. "You heard me clear enough."

"Salt wine," I says, and different this time, slowly. "Salt wine ... that'd be like pickled beer? Oysters in honey, that kind of thing, is it? How about bloody fried marmalade, then?" Takes me a bit of time to get prop-erly worked up, mind, but foolery will do it. "Whale blubber curry," I says. "Boiled nor'easter."

For answer, Henry Lee reaches into those dirty canvas pants and comes up with a cheap pewter flask, two for sixpence in any chandlery. Doesn't say one word—just hands it to me, folds his hands on the table and waits. I take me time, study the flask—got a naked lady and a six-point buck on one side, and somebody in a flying chariot looks like it's caught fire on the other. I start to say how I don't drink much wine—never did, not Spanish sherry, nor even port, nor none of that Frenchy slop—but Henry Lee flicks one finger to tell me I'm to shut me gob and taste. So that's what I did.

All right, this is the hard part to explain. Nor about merrows, nor nei-ther the part about some bloody fool jumping on the back of a bull shark—the part about the wine. Because it *were* wine in that flask, and it *were* salty, and right there's where I run aground on a lee shore, trying to make you taste and see summat you never will, if your luck holds. *Salt wine*—not red nor neither white, but gray-green, like the deep sea, and smell-ing like the sea, filling your head with the sea, but wine all the same. *Salt wine...*

First swallow, I lost meself. I didn't think I were ever coming back.

Weren't nothing like being drunk. I've downed enough rum, enough brandy, dropped off to sleep in enough jolly company and wakened in enough stinking alleys behind enough shebeens to know the differ-ence. This were more ... this were like I'd fallen overboard from me, from meself, and not a single boat lowered to find me. But it didn't matter none, because *summat* were bearing me up, *summat* were surging under me, big and fast and wild, as it might have been a dolphin between me legs, tearing along through the sea—or the air, might be we were flying, I'd not have known—carrying somebody off to somewhere, and who it was I can't tell you now no more than I could have then. But it weren't me, I'll take me affydvay on that. I weren't there. I weren't anywhere or anybody, and just then that were just where I wanted to be.

Just then ... Aye, you give me a choice just then, happen I might have chosen ... But I'd just had that one swallow, after all, so in a bit there I were, me as ever was, back at that tavern table with Henry Lee, and him still grinning like a dog with two tails, and he says to me, "Well, Ben?"

When I can talk, I ask him, "You can make this swill yourself?" and when he nods, "Then I'd say your merrow earned his keep. Not half bad."

"Best *you* ever turned into piss," Henry says. I don't say nowt back, and after a bit, he leans forward, drops his voice way down again, and says, "It's our fortune, Ben. Yours and mine. I'm swearing on my moth-er's grave."

"If the dollymop's even got one," I says, because of course he don't know who his mam was, no more than I know mine. They just dropped us both and went their mortal ways, good luck to us all. I tell him, "Never mind the swearing, just lay out what you mean by *our fortune*. I didn't save no merrow—fact, I halfway tried to save *you* from trying to save him. He don't owe me nowt, and nor do you." And I'm on me feet and ready to scarper—just grab up those mangoes and walk. Ain't a living soul thinks I've got no pride, but I bloody do.

But Henry Lee's up with me, catching ahold of me arm like an octopus, and he's saying, "No, no, Ben, you don't understand. I need you, you have to help me, sit down and *listen*." And he pulls and pushes me back down, and leans right over me, so close I can see the scar as cuts into his hairline, where the third mate of the *Boston Annie* got him with a marlinspike, happened off the Azores. He says, "I can make it, the salt wine, but I need a partner to market it for me. I've got no head for business—I don't know the first thing about selling. You've got to ship it, travel with it, be my factor. Because I can't do this without you, d'you see, Ben?"

"No, I don't see a frigging thing," I says in his face. "I'm no more a fac-tor than you're a bloody nun. What I am's a seacook, and it's past time I was back aboard me ship, so by your leave—"

Henry Lee's still gripping me arm so it *hurts*, and I can't pry his fin-gers

loose. "Ben, *listen!*" he fair bellows again. "This is Goa, not the City of London—the Indians won't ever deal honestly with a Britisher who doesn't have an army behind him—why should they?—and the Portuguese bankers don't trust me any more than I'd trust a single one of them not to steal the spots off a leopard and come back later for the whis-kers. There's a few British financiers, but *they* don't trust anyone who didn't go to Eton or Harrow. Now you're a lot more fly than you ever let on, I've always known that—"

"Too kind," I says, but he don't hear. He goes on, "You're the one who always knew when we were being cheated—by the captain, by the com-pany, by the lady of the house, didn't matter. Any *souk* in the world, any marketplace, I always let you do the bargaining—*always*. You'd haggle forever over a penny, a peseta, a single anna—and you'd get your price every time. Remember? I surely remember."

"Ain't nothing like running a business," I tell him. "What you're talk-ing about is responsibility, and I never been responsible for nowt but the job I were paid to do right. I like it that way, Henry Lee, it suits me. What you're talking about—"

"I'm talking about a *future*, Ben. Spend your whole life going from berth to berth, ship to ship—where are you at the end of it? Another rot-ting hulk, like all the rest, careened on the beach, and no tide ever coming again to float you off. I'm offering you the security of a decent roof over your head, good meals on your table, and a few teeth left in your mouth to chew them with." He lets go of me then, but his blue eyes don't. He says, "I'd outfit you, I'd pay your way, and I'd give you one-third of the profits—ah, hell, make it forty, forty percent, what do you say? It'll be worth it to me to sleep snug a'nights, knowing my old shipmate's minding the shop and putting the cat out. What do you say, Ben? Will you do it for me?"

I look at him for a good while, not saying nowt. I remember him one time, talking a drunken gang of Yankee sailors out of dropping us into New York harbor for British spies—wound up buying us drinks, they did, which bloody near killed us anyway. And Piraeus—God's teeth, Piraeus—when the fool put the comehither on the right woman at the wrong time, and there we was, locked in a cellar for two days and nights, while her husband and his mates went on and on, just upstairs, about how to slaughter us so we'd remember it. Henry Lee, he finally got them per-suaded that I were carrying some sort of horrible disease, rot your cods off, you leave it long enough, make your nose fall into your soup. They pushed the cellar key under the door and was likely in Istanbul, time we got out of that house. Me, I didn't stop feeling me nose for another two days.

So I know what Henry Lee can do, talking, and I sniff all around his words, like a fox who smells the bait and knows the trap's there, some-where, underneath. I keep telling him, over and over, "Henry Lee, I never been no better than you with figures—I'd likely run you bankrupt inside of a month." Never stops him—he just grins and answers back, "I'm bankrupt already, Ben. I'm not swimming in boodle, like you thought—I've gone and sunk all I own into a thousand cases of salt wine. Nothing more to lose, you see—there's no way you can make anything any the worse. So what do you

say now?"

I don't answer, but I up with that naked-lady flask, and I take another swallow. This time I know what's coming, and I set meself for it, but the salt wine catches me up again, lifts me and tosses me like before, same as if I was a ship with me mainmast gone, and the waves doing what they like with me. No, it's not like before—I don't lose Ben Hazeltine, nor I don't forget who I am. What happens, I *find* summat. I find *everything*. I can't rightly stand up proper, 'acos I don't know which way up is, and I feel the eyes rocking in me head, and I'm dribbling wine like I've not done since I were a babby ... but for a minute, two minutes—no more, I couldn't have stood no more—everything in the world makes sense to me. For one minute, I'm the flyest cove in the whole world.

Then it's gone—gone, thank God or Old Horny, either one—and I'm back to old ordinary, and Henry Lee's watching me, not a word, and when I can talk I say, "There's more. I know you, and I know there's more. You want me to come in with you, Henry Lee, you tell me the part you're not telling me. Now."

He don't answer straight off—just keeps looking at me out of those nursery-blue eyes. I decide I'd best help him on a bit, so I say, "Right, then, don't mind if we do talk about merrows. Last time I saw you, you was risking your life for the ugliest one of them ugly buggers, and him having to hand over every farthing he'd got sewn into his underwear, because that's the frigging rule, right? So when did that happen, hey? We never seen him again, far as *I* know."

"He found me," Henry Lee says. "Took him a while, but he caught up with me in Port of Spain. It's important to them, keeping their word, though you wouldn't think so." He keeps cracking his knuckles, the way he always used to do when he weren't sure the captain were swallowing his tale about why we was gone three days in Singapore. "I had it wrong," he says, "that rule thing. I expected he'd come with his whole fortune in his arms, but all the merrow has to bring you is the thing that's most pre-cious to him in the world. The most precious thing in the world to that merrow I saved—I call him Gorblimey, that's as close as I can get to his name—the most precious thing to him was that recipe for salt wine. It's only some of them know how to make it, and they've never given it to a human before. I'm the only one."

Me head's still humming like a honey tree, only it's swarming with the ghosts of all the things I knew for two minutes. Henry Lee goes on, "He couldn't write it down for me—they can't read or write, of course, none of them, I'd never thought about that—so he made me learn it by heart. All that night, over and over, the two of us, me hiding in a lifeboat, him floating in the ship's shadow, over and over and *over*, till I couldn't have remembered my own name. He was so afraid I'd get it wrong."

"How would you know?" I can't help asking him. "Summat like that wine, how could you tell if it *were* wrong, or gone bad?"

Henry Lee bristles up at me, the way he'd have his ears flat back if he was a cat. "I make it exactly the way Gorblimey taught me—*exactly*. There's no



chance of any mistake, Gorblimey himself wouldn't know whether I made it or he did. Get that right out of your headpiece, Ben, and just tell me if you'll help me. *Now*," he growls, mimicking me to the life. He'd land in the brig, anyway once every voyage, imitating the officers.

Now, I'm not blaming nobody, you may lay to that. I'm not even blaming the salt wine, although I could. What I done, I done out of me own chuckleheadedness, not because I was drunk, not because Henry Lee and me'd been shipmates. No, it were the money, and that's the God's truth—just the money. He were right, you can live on a seacock's pay, but that's all you *can* do. Can't retire, and maybe open a little seaside inn—can't marry, can't live nowhere but on a bloody ship ... no, it's no life, not with-out the needful, and there's not many can afford to be too choosy how they come by it. I says, "Might do, Henry Lee. Forty percent. Might do. Might."

Henry Lee just lit up all at once, one big woosh, like a Guy Fawkes bonfire. "Ah, Ben. Ah, Ben, I knew you'd turn up trumps, old growly truepenny Ben. You won't be sorry, my old mate," and he claps me on the shoulder, near enough knocking me over. "I promise you won't be sorry."

So I left that Indiaman tub looking for another cook, and I signed on right there as Henry Lee's factor—his partner, his first mate, his right hand, whatever you like to call it. Took us a hungry year or so to get our feet under us, being just the two, but the word spread faster than you might have supposed. Aye, that were the thing about that salt wine—there were them as took to it like a Froggie to snails, and another sort couldn't even abide the *look* of it in the bottle. I were with that lot, and likely for the same reason—not 'acos it were nasty, but 'acos it were too good, too *much*, more than a body could thole, like the Scots say. I never touched it again after that second swig, never once, not in all the years I peddled salt wine fast as Henry Lee could make it. Not for cheer, not for sorrow, not even for a wedding toast when Henry Lee married, which I'll get to by and by. Couldn't thole it, that's all, couldn't risk it no more. Third time might eat me up, third time might make me disappear. I stayed faithful to rum and mother's-ruin, and let the rest go, for once in me fool life.

Year and a half, we had buyers wherever ships could sail. London, Liverpool, Marseilles, Hamburg, Amsterdam, Buenos Aires, Athens, New York, Naples ... we did best in seaports, always. I didn't travel everywhere the wine went; we hired folk in time, me and Henry Lee, and we even bought a ship of our own. Weren't no big ship, not so's you'd take notice, but big enough for what we put aboard her, which was the best captain and crew anyone could ask for. That were me doing—Henry Lee wanted to spend more on a fancier ship, but I told him it weren't how many sails that mattered, but the hands on the halyards. And he listened to me, which he mostly did ... aye, you couldn't never call him stupid, poor sod. I'll say that, anyway.

Used to look out for that merrow, Henry Lee's Gorblimey, times I were keeping the wine company on its way. Not that I'd likely have known him from any other of the ones I'd see now and again, chasing the flying fish or swimming along with the porpoises—even nastier, they looked, in the

middle of those creatures—but I'd ponder whiles if he knew what were passing above his head, and what he'd be thinking about it if he did. But Henry Lee never spoke word about merrows nor mermaids, none of all that, not if he could help it. Choused him, whiles, I did, telling him he were afeard Gorblimey'd twig how well we was getting on, and come for his own piece, any day now. That'd rouse him every time, and he'd snap at me like a moray, so I belayed that. Might could be I shouldn't have, but who's to say? Who's to say now?

He'd other matters on his mind by then, what with building himself a slap-up new house on the seafront north of Velha Goa. Palace and a half, it were, to me own lookout, with two floors and two verandas and *four* chimneys—four chimneys, in a country where you might be lighting a fire maybe twice a year. But Henry Lee told me, never mind: didn't the grandest place in that Devon town where he were born have four chim-neys, and hadn't he always wanted to live just so in a house just like that one? Couldn't say nowt much to that, could I? Me that used to stare hours into the cat's-meat shop window back home, cause I got it in me head the butcher were me da? He weren't, by the by, but you see?

But I did speak a word or two when Henry Lee up and got wed. Local girl, Julia Caterina and about five other names I disremember, with a couple of *das* in between, like the Portygee nobs do. Pretty enough, she were, with dark brown hair for two or three, brown eyes to crack your heart, and a smile to make a priest give up Lent. Aye, and though she started with nobbut *hello* and *goodbye* and *whiskey-soda* in English, didn't she tackle to it till she shamed me, who never mastered no more than a score of words in her tongue, and not one of them fit for her ears. Good-tempered with it, too—though she fought her parents bare-knuckle and toe to toe, like Figg or Mendoza, until they let her toss over the gran-dee they'd promised her to, all for the love of a common Jack Tar, that being what he still were in their sight, didn't matter how many Bank of England notes he could wave at them. "She's a lady," I says, "for all she's a Portygee, and you're no more a gentleman than that monkey in your mango tree. Money don't make such as us into gentlemen, Henry Lee. All it does, it makes us rich monkeys. You know that, same as me."

"I'm plain daft over her, Ben," says he, like I'd never spoke at all. "Can't eat, can't sleep, can't do a thing but dream about having her near me all the time. Nothing for it but the altar."

"Speaking of altars," says I, "you'll have to turn Papist, and there's not one of her lot'll ever believe you mean it, no more than I would. And never mind her family—what about her friends, what about that whole world she's been part of since the day she were born? You reckon to sweep her up and away from all that, or try to ease yourself into it and hope they won't twig what you are? Which is it to be, then, hey?"

"I don't know, Ben," says Henry Lee, real quiet. "I don't know any-thing anymore." He said me name, but he weren't talking to me—maybe to that monkey, maybe to the waves out beyond the seawall. "The one thing I've got a good hold on, when I'm with her, it's like coming home. First time I saw her, it came over me, I've been gone a long time, and now I'm home."

Well, you can't talk sense to nobody in a state like that, so I wished them luck and left them to it. Aye, and I even danced at the wedding, sweating like a hog in a new silk suit, Chinee silk, and kicking the bride's shins with every turn. Danced with the mother-in-law too, with her cry-ing on me shoulder the while, how she'd lost her poor angel forever to this soulless brute of an English *merchant*, which no matter he'd con-verted, he weren't no real Catholic, nor never would be. I tried to get *her* shins, that one, but she were quick, I'll say that for her.

So there's Henry Lee and his pretty new missus, and him so happy staying home with her, hosting grand gatherings just for folk to look at her, he weren't no use for nowt else, save telling me how happy he were. Oh, he still brewed up the salt wine himself—wouldn't trust me nor no other with the makings—but for the rest of it, I were near enough running the business without him. Took in the orders, paid the accounts, kept the books, supervised the packing and the shipping, every case, every bloody bottle. Even bought us a second ship—found her and bar-gained for her, paid cash down, all on me own hook. Long way from the Isle of Pines, hey?

Like I say, I didn't make all the voyages. Weren't any degree neces-sary for me to make none on 'em, tell the truth—and besides I were get-ting on, and coming to like the land more than I ever thought I would. But I never could shake me taste for the Buenos Aires run. I knew some women there, and a few men too ... aye, that's a fine town, Buenos. A man could settle in that town, and I were thinking about it then.

So we're three days from landfall, and I'm on deck near sunset, tak-ing the air and keeping a lookout for albatrosses. No finer bird than an albatross, you can keep your eagles. A quiet, quiet evening—wide red sky streaked with a bit of green, fine weather tomorrow. You can hear the gulls' wings, and fish jumping now and then, and the creaking of the strakes, and sometimes even the barrels of salt wine shifting down in the hold. Then I hear footsteps behind me, and I turn and see the bos'un's mate coming up on deck. Can't think of his name right now—a short, wide man, looked like a wine barrel himself, but tough as old boots. Monkey Sucker, that's it, that's what they called him. Because he liked to drink his rum out of a cocoanut, you see. Never see no one doing that, these days.

He weren't looking too hearty, old Monkey Sucker. Red eyes and walking funny, for a start, like his legs didn't belong to him, but I put that down to him nipping at the bung down below. Now I already told you, I never again laid lip to that salt wine from that first day to this, but folk that liked it, why, they'd be waiting on the docks when we landed, ready to unload the cargo themselves right on the spot. And half the crew was the same way, run yourself blind barmy trying to keep them out of the casks. Well, we done the practical, Henry Lee and me: we rigged the hold to keep all but the one barrel under lock and key. That one we left out and easy tapped, and it'd usually last us there and back, wherever we was bound. But this Monkey Sucker ... no, he weren't just drunk, I saw that on second glance. Not drunk. I wish it *had* been that, for he weren't a bad sort.

"Mr. Hazeltine," he says to me. "Well, Mr. Hazeltine." Kept on saying me

name like we'd just met, and he were trying to get a right fix on it. His voice didn't sound proper, neither, but it kept cracking and bleating—like a boy's voice when it's changing, you know. And there were summat bad wrong with his nose and his mouth.

"Monk," I says back, "you best get your arse below decks before the captain claps eyes on you. You look worse than a poxy bumboy on Sunday morning." The light's going fast now, but I can make out that his face is all bad swole up and somehow *twisty*-like, and there's three lines like welts on both sides of his neck. He's got his arms wrapped around him-self, holding himself *tight*, the way you'd think he were about to birth four thousand babies at one go, like some fish do it. And he keeps mum-bling me name, over and over, but he's not looking at me, not once, he's looking at the rail on the starboard side. Aye, I should have twigged to that straightaway, I know. I didn't, that's all.

Suddenly he says, "Water." Clear as clear, no mistake about it. "Water," and he points over the side. Excited, bobbing on his toes, like a nipper at Brighton. Third time, "*Water*," and at least I were the first to bawl, "Man overboard!" there's that. In the midst of all the noise and garboil, with everyone tumbling on deck to heave to, and the captain yelling at every-one to lower a boat, with the bos'un crazy trying to lower two, 'acos he and Monkey Sucker was old mates ... in the midst of it all, I saw Monkey Sucker in the sea. I *saw* him, understand? He weren't splashing around, waving and screaming for help, and he weren't treading water neither. No, he's trying to swim, calm as can be—only he's trying to swim like a fish, laying himself flat in the water and *wriggling* his legs together, same as if he had a tail, understand? Only he didn't have no tail, and he sank like that, straight down, straight down. They kept that boat out all night, but they never did find him.

We reported the death to the customs people in Buenos Aires, and I sent word to Henry Lee back in Goa. The captain and the mates kept ask-ing the crew about why Monkey Sucker had done it, scragged himself that way—were it the drink got him? Were it over some dockside bint? Did he owe triple interest on some loan to Silas Barker or Icepick Neddie Frey? Couldn't get no answer, not one, that made no sense to them, nor to me neither.

Heading home, every barrel gone, hold full of Argentine wheat for bal-last, now it's me turn to chat up the crew, on night watch or in the mess. I go at it like a good 'un, but there's not a soul can tell me anything I don't know. I were first ashore before dawn at Velha Goa—funny to think of that fine Mandovi River all silted up today, whole place left to the snakes and the kites—and if I didn't run all the way to Henry Lee's house, may I never piss again. Man at the door to let me in, another man to take me hat and offer me a glass. I didn't take it.

I bellow for Henry Lee, and here he comes, rushing downstairs in his shirtsleeves, one shoe off and one on. "Ben, what is it? What's happened? Is it the ship?" Because he never could get used to having two ships of his own—always expected one or t'other to sink or burn, or be taken by the Barbary pirates. I didn't say nowt, just grabbed him by the arm and hauled

him off into the room he calls the library. Shut the door, turn around, look into his frightened blue eyes. "It ain't the ship, Henry Lee," I tell him. "It's the hands."

"The hands," he says. "I don't understand."

"And it ain't the hands," I say, "it's the buyers. And it ain't the buyers." I take a breath, wish God'd put a noggin of rum in me fist right now, but there ain't no God. "It's the wine."

Henry Lee shakes his head. He reaches for a bottle on the sideboard, pours himself a drink. Salt wine, it is—I knock it out of his hand, so it splashes on his fancy rug, and now I'm whispering, because if I shout everything comes apart. "It's the wine, Henry Lee. You know it, and now I know."

That about him knowing, that was a guess, and now I'm the one looking away, 'acos of I don't want to find out I'm right. And because it's hard to say the bloody words, either way. "The salt wine," I says. "It frigging well killed a man, this time out, and I'm betting it's done it before."

"No," Henry Lee says. "No, Ben, that's not possible." But I look straight back at him, and I know what he's fighting not to think.

"Maybe he didn't mean no harm, your Gorblimey," I go on. "Maybe he'd no notion what his old precious gift would do to human beings. Maybe it depends on how much of it you drink, or how often." So still in that fine house, I can hear his Julia Caterina turning in the bed upstairs, murmuring into her pillow. I say, "Old Monkey Sucker, he never could keep away from the cask in the hold, maybe that's why ... why it hap-pened. Maybe if you don't drink too much."

"No," Henry Lee answers me, and his voice is real quiet too. "That wouldn't make sense, Ben. I drink salt wine every day. A lot of it."

He's always got a flask of the creature somewhere about him, true enough, and you won't see him go too long without his drop. But there's no sign of any change, not in his face, nor in his skin, nor his teeth—and that last time Monkey Sucker said "water" I could see his teeth had got all sprawled out-like, couldn't hardly close his mouth. But Henry Lee just went on looking like Henry Lee, except a little bit grayer, a bit wearier, a bit more pulled-down, like, the way quitting the sea will do to you. No merror borning there, not that I could see.

"Well, then," says I, "it's not the amount of wine. But it is the wine. Tell me that's not so, and I'll believe you, Henry Lee. I will."

Because I never knew him lie to me. Might take his time getting around to telling me some things, but he wouldn't never lie outright. But he just shook his head again, and looked down, and he heaved a sigh sounded more like a death rattle. Says, "It could be. It could be. I don't know, Ben."

"You know," I says. "How long?" He don't answer, don't say nowt for a while—he just turns and turns in a little tight circle, this way and that, like

a bear at a baiting. Finally he goes on, mumbling now, like he'd as soon I didn't hear. "The Tagus, last year, that time I took Julia Caterina to Lisbon. A man on the riverbank, he just *tumbled* ... I didn't get a really good look, I couldn't be sure what I was seeing, I swear, Ben." I can't make no sound. Henry Lee grabs me hands, wrings them between his until they hurt. "Ben, it's like you said, maybe Gorblimey didn't know himself—"

I pull me hands free, and for a minute I have to close me eyes, 'acos if I was on a ship I'd be seasick. I hear meself saying, "Maybe he didn't. But we do. We know now."

"No, we don't! It still mightn't be the wine—it could be any number of things." He takes a deep, deep breath, plunges on. "Even if—even if that's so, obviously it's *just a few, a very few*, not one in a thousand, if even ... I mean, you don't see it happening everywhere, it's just—it's like the way some folk can't abide shellfish, the way cheese gripes your gut, Ben, every time. It's got to be so with the salt wine."

"Even one," I says. It catches in me throat and comes out a whisper, so I can't tell if he's heard. We stand there, looking at each other, like we're waiting to be introduced. Henry Lee reaches for me hand again, but I step away. Henry Lee starts to say *summat*, but then he don't. There's blood in me mouth, I can taste it.

"I done bad things, Henry Lee," I says at last. "I know where I'm going when I go, and none to blame but me. I know who's waiting for me there, too—some nights I see their faces all around the room, plain as I now see you. But in me life I never done nothing, *nothing* ... I got to get out of your house, Henry Lee."

And I'm for the door, because I can't look at him no more. He calls after me—once, twice—and I think he's bound sure to try and drag me back, maybe to gull me into seeing things his way, maybe just not to be alone. But he don't, and I walk on home along the seafront, a deal slower than I came. And when I get there—it were a plain little house, nobbut the one servant, and him not living in, because I can't abide folk around me when I rise—when I got there, I drank meself to sleep with me whole stock of good Christian rum. And in the morning I went to see Henry Lee's lawyer—*our* lawyer—Portygee-Goan, he were, name of Andres Furtado, near enough—and I started working an old fool name of Ben Hazeltine loose from the salt wine business. It took me some while.

Cost me a few bob, too, I don't mind saying. We'd made an agreement long back, Henry Lee and me, that if ever I wanted to sell me forty per-cent, he'd have to buy me out, will-he, nil-he. But I didn't want no more of that salt wine money—couldn't swallow the notion, no more than I could have swallowed a single mouthful of the stuff ever again after that second time.

So by and by, all what you call the legalities was taken care of, and there was I, on the beach again, in a manner of speaking. But at least I'd saved a bit—wouldn't last forever, but leastways I could bide me time finding other work, and not before the mast, neither. Too old to climb the rigging, too used to proper dining to go back to cooking in burned pots and rusty

pannikins in some Grand Banks trawler's galley—aye, and far too fast-set in me ways of doing things to be taking orders from no captain hadn't seen what I've seen in this world. "Best bide ashore awhile, Ben Hazeltine," I says to meself, "and see who might be needing what you yet can do. There'll be someone," I says, "as there always is," and I'd believe it, too, days on end. But I'd been used to a lot of things regular, not only me meals. Henry Lee, he were one of them, him and his bloody salt wine. Not that I'd have gone back working for the fool—over the side meself first, and I can't swim no better than poor old Monkey Sucker. But still.

So when Henry Lee's young wife shows up at me door, all by herself, no husband, no servants, just her parasol and a whole great snowy spill of lace down her front, I asked her in like she were me long-lost baby sister. We weren't close, didn't know each other much past the salon and the dining room, but she were pretty and sweet, and I liked her the best I could. Like I tried to tell Henry Lee, I don't belong in the same room with no lady. Even when it's me own room.

Any road, she comes in, and she sat down, and she says, "Mr. Ben, my husband, he miss you very much." Never knew a woman quicker off the mark and to the point than little Mrs. Julia Caterina Five-other-names Lee. I can still see her, sitting in me best company chair, with her little fan and her hands in her lap, and that bit of a smile that she could never quite hide. Henry Lee said it were a nervous thing with her mouth, and that she were shamed by it, but I don't know.

"We're old partners, him and me," I answers her. "We was sailors together when we was young. But I'm done working with him, no point in pretending otherwise. You're wasting your time, ma'am, I have to tell you. He shouldn't ought to have sent you here."

"Oh, he did not sent me," she says quickly. "I come—how is it?—on my ownsome? And no, I do not imagine you to come back for him, I would not ask you such a thing, not for him. But you ... I think for you this would be good." I gawk at her, and she smiles a real smile now. She says, "You come to us alone—no friend, no woman, never. I think you are lonely."

Not in me life. Nobody in me *life* has ever spoke that word about me. Nobody. Not me, not nobody, never. I can't do nothing but sit there and gawp. She goes on, "He has not many friends either, my Enrique. You, me—maybe one of my brothers, maybe the *abogao*, the lawyer. Not so many, eh?" And she puts out her hands toward me, a little way. Not for me to take them—more like giving me summat. She says, "I do not know what he have done to make you angry. So bad?"

I can't talk—it ain't in me just then, looking at those hands, at her face. I nod, that's all.

No tears, no begging, no trying to talk me round. She just nods her-self, and gets up, and I escort her out to where her coachman's waiting. Settling back inside, she holds out one hand, but this time it's formal, it's what nobby Portygee ladies do. I kissed her mother's hand at the wedding, so I've got the trick of it—more like a breath, it is, more like you're smelling a flower. For half a minute, less, we're looking straight into each other's

eyes, and I see the sadness. Maybe for Henry Lee, maybe for me—I never did know. Maybe it weren't never there.

But afterwards I couldn't stop thinking about her. I don't mean her, not like that, wouldn't have occurred to me. I mean what she said, and the way she looked at me, and her coming to see me by herself, which you won't never see no Portygee lady doing, high nor low. And saying that thing about me being lonely—true or not ain't the point. It were her *say-ing* it, and how I felt to hear her. I plain wanted to hear her again, is all.

But I didn't. It would have meant seeing Henry Lee, and I weren't no way up to that. I talked to him in me head every time I saw one or t'other of our ships slipping slow out of the harbor in the morning sun, sails fill-ing and the company pennant snapping atop the mizzenmast. And her hold full of poison. I had time enough on me hands to spend with sail-ors ashore, and shillings enough to buy another round of what's-your-fancy, and questions enough to keep them talking and me mind unset-tled. Because most of them hadn't noticed nothing—no shipmates turn-ing, no buyers swimming out to sea, no changelings whispering to them from the dark water. But there was always a couple, two or even three who'd seen *summat* they'd as soon not have seen, and who'd have to down more than a few jars of the best before they'd speak about it even to each other. Aye, I knew *that* feeling, none better.

They wasn't all off our ships, neither. Velha were still a fair-sized port then, not like it is now, and there was traders and packets and merchant-men in from everywhere, big and small. I were down the harbor pretty regular, any road, sniffing after work—shaming, me age, but there you are—and I talked with whoever'd stay for it, officers and foremast hands alike. Near as I could work it out, Henry Lee were right, in his way—however much of the salt wine were going down however many throats all over the world, couldn't be more than almost nobody affected beyond waking next day with a bad case of the whips and jingles. Like he'd said to me, just a few, a very few, and what difference to old Ben Hazeltine? No lookout of mine no more, I were clear out of that whole clamjamfry altogether, and nobody in the world could say I weren't. Not one single soul in the world.

Only I'd been in it, you see. Right up to me whiskers in it, year on year—grown old in it, I had. Call it regret, call it guilt, call it what you like, all I knew was I'd sleep on straw in the workhouse and live on slops and sermons before I'd knock on Henry Lee's door again. Even to have her look at me one more time, the way she looked in me house, in me best chair. I've made few promises in me life, and kept less, but I made that one then, made it to meself. Suppose you could call it a vow, like, if that suits you.

And I kept that one. It weren't easy, whiles, what with me not finding nobbut portering to do, or might be pushing a barrow for a day or two, but I held to that vow right up to the day when one of Henry Lee's men come to say his master were in greatest need of me—put it just like that, "greatest need"—and would I please come right away, *please*. Tell the truth, I mightn't have come for Henry Lee himself, but that servant, try-ing to be so calm and proper, with his eyes so frantic ... Goanese Konkany, he were, name of Gopi.



I didn't run there, like I'd last done—didn't even ride in the carriage he'd sent for me. I walked, and I took me own time about it, too, and I thought on just what I'd say, and what he'd do when I said it, and what I'd do then. And before I knew, I were standing on the steps of that fine house, with no butler waiting but Henry Lee himself, with both hands out to drag me inside. "Ben," he keeps saying, "ah, Ben, Ben, Ben." Like Monkey Sucker again, saying *Mr. Hazeltine, Mr. Hazeltine*, over and over.

He looked old, Henry Lee did. Hair gone gray—face slumped in like he'd lost all his teeth at once—shoulders bent to break your heart, the way you'd think he'd been stooping in a Welsh coal mine all his life. And the blue eyes of him ... I only seen such eyes one time before, on a donkey that knew it were dying, and just wanted it over with. All I could think to say were, "You shouldn't never have left the sea, Henry Lee—not never." But I didn't say it.

He turned away and started up that grand long stair up to the second floor and the bedrooms, with his footsteps sounding like clods falling on a coffin. And I followed after, wishing the stair'd never end, but keep us climbing on and on for always, never getting where we had to go, and I wished I'd never left the sea neither.

I smelled it while we was still on the stair. It ain't a *bad* smell, con-sidering: it's cold and clean, like the wind off Newfoundland or when you're just entering the Kattegat, bound for Copenhagen. Aye ... aye, you could say it's a fishy smell, too, if you care to, which I don't. I'd smelled it before that day, and I've smelled it since, but I don't never smell it without thinking about her, *Senora* Julia Caterina Five-names Lee, Missus Henry Lee. Without seeing her there in the big bed.

He'd drawn every curtain, so you had to stand blind and blinking for a few minutes, till your eyes got used to the dark. She were lying under a down quilt—me wedding gift to the bride, Hindoo lady up in Ponda sewed it for me—but just as we came in she shrugged it off, and you could see her bare as a babby to the waist. Henry Lee, he rushes forward to pull the quilt back up, but she turns her head to look up at him, and he stops where he stands. She makes a queer little sound—hear it outside your window at night, you'd think it were a cat wanting in.

"She can talk still," says Henry Lee, desperate-like, turning to me. "She was talking this morning." I stare into Julia Caterina's pretty brown eyes—huge now, and steady going all greeny-black—and I want to tell Henry Lee, oh, she'll talk all right, no fear. Mermaids *chatter*, believe me—talk both your lugs off, they will, you give them the chance. Mermaids gets lonely.

"She drank so *little*," Henry Lee keeps saying. "She didn't really like any wine, French or Portuguese, or ... ours. She only drank it to be polite, when we had guests. Because it was our business, after all. She understood about business." I look down at the quilt where it's covering her lower parts, and I look back at Henry Lee, and he shakes his head. "No, not yet," he whispers. *No tail yet*, is what he meant—*she's still got legs*—but he couldn't say it, no more than me. Julia Caterina reaches up for him, and he

sits by her on the bed and kisses both her hands. I can just see the half-circle outlines beginning just below her boobies, very faint against the pale skin. *Scales...*

"How long?" Henry Lee asks, looking down into her face, like he's asking her, not me.

"You'd know better than me," I tells him straight. "I only seen one poor sailor, maybe cooked halfway. And no women."

Henry Lee closes his eyes. "I never..." I can't hardly hear him. He says, "I never ... only that one time on the river, in the dark. I never saw."

"Aye, made sure of that didn't you?" I says. "You'll know next time."

He does look at me then, and his mouth makes one silent word—*don't*. After a bit he gets so he can breathe out, "Aren't I being punished enough?"

"Not nearly," I says. But Julia Caterina makes that sound again, and all on a sudden I'm so rotten sorry for her and Henry Lee I can't barely speak words meself. Nowt to do but rest me hand on his shoulder, while he sits there by his wife, and her *turning* under his own hands. Time we leave that sea-smelling room, it's dark outside, same as in.

And I didn't stir out of that house for the next nineteen days. Seems longer to me betimes, remembering—shorter too, other times, short as loving a wall and a barmaid—but nineteen days it were, with all the curtains drawn, every servant long fled, bar Gopi, him who'd come for me. That one, he stayed right along, went on shopping and cooking and sweeping; and if the smell and the closed rooms and us whispering up and down the stair—aye, and the sounds Henry Lee made alone in the night—if it all ever frightened him, he never said. A good man.

Like I figured, she never lost speech. I'd hear them talking hours on end, her and Henry Lee—always in the Portygee, of course, so's I couldn't make out none of it, which was good. Weren't for me to know what Henry Lee was saying to his wife, and her changing into a mer-maid along of him getting rich. He tried to tell me some of their talk, but I didn't want to hear it then, and I've forgot it all now—made bleeding sure of *that*. I already know enough as I shouldn't, ta ever so.

Nineteen days. Nineteen mornings rising with me head so full of that sea-smell—stronger every day—I couldn't hardly swallow nowt but maybe porridge, couldn't never drink nowt but water. Nineteen nights lying awake hour on hour in one of the servants' garrets—I put meself there, 'acos I don't dream in them little cubbies the way I do in big echoey rooms such as Henry Lee had for his guests. I don't like dreaming, to this day I don't, and I liked it less then. Never closed me eyes until I had to, in that dark house.

Seventeenth night ... seventeenth night, I've just finally gotten to sleep when Henry Lee wakes me, shaking me like the house is afire. I come up fighting and cursing—can't help it, always been that way—and I welt him a

rouser on the earhole, but he drags me out of the bed and bundles me down to their room with a blanket around me shoulders. I keep pull-ing away from him, 'acos I know what I'm going to see, but he won't let go. His blue eyes look like he's been crying blood.

He'd covered her with every damp towel and rag in the house, but she'd thrown them all off ... and there it is, there, laying out on the sheets that Henry Lee changes with his own hands every day, and Gopi takes to the *dhobi-wallah* for washing. There it is.

Everything's gone. Legs, feet, belly, all of it, *everything*, gone as though there'd never been nothing below her waist but that tail, scales flickering and glittering like wet emeralds in the candlelight. Look at it one way, it's a wonderful thing, that tail. It's the longest part of a mermaid or a mer-row, and even when it's not moving at all, like hers wasn't just then, I swear you can see it *breathing* by itself, if you stand still and look close. In and out, slow, only a little, but you can see. It's them and it's *not* them, and that's all I'm going to say.

Now and then she'd twitch it a bit, flip the finny end some—getting used to it, like, having a tail. Each time she did that, Henry Lee'd draw his breath sharp, but all he said to me as we stood by the bed, he said, "It's made her more beautiful, Ben, hasn't it?" And it had that. She'd always had a good face, Julia Caterina, but the change had shaped it over, same as it had shaped her body. There was a wildness mixed in with the old sweetness now—mermaids is animals, some ways—and it had turned her, *whetted* her, into summat didn't have no end to how beautiful it could be. I told you early on, they ain't all beautiful, but even the ugly ones ... see now, people got ends, people got *limits*—mermaids don't. Mermaids got no limits, except the sea.

She said his name, and her voice were different too—higher, yes, but mainly *clearer*, like all the clouds had blown off it. If that voice called for you, even soft, you'd hear it a long way. Henry Lee picked her up in his arms and put his cheek against hers, and she held onto him, and that tail tried to hold him too, bumping hard against his legs. I thought to slip out of there unnoticed, me and me blanket, but then Henry Lee said, quiet-like, "We could ... I suppose we could put her in the water tonight, couldn't we, Ben?"

Well, I turned round on that fast, telling him, "Not near!" I pointed at the three double lines on both sides of her neck, so faint they were, still barely visible in her skin. "The gill slits ain't opened yet—drop her in a bathtub, she'd likely drown. Happen they might never open, I don't know. I'm telling you straight, I never seen this—I don't *know*!"

She looked at me then, and she smiled a little, but it weren't her smile. I leaned closer, and she said in English, so softly Henry Lee didn't hear, "Unbind my hair."

They don't all have long golden hair, that's just nursery talk. I seen one off Porto Rico had a mane red as sunset clouds, and I seen a fair old lot with thick dark hair like Julia Caterina's. But I never touched none of them

before. It weren't me place to touch her neither, and Henry Lee standing by, too, but I done it anyway, like it were the hair asking me to do it, and not her. First twitch, it all come right down over me hands, ripe and heavy and *hot*—hot like I'd spilled cooking oil on meself, the way it clings and keeps burning, and water makes it worse. Truth, for a min-ute I thought me hands *was* ablaze—seemed like I could see them burn-ing like fireships through that black swirly tangle wouldn't let them go. I yelled out then—I ain't shamed none to admit it, I know what I felt—and I snatched me hands right back, and of course there weren't a mark on them. And I looked into her eyes, and they was green and gray and green again, like the salt wine, and she laughed. She knew I were frightened and hurting, and she laughed and laughed.

I thought there were nothing left of her then—all gone, the little Portygee woman who'd sat in me chair and said something nobody else never said to me before. But then the eyes was hers again, all wide with fear and love, and she reached out for Henry Lee like she really were drowning. Aye, that were the worst of it, some way, those last two days, 'acos of one minute she'd be hissing like a cat, did he try to touch her or pet her, flopping away from him, the way you'd have thought he were her worst enemy in the world. Next minute, curled small in his arms, trembling all over, weeping dry-eyed, the way mermaids do, and him sing-ing low to her in Portygee, sounded like nursery rhymes. Never saw him blubbing himself, not one tear.

She didn't stay in the bed much no more, but managed to get around the room using her arms and her tail—practicing-like, you see. Wouldn't eat nothing, no matter Henry Lee cozened her with the freshest fish and crab, mussels just out of the sea. Sometimes at first she'd take a little water, but by and by she'd show her teeth and knock the cup out of his hand. Mermaids don't drink, no more nor fish do.

They don't sleep, neither—not what you'd call sleeping—so there'd be one of us always by her, him or me, for fear she'd do herself a mischief. We wasn't doing much sleeping then ourselves, by then, so often enough we'd find ourselves side by side, not talking, just watching her while she watched the sea through the window and the moon ripened in the trees. The one time we ever did talk about it, he said to me, "You were right, Ben. I haven't been punished nearly enough for what I've done."

"Some get punished too much," I says, "and some not at all. Don't seem to make much difference, near as I can tell."

Henry Lee shakes his head. "You got out the moment you knew we might have harmed even one person. I stayed on. I'll never be quits for this, Ben."

I don't have no answer, except to tell him about a thing I did long ago that I'm still being punished for meself. I'd never told nobody before, and I'm not about to tell you now. I just did it to maybe help Henry Lee a lit-tle, which it didn't. He patted me back and squeezed me shoulder a little bit, but he didn't say no more, and nor did I. We sat together and watched Julia Caterina in the moonlight.

Come that nineteenth night, the moon rose full to bursting, big and bright and yellow as day, with one or two red streaks, like an egg gone bad, laying down a wrinkly-gold path you could have walked on to the horizon ... or swum down, as the case might be. Julia Caterina went wild at the sight, beating at the window the way you'd have thought she were a moth trying to get to the candle. It come to me, she'd waited for this moon the same way the turtles wait to come ashore and lay their eggs in the light—the way those tiny fish I disremember flood over the beaches at high tide, millions of them, got to get those eggs buried *fast*, before the next wave sweeps them back out to sea. Now it were like the moon were waiting for her, and she knew the way there.

"Not yet," Henry Lee says, desperate-like, "not yet—*they've* not..." He didn't finish, but I knew he were talking about the pale lines on her neck, darker every day, but still not opened into proper gill slits. But right as he spoke, right then, those same lines swelled and split and flared red, and that sudden, they was there, making her more a fish than the tail ever could, because now she didn't need the land at all, or the air. Aye, now she could stay under water all the time, if she wanted. She were ready for the sea, and she knew it, no more to say.

Henry Lee carried her in his arms all the way down from his grand house—*their* house until two nights ago—to the water's edge, nobody to see nowt, just a couple of fishing boats anchored offshore. A dugout canoe, too, which you still used to see in them days. She wriggled out of his arms there, turning in the air like a cat, and a little wave splashed up in her face as she landed, making her laugh and splash back with her tail. Henry Lee were drenched right off, top to toe, but you could see he didn't know. Julia Caterina—her as had been Julia Caterina—she swam round and round, rolling and diving and admiring all she could do in the water. There's nothing *fits* the sea like a mermaid—not fish, not seals, dolphins, whales, nothing. There in the moonlight, the sea looked happy to be with her.

I can't swim, like I told you—I just waded in a few steps to watch her playing so. All on a sudden—for all the world like she'd heard a call from somewhere—she did a kind of a swirling cartwheel, gave a couple of hard kicks with that tail, and like *that*, she's away, no goodbye, clear of the shore, leaving her own foxfire trail down the middle of that moon-light path. I thought she were gone then, gone forever, and I didn't waste no time in gawping, but turned to see to Henry Lee. He were standing up to his knees in the water, taking his shirt off.

"Henry Lee," I says. "Henry Lee, what the Christ you doing?" He don't even look over at me, but throws the shirt back toward the shore and starts unbuttoning his trews. Bought from the only bespoke gentlemen's tailor in Velha Goa, those pants, still cost you half what you'd pay in Lisbon. Henry Lee just drops them in the water. Goes to work getting rid of his smallclothes, kicking off his soaked shoes, while I'm yapping at him about catching cold, pneumonia. Henry Lee smiles at me. Still got most all his teeth, which even the Portygee nobbs can't say they do, most of them. He says, "She'll be lonely out there."

I said summat, must have. I don't recall what it were. Standing there

naked, Henry Lee says, "She'll need me, Ben."

"She's got all she needs," I says. "You can't go after her."

"I promised I'd make it up to her," he says. "What I did. But there's no way, Ben, there's no way."

He moves on past me, walking straight ahead, water rising steady. I stumble and scramble in front of him, afeared as I can be, but he's not getting by. "You can't make it up," I tells him. "Some things, you can't ever make up—you live with them, that's all. That's the best you can do." He's taller by a head, but I'm bigger, wider. He's not getting by.

Henry Lee stops walking out toward the deep. Confused-like, shaking his head some, starts to say me name ... then he looks over me shoulder and his eyes go wide, with the moon in them. "She's there," he whispers, "she came back for me. There, right *there*." And he points, straining on his toes like a nipper sees the Dutch-biscuit man coming down the street.

I turn me head, just for an instant, just to see where he's pointing. Summat glimmers in the shadow of the dugout, diving in and out of the moonlight, and maybe it's a dolphin, and maybe it's Henry Lee's wife, turning for one last look at her poor husband who'd driven both of their lives on the rocks. Didn't know then, don't know now. All I'm sure of is, the next minute I'm sitting on me arse in water up to me chin, and Henry Lee's past me and swimming straight for that glimmer—long, raking Devonshire strokes, looking like he could go on forever if he had to. And bright as the night was, I lost sight of him—and her too, it, whatever it were—before he'd reached that boat. Bawled for him till me voice went—even tried to go after him in the dugout—but he were gone. They were gone.

His body floated in next afternoon. Gopi found it, sloshing about in the shallows.

Her family turned over every bit of ground around that house of Henry Lee's, looking for where he'd buried her. I'm dead sure they believe to this day that he killed Julia Caterina and then drowned himself, out of remorse or some such. They was polite as pie whenever we met, no matter they couldn't never stand one solitary thing about me—but after she disappeared only times I saw them was at a *feria*, where they'd always cut me dead. I didn't take it personal.

The will left stock and business to the family, but left both ships to me. I sold one of them for enough money to get meself to Buenos Aires, like I'd been wanting, and start up in the freighting trade, convoying every-thing from pianos to salt beef, rum to birdseed, tea to railroad ties ... what-ever you might want moved from *here* to *there*. Got two young partners do most of the real work these days, but I still go along with a shipment, times, just to play I'm still a foremast hand—plain Able-bodied Seaman, same as Henry Lee. The way it was when we didn't know what he died knowing. What I'll die knowing.

He left me the recipe for salt wine, too. I burned it. I'd wanted to buy up

the stock and pour every bottle into the sea—giving it back to the merrows, you could say—but the family wouldn't sell, not to me. Heard they sold it to a German dealer, right after I left Goa, and he took it all home to Berlin with him. Couldn't say, meself.

I seen her a time or two since. Once off the Hebrides—leastways, I'm near about sure it was her—and once in the Bay of Biscay. That time she came right up to the ship, calling to me by name, quiet-like. She hung about most of the night, calling, but I never went to the rail, 'acos I couldn't think of nothing to say.

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