

Distant Seas

by
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Lying in bed, Captain Huygens turns restlessly as a single sharp note reverberates in his sleep like a tolling bell. In his dream it seems a signal, calling him from the murky, swirling waters in which he drifts, filling him with an unexpected buoyancy. Slowly he begins to rise, past the groping tendrils of bottom weeds which, in the utter black, feel like the caress of cold fingers running along the exposed skin of hands and face. His ascent continues, through dark as impenetrable as pitch, through waters that flow around him like an icy cloak. He cranes his neck, for the first time seeing a soft, diffused glow far above, and with each passing heartbeat the light grows brighter, the water he slips through warmer. He is pushed ever faster through layers of shadowy green filled with the flecks and blurs that are darting fish; above, his world has become overarched with a rippling azure plain. Layers of increasingly translucent water slip by, and he moves towards the surface of wakefulness, his lungs aching suddenly, as if only now they have remembered their need for oxygen; the ribs in his chest strain against tightly drawn skin, an irresistible desire to open his mouth and drink deeply fills him. He claws at the water, tearing madly to propel himself toward the light, fighting the panic that rises in his throat like a balled fist, that threatens to burst from him in a watery scream, and when he is sure that he can no longer hold it at bay, when it pushes from between his tightly pressed lips, that formless howl, at the same instant he breaks the surface like a shot, gasping and flailing in the blinding light.

Awake at last, Captain Huygens sits amid the tangle of soaked sheets, trembling, a shaft of sunlight cutting the gloom of his cabin and

falling across his bed like a bright cutlass. He closes his eyes and swallows several times, head still reeling from the dream, its fear and confusion supplanted by another greater fear now that he has returned to his senses.

He wonders, *Who am I?*

I am the Captain.

For several minutes he remains where he is, back propped against the headboard. Then, feeling a sudden sense of urgency, he swings himself over the edge of the bed and nearly falls as his legs buckle beneath his weight. He clutches the bedframe, steadies himself, and in a moment he can feel his strength returning, though his dream has left him weaker than he had believed. Moving cautiously, he makes his way to the foot of the bed where clothes -- *his* clothes, he realizes -- have been laid out on top of his sea chest; slowly, he begins dressing, pulling on his breeches and silk shirt, hands still shaking, making it difficult to manage the buttons. The effort required to get his boots on taxes his strength to such a degree that he must pause to collect himself afterwards. Finally, he walks, more or less steadily, to the bureau where his black felt tricorne sits. He places it squarely on his head and, looking up, catches a glimpse of himself in the gilt framed glass.

A stranger regards him from the mirror with startlement, a man who wears his clothes yet has a thin, bloodless face, with sunken, watery eyes and parched lips. He blinks, and the figure in the mirror apes him. Closing his eyes, he is once again aware of the thumping of his heart in his ribcage, the rubbery feeling of his legs, the lightness of his head.

He wonders: *Have I been ill?*

He has no recollection of being sick, yet when he tries to recall anything of the past few days he cannot: his memories have fled. He is the Captain. This is his ship. But of the last weeks he remembers nothing. And with a sudden sickening lurch in his stomach he realizes he is in possession of only fragments of his past. He concentrates and an assembly of familiar faces float before him, men sitting around a table, engaged in earnest discussion, though he cannot name them; then a memory of a carriage rolling through level countryside, he staring from within as they drive past canals lined with long stemmed tulips whose blossoms sway yellow and red in the breeze; and in France (*Yes, he remembers, France*) a country house filled with music and the soft rustle of long, elegant skirts. Vague impressions and sensations that refuse to coalesce.

A fever, he thinks. I have woken from a feverish dream. It is the effect of the illness. My memories will return. Must return.

And having decided this, he opens his eyes.

He is relieved to see his pallor, still sickly, is not quite as white as he first thought; faint lines of colour are visible in his cheeks, and his eyes now appear clear. Tipping his hat forward so that it will leave his face in shadow, he steps out into the blazing, morning light.

The deck is deserted.

It has the unmistakeable air of abandonment, coils of line and pails of tar lying as if they'd just been dropped; loose carpenter's tools and wood shavings next to a half-made barrel; a large sheet of canvas spread near the mizzen mast, a thick needle piercing it at the base of a jagged tear.

Overhead, the sheets hang limply from their spars beneath a fulgent sun, a sun as bright and hot as any Captain Huygens can remember. He removes his hat and with his sleeve he wipes at the beads of perspiration that have already gathered on his forehead. The light is inescapable, filling the ship, leaving no shadows, dancing in all the recesses of his head.

Captain Huygens walks across the weather deck towards the prow. Climbing the short ladder to the foredeck, he surveys the extent of the ship. From where he stands, the aft deck is partially obscured by the mainsail; but he is certain that it, too, is deserted. Then a thought occurs to him, and, absurd as it is, he cranes his neck and squints into the rigging, half-expecting to see his entire crew, every one of them, perched in the shrouds and ratlines like large, angry crows. But no one is there, and the white sails leave burning after-images that shoot across his vision like stars.

Perhaps they are all below, he thinks, setting out towards the forecabin, determined, if needs be, to check every cabin, compartment and hold on the ship in his methodical, orderly fashion.

Captain Huygens' inspection proves futile. He has found no one. Returning to his cabin, he throws the shutters wide on all the aft windows to permit as much light as possible to enter; while he has searched the sun has risen and its rays cut obliquely through the window and fall on the rough wooden planks of the cabin floor.

In the centre of the room is a heavy, oak table with a single drawer, and it is before this he sits. On its surface lie a brass sextant, several large navigational charts, a cream-coloured book bound in vellum, and a sheaf of curling papers.

Picking up the book, Captain Huygens turns it over as if he were

examining a specimen. Its covers are blank. He places it on the desk and opens it, but there is still nothing to identify its purpose, only an empty white leaf narrowly ruled in black ink. He begins turning pages, but they are all identical, each as empty as the first. When he reaches the last page he closes the book.

He leans back in his chair and opens the drawer. It has been divided into two sections by a thin wooden partition, one narrow that contains two inkwells and a number of quills, the other wider but unused. He places the book into this side, and it fits nicely with just enough room around its edges so that it can be easily lifted out again, and this somehow pleases him, this seeming order. He shuts the drawer.

The charts are of various sizes and types, some imprinted with foreign languages and symbols that make no sense to him. Although he cannot recall how or where he might have acquired each, he is certain that with a little patience he will be able to unlock their secrets, to discern their patterns. Why he knows this he cannot say; but he is firm in his confidence, certain that he has solved far knottier problems in the past. He sorts them in order of size, then moves them to the corner of the desk, placing the sextant atop of the pile.

He examines the loose papers, one after the other, but these confound him. They are covered with detailed diagrams and intricate calculations, and appear to deal with diverse topics from the minutiae of life to the motions of the planets. On the first is a series of sketches of puzzling objects labelled *animalcules*; on the next two pages he finds numerous mathematical notations, a consideration, it seems, of the probability of a dicing game; following this is a detailed rendering of the internal mechanism of a clock driven by a pendulum that travels in a cycloidal arc; finally are a series of astronomical drawings and calculations, geometries of the motion of planets.

All, he notes with some consternation, are in his own distinctive script.

The sun is almost directly overhead, the morning nearly spent. Captain Huygens stands on the aft deck, a lone figure lost in contemplation, his large, expressionless eyes, the colour of the sea.

"*Help!*"

The voice, small and trilling, shatters the Captain's reverie with the abruptness of a stone.

"*Save me!*"

Captain Huygens turns. The sea is an unbroken mirror, and it is not difficult to spot the distant, floundering figure of a boy.

"Ahoy!" he bellows through cupped hands.

The tiny form ceases his struggles, as if the Captain's words have surprised him. Then, he begins to wave a small arm energetically in the direction of the ship. "*Help me!*" he cries with renewed effort.

"I can do nothing for you!" the Captain shouts in reply. "I am alone! You must swim!"

There is moment of silence while the boy treads water, as if weighing the wisdom of the Captain's suggestion; then he strikes out towards the ship, his little arms churning through the water, a steady, unhurried stroke.

"What is your name, lad?"

The boy shrugs. He is round-faced and sleepy-eyed, with full lips and a downturned mouth; wet, curly locks of hair are pasted to his skull. His complexion is ghostly, his lips the fading blue of arctic ice.

The Captain knows this colour, has seen it many times before on the sodden corpses they have dragged from the sea, but never on the living. He shivers despite the stifling heat, then forces these thoughts from his mind. "Do I know you?" he asks, then, feeling embarrassed at the absurdity of his question, says, "Do not be shy. Speak up."

The boy's eyes dart nervously, taking in the ship as if it is all new and frightening to him; he shifts his weight from foot to foot. "I ... I ... I'm not sure."

"Not sure?"

He nods numbly in answer, averting his eyes.

"Your name then. What is your name?"

"I do not know."

The Captain tries to hide his rising exasperation. "Come, come, lad! How can you not remember your own name?"

"I ... I cannot." The boy studies the puddle growing around his bare feet. "I was hoping, sir" he says in a small voice, "you might be able to tell me."

The Captain purses his lips thoughtfully, then clears his throat. "Ah, well, you see, I've been sick. A fever, I think." Withdrawing a handkerchief from his pocket, he dabs at the film of perspiration gathering

on his brow, his hand trembling slightly with the action. "I've just this morning been out of bed. My memory is still a bit muddled, I'm afraid"

"You don't remember either," the boy says, for the first time staring directly at the Captain. "Do you?"

"Your name. Surely you have a name."

The boy furrows his brow in exaggerated concentration, and then his face lights up. "Albert!" he says, beaming. "My name is Albert!"

"Albert," the Captain repeats slowly, as if considering the name.

"Good. Now, perhaps you might tell me how you came to be floundering out there."

The boy's face clouds over, and he averts his eyes. "I ... I do not know," he stammers.

"You've no recollection at all?"

The boy shakes his head sullenly.

"The ship," The Captain's grasps the boy's shoulder. "Does she look familiar? Were you on her before? Can you remember her?"

The boy remains mute. Beneath his fingers the Captain can feel a shudder pass through him. He releases his grip.

"Never mind," the Captain mutters, and clasping his hands behind his back he begins pacing the deck. "It is not important."

For a time neither speaks, the Captain lost in thought while the boy takes in the ship with furtive glances. Then: "The others?"

"What?" The Captain stops pacing, stares at the boy. "What?"

"The others. Where are they?"

"Gone. Jumped ship, perhaps. Likely drowned."

The boy's face blanches; his eyes grow wide with fear.

"A storm," the Captain says quickly, knowing it to be a lie, the ship bearing no evidence of rough weather. But the boy looks hopefully at him, and he continues in a loud voice. "Aye, that must be it. Maybe they were washed overboard. Or perhaps they lost their nerve in a storm and were afraid we'd founder. So they struck out for an island they spotted." He nods thoughtfully. "Perhaps that's what happened to you as well, Albert."

"But I don't remember --"

"Your head. You might have banged your head. Sometimes people forget when they receive a blow to the skull."

Albert chews his lower lip and gazes off into space. Then his eyes narrow. "There's no clouds," he says flatly, staring at the empty sky.

"No," the Captain replies. "You're right, and there's no denying

that. But suppose, now just suppose, that you'd been out there at sea all this time clinging to a barrel or plank, half drowned and out of your mind with fear while the storm passes by then disappears altogether. And later, much later, when you hear my voice, well then you snap out of it."

The boy seems lost in thought. "Yes," he says at last. "Your voice is the first thing I remember."

"That must be it," the Captain says in what he hopes is a hardy voice, clapping Albert stoutly on his back. "Get yourself out of those wet clothes and see if you can find something to eat. When the wind picks up we'll have lots of work between us, I warrant."

"Yes sir," Albert says, venturing a weak smile. He moves towards the companionway that leads beneath the afterdeck and to the officers' quarters.

The Captain watches him for a moment. "Albert," he says quietly, and the boy pauses. "Where are you going?"

Without hesitation he replies, "To my berth, sir."

"And where is that?"

"Why, next to your's, sir."

"To the cabin boy's quarters," Captain Huygens says, staring at Albert, who regards him solemnly. But there is no spark of recognition, no face that comes to mind when he considers those words. "Very well," he says. "Carry on."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The Captain watches Albert disappear into the gloom of the stairway; in his stomach something turns sluggishly, like a small animal awakening. *It is the fever*, he tells himself.

But he no more believes this than the story he has concocted for Albert.

Against the foot of Captain Huygens' bed rests a sea chest of teakwood banded with dark iron; it glows with the patina of age and feels warm, almost alive, beneath the tips of his fingers where they rest lightly on its surface. His initials are carved deeply on its hump-backed lid just above a rusty lock: C. H.

The chest contains bundles of various sizes and shapes wrapped in grey sailcloth and secured with short lengths of packing string. On the very bottom he can see five cylindrical objects, all roughly the length of the chest, on top of which three other packages rest. He selects these topmost and

carries them to his desk.

The first is a tube about the length of his arm and the width of his wrist. He pulls the single string tied around its centre and the cloth falls away to reveal the stepped, brass cylinder of a seafaring spyglass. He extends to its full length -- nearly a meter -- then collapses it, placing it on the corner of his desk.

When he unwraps the second bundle he finds a heavy disc the size of a tea saucer and the thickness of his little finger; lying on his desk, it looks like a giant's coin. It, too, is constructed from brass, and several small, precise holes have been drilled through the metal. *The stars*, he thinks. *It is an instrument to measure the luminosity of the stars – and therefore their distance.* How he knows this he cannot say. He pushes it to the side.

The third parcel contains a rosewood box that is square and a handspan in width, with bevelled corners and a small gold latch. He flips the latch open with his thumb and lifts the lid. It is lined with dark blue velvet both top and bottom, each half being subdivided into a number of pockets that contain glass lenses of varying thickness. He withdraws one holding it by its edges, and peers through it intently; he places it gently on the table, its concave side down so that he won't abrade the surface. He stares at it for a moment. Then, leaving the single lens on the table, he closes the case and pushes his chair back, starting for the trunk to examine the cylinders that lay in its bottom. But before he has taken a step he pauses, looks at the lens again then back to the trunk, suddenly realizing what those long packages must contain.

Captain Huygens strides across the main deck towards Albert. The boy's shouts have drawn him from his cabin to where Albert has been stowing the loose gear littering the weather deck. "There," the boy says in his small, serious voice, pointing up the foremast as the Captain approaches.

Shading his eyes, the Captain scans the webbing of the shroud, and near the lower top gallant, a figure clings to the lines. "So," the Captain says. "We have another."

Albert frowns. "He wasn't there before."

"No, I don't believe he was."

The boy's face is pale; he crosses his arms. "I looked, but it was empty --"

"Perhaps," the Captain says quickly, "We missed him. If he were to be lying along a spar, or curled round the main top, we mightn't have seen

him from the deck. Then he crawled to where he is now. We just missed him, is all.”

Albert opens his mouth as if he is about to say something, then snaps it shut. As they watch the dark form stirs uneasily as if waking from a deep sleep.

Despite the sweltering, mid-afternoon heat the man shivers uncontrollably, as if he is chilled to the bone. He sits, back against the rail with knees drawn up to his chest. The man is of middle height and years; he has long blond hair that curls at his shoulders, framing a narrow face and roman nose. His countenance is pale, his lips tinged with slightest of blues. Beneath his eyes are pronounced circles that give him a contemplative, scholarly air despite his deathly pallor, one that is in some distant way familiar to the Captain.

Where, he wonders, have I seen this man before?

Abruptly an image comes into his head, a memory of long ago, a carriage early in the morning, one other passenger who sits, sullen and withdrawn, in the brocaded interior. It is July.

"Isaac," the Captain says suddenly, the vision vanishing with the words. "Your name is Isaac."

The man stares at him blankly, suspiciously, then nods before he is seized by a violent fit of shaking.

At that moment Albert returns with a blanket, and the Captain suddenly recalls how the boy had first appeared like this man, pale and half-alive; but whatever traces of death he had shown earlier have faded, suffused in a ruddy glow, his eyes now filled with the curiosity of youth.

"Go ahead," the Captain says, and the boy lowers the thick wool blanket carefully over Isaac's shoulders like a shroud.

"You remember nothing?"

After a moment, Isaac shakes his head; he sits hunched low in his seat across the desk from the Captain, the blanket still draped about his shoulders, his mannerisms suggesting fear and caution. From time to time a tremor passes through him then subsides as if he is racked by memories of a bitter cold.

"And do I not look familiar?"

Isaac narrows his eyes and glares at the Captain, his face both melancholy and defiant.

The Captain sighs. He pushes the case of lenses to one side to make room on his crowded desk, then pulls the vellum book, quill and inkwell from his drawer. Opening the book to the first page, he runs his hand down its centre so that it will lie flat. The page already contains two entries he made earlier and, uncapping the inkwell and dipping the quill, he neatly enters Isaac's name on the third line.

When he finishes, he looks up and says, "Now then --" but stops to stare at the other man. Isaac's face has changed, has lost some of its irascible character; his eyes have become lively and piercing, his brow furrowed in concentration as he holds the single lens the Captain had left on the desk. So engrossed is he in his examination that he appears to have forgotten the Captain altogether.

The Captain clears his throat.

Isaac looks startled, then seems to recall himself. He returns the lens to the desk, and nodding towards it says, "Very good work."

Absurdly, the Captain feels a flush of pride. He is about to say "Thank you," when the hollow thump of feet pounding down the corridor makes him pause.

Albert's head pops into the cabin. "Astern!" he shouts breathlessly, leaning through the door, clutching its frame. "There's more astern!"

Rising from his chair, the Captain makes his way to the aft window. Beyond, the sea lies undisturbed in all directions, the ship still becalmed in this unnatural weather. The Captain is puzzled. "I cannot see ..." he begins, then stops, something directly below catching his eye. The sun, having passed its zenith, casts an incipient shadow behind the tail of the ship, and in this gibbous darkness are three unlikely lumps, bodies in the water, clothes mushroomed around them, face down, staring into the depths.

The bodies have been arranged on the deck in an orderly row. All three are bloated, the skin pale white, almost luminescent, in the early afternoon sun. Isaac stands above them; he is sweating profusely from his exertion and his breath comes raggedly, though his countenance is much improved. To the Captain's surprise, he had, with Albert's help, retrieved the corpses. Behind him Albert's head rises above the scuppers as he hauls himself up the last few rungs of the ladder. Using a small launch, they had fished the men from the water, Isaac instructing Albert in a terse voice on how he might use the gaff hook to snare the dead men; with one in tow, Isaac then rowed back to where a looped rope waited beneath the gangway.

Working this rope beneath their arms, he signalled the Captain who then began to crank the windlass about whose barrel the rope wound. Three times the corpses were drawn from the sea in this fashion, bumping and scraping up the side of the *Beagle*, in small, precise jerks, a fall of glittering drops shivering from them with each loud click of the ratchet.

Standing before the bodies now, Captain Huygens observes they wear breeches and plain, white shirts; all are barefoot as is the custom among men before the mast. One is tall and thin, with nordic features and a scar along his cheek; the second has dirty-blond hair cropped close to the skull and a thick white beard; the third is diminutive, with narrow features, swarthy skin and dark curling hair. There are all of a middle age and, by their appearances – soft unformed muscles and smooth, uncalloused skin – seem unlikely sailors. He gazes at them filled with curiosity, and at last asks, “Did you know them?”

But neither Isaac, who leans against the mast, nor the boy, standing at the rail, answer, for both watch as the silence gathers in folds about them, and the dead begin to stir.

It is late in the afternoon, and Captain Huygens climbs the ladder to the foredeck, his small, brass telescope beneath the crook of his arm. Leaning against the rail, he extends it to its full length and, bringing it up to his eye, scans the sea.

For a time he sees nothing.

He swings the glass slowly and precisely from side to side in a wide arc.

Then he finds what he has been looking for: on the horizon, there is a tiny smudge, barely perceptible, and he cannot be sure it is anything more than his imagination. At this distance the shape could be anything really, and he waits patiently, watching it for the better part of an hour as it advances towards them through the dead calm, drawn to them by the tug of a spectral current.

The Captain can descry four bodies slumped in the boat; it is possible there might be others who have slipped beneath the gunwale so that they are hidden. All appear lifeless.

The Captain, proffers his telescope to Isaac. "Secure her," he says, gesturing in the direction of the boat, "as she comes near."

Isaac nods.

"Tie the boat up, but you might as well leave them be until they can

climb aboard themselves."

Isaac, who is already peering through the telescope, says nothing, but the Captain can see his fingers tighten around the slender tube.

"When they are ready, bring them to my cabin."

Leaving Isaac, the Captain makes his way down to the weather deck to examine the three they have pulled from the sea. The two smaller men are still unconscious, and their breathing is ragged and noisy, as if their lungs still suffer some obstruction. Occasionally one or the other coughs, and flat ribbons of water seep from a nose or the corner of a mouth. Their faces look worse than before, their pallid complexions more pronounced for the bit of colour that has crept back. The tall one, however, is awake.

He lays on the deck, his chest rising and falling with regularity, watching everything through wide eyes. He seems to be taking it all in, the empty ship, the unnaturally bright day, the men who lay on either side of him, the Captain.

But his eyes contain no understanding, only confusion and perhaps fear, as if the world in which the Captain stands is illusory, insubstantial. Watching him, the Captain tries to imagine what he is feeling. He is reminded of the large, rolling eyes of a fish, dragged from the cool gloom of the depths into the bright, painful light of day.

In the very bottom of the chest is a package the Captain had earlier overlooked. It contains a small silver flute.

Captain Huygens sits on the edge of his bed, the flute cradled in his hand, remembering. He played in the centre of well appointed room, a table off to the side cluttered with drawings and calculations, surrounded by a ring of serious faces. They are ghosts of remembrances, insubstantial figures, these men. Friend's, he realizes all at once, of his father's. Their names come to him: Mersenne, Diodati, Schooten, Descartes. He is there, with his flute, a child no more than Albert's age, playing. It is a night like many others, and this is his father's house in Voorburg near the Hague.

The sun is an enormous, watery eye on the horizon.

Throughout the afternoon and into the evening the men have continued to come to before the Captain in twos and threes. They have been discovered in previously unoccupied cabins, in empty barrels in the holds, clinging fearfully to the masts, confused and tangled in spare sails and lines, struggling in the sea

The Captain sits behind his desk, entering the names of each of the

crew members in the ledger as they are brought before him. They are by turns pale, shivering, quiet, flushed with anger, fearful, incoherent, lucid. Some of the names are familiar as he carefully inks them, and he feels that he should know them, though the fragments of recollection are for the most part still lost in a swirling, uncertain fog.

Dipping his quill in the ink well, he continues to write as they file past him. Their appearances are varied, tall and short, broad and thin, dark and light, as if they've been drawn from the furthest corners of the earth. Many speak in strange tongues and accents, but he manages, through words and gestures, to make them understand that it is their names he desires.

The Captain has discovered that he has an ear for languages, and as he listens to them, he understands, at least in part, the English, French, Dutch, Flemish, German, Italian and Latin they speak, the urgent questions framed in foreign languages they ask him.

But he does not answer.

Instead he continues to enter names, forty-two per page, and after several leafs are filled, he pauses to retrieve a tinder box and candle from the top his dresser so that he might chase back the shadows that have gathered like silent watchers in the corners of the room.

It is night, and Captain Huygens sits on a three-legged stool on the afterdeck, elbows resting on knees, waiting patiently. To his side, Isaac kneels, busily assembling the series of tubes that had lain in the bottom of the chest, fitting the lenses in each section.

On a small table the Captain has placed his sextant, a quill, an inkwell, and several blank sheets of paper. Occasionally he leans forward and sketches a rough figure or makes a note. His crew mills about on the weather deck, their voices a soft murmur in the growing darkness, gathering in knots to watch the sky. They seem, on the whole, to have adjusted remarkably well, although there is something subdued in their manner and speech. From time to time they glance in his direction as if for reassurance, and when he notices these movements he nods curtly in response.

The Captain's memory is still uncertain and cloudy, but he is convinced that it is only a matter of time before he will remember everything clearly, before the brief flashes and snatches of images will come together to give him back his past.

The Captain has ordered the sails furled so that they might have an unobstructed view of the sky in all directions. Stars, brighter than any he has

ever seen, shimmer in the heavens. They glitter with an unaccustomed brilliance and clarity that pierce his heart like the tip of a diamond knife.

"Captain."

He turns. Albert, who stands near the tiller, points to the rising moon.

It is large and luminous, its surface mottled with shades of green and brown and blue. Clouds, small and white and perfect, scud across its surface, obscuring its tiny continents.

And when it is followed, a short time later, by a second moon whose surface ripples like a burning, silver sea, Captain Huygens feels no fear; rather, his heart soars with joy and wonder, that there still remain so many worlds he, a traveller from a distant country, might yet see.