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About 4,700 words

Bait

by David Sakmyster

In a surge of incandescent bubbles and an explosion of seaweed and muck, Trent Michaels ascended through the icy water. He moved as an angel of mercy, carrying in his neoprene-clad arms the pale, partially devoured body while battalions of armored fish raced along in his wake.

Struggling to keep up, my heart pounding with excitement, I kicked frantically after my partner's twisting form. The pressure change suddenly hit me and checked my ascent. Somehow, though, Trent was unaffected – rising effortlessly like a tireless jellyfish.

Three nights ago a witness had seen someone dump a body out in the Sound just north of Muskeget Island; and on Wednesday afternoon the call had come to our Nantucket dive shop, interrupting Trent and I as we just started in on our second basket of freshly shucked oysters. "The landlocked boys in blue

need a little aquatic help," Trent said, grinning at me when he hung up the phone. A dozen empty shells later, we set off.

And now we had succeeded, no doubt to Lieutenant Miles' grudging satisfaction. When I finally made it up, I found Trent floating at the surface in his purple vest and pastel-green hood, effortlessly supporting his catch. My ears popped clear, and bitter seawater trickled down my throat. The sky grudgingly acknowledged my return but seemed to view our discovery cautiously, frowning through layers of shaded gray clouds.

"'Bout time, Jack," Trent said over the waves' feeble assaults. "Me and the stiff here were running out of conversation topics. Decided to try a little synchronized swimming number I've always dreamed about."

Trent stared deeply at the pale face, and I had the sudden image of a wet Shakespearean actor gazing at a skull. And of course, Trent didn't disappoint, quoting, as he so enjoyed, from some literary source: "here is death in this business – a speechlessly quick, chaotic bundling of a man into Eternity."

"Huh?"

"We are too much like oysters observing the sun through the water, and thinking that thick water the thinnest of air."

I groaned. Oysters again. "Okay, I'll play 'Name that Quote'. Shaw?"

"Close, but no oyster."

"Damn," I said, cursing my limitations. An enviable four-year English Lit degree pissed away so I could teach scuba-diving

and trap lobsters. "I give up."

He completed another spin of his one-sided waltz, then faced the oncoming boat. "Say it with me, Jack - 'three cheers for Nantucket!'"

I blinked. "Oh. Of course, good old Melville. Moby Dick."

"Bingo. Always loved Ishmael's little existential insights. But look, here comes the good Lieutenant Miles now."

The boat eased up close, the motor sputtering. The Lieutenant stood in front, wearing his profession's standard trench coat. Two other men in the boat quickly donned latex gloves, turned their Red Sox caps on backwards, and leaned over to help lift our catch onto deck.

"Good work," Miles said when we had pulled ourselves up over the side. He promptly stepped back and grimaced as the corpse flopped unceremoniously into the open bodybag.

One of the men grunted as he fit the body inside and struggled with the zipper. I tried to look away from those alluring eye sockets, and stared instead at the corpse's chewed fingers - the bones exposed where the ripped flesh dangled free.

"Hang in there," whispered Trent, who then raised his voice. "Our worthy law officials have the matter in hand. I'm sure the good Inspector here has it all figured out. Knows the perpetrator, the motive, and all those pesky hows and whys."

Miles craned his neck; he loosened his collar. "This is a police investigation. You've done your part, let us do ours."

"Sure." Trent sighed, tossing his mask up and catching it

as he gazed out over the Sound towards the hazy shoreline. "So... I'm sure it's just overkill if I mention that our internally ravaged friend here wasn't actually dumped at this spot."

Miles held his head as if nursing a migraine. "What?"

Extending his left hand, still dripping, Trent pointed. "Probably out there aways, several miles around the southern edge. The rope binding his feet to something - probably a cinder block - was chewed through, but not before he was lunched on by, I'd venture, a swarm of hungry Bluefish."

One of the Red Sox hat men tugged on the Lieutenant's sleeve. "May be right, sir. See these here bites? Not Bass, or Albacore. Teeth too small."

"So?" said the Lieutenant. "I've caught Bluefish all over Nantucket's waters."

"Good for you," Trent said. "But schools, the really large numbers, don't stray into these waters. Trust me, I've drunk with enough fishermen to know. Bluefish?" he thumbed over his shoulder. "They're over there."

The Lieutenant's eyes glazed over as he frowned. "Fine. We get it - the body drifted."

"Kinda odd," Trent blurted, "don't you think? His muscles?"

"What about 'em?"

Trent made a sudden lunge and poked at the corpse's shoulder. "Nice and soft, still, even after three days. What do you make of that?"

The one I presumed was the coroner shrugged. "Maybe a side-

effect of the cold saline bath he's been taking."

Trent gave a mock-clap. "You get points for imagery, doc, but... I really believe that if he were still able to talk, old Bluefish bait here would have a slightly different spin on things."

"Well, he can't talk," grumbled the Lieutenant, rising. "Mac, start the engines and take us back to Hyannis. We'll drop these two off and—"

"Pay us," Trent said with a wide smile.

"—Write them a voucher, then bring our victim to the morgue for a full autopsy."

"—Where," Trent added excitedly, "you'll be astonished to find you have a three-day old corpse who's been struggling and fighting for at least seventy of those seventy-six hours."

The knots in my stomach unraveled, and I joined the others in staring at Trent, open-mouthed. He fumbled with the zipper at the back of his suit. "Yes. Underwater. Alive — or at least, animated. Don't know how else to explain it, but this stiff's not as stiff or as dead as you might guess."

I inched away from the pale feet and the rope-burned ankles.

"And before you throw me off this boat, let me tell you I've heard of something just as nuts." Trent poked me in the ribs.

"Actually, you tell them, Jack. About the walrus."

Oh God. "That was just one-eared Al and his drunken stories after a few at McGinnity's."

It took Lieutenant Miles over nine frustrated tries to start

the flooded motor, and in that time Trent made me continue. So I told them, reciting the whole thing about Al Mozer finding this walrus washed up behind his dock, and how he tried to roll it back in the water and how it suddenly snapped and tried to take him with it. And then... how Al noticed the walrus had been gutted – insides mostly gone, like someone had taken a giant ice cream scoop to its belly. Al had also noticed a piece of rope tied to its fin. He went screaming back to the garage, returned with a shotgun, and then blew the thing to pieces.

"Well told," Trent said as the motor roared to life and drowned our voices.

For the entire ride back to port, the Lieutenant and the other two stared at us emptily, like we were at best only wisps of steam, and at worst – total madmen.

###

"Are we diving today?" I asked Trent, scratching my head and trying to piece together what day or even month, this was. It had been a rough night at McGinnity's, with me drinking a shot of something foul every time the memory of that gutted corpse lurched into my mind.

I stumbled along the pier and squinted against the arrival of a surprisingly bright day for late spring. "Nope," Trent shouted back as he trotted towards a lonely gull on the first post. Over a dozen boats were moored against the pier, and a couple fishing waifs had just departed. The overpowering essence of dying fish and ripe seaweed made my stomach even queasier.

"Just doing a little research," he said. "You know I can't let this rest. As Aristotle says..."

I tuned out what Aristotle said, fumbling in my shirt pocket for a pair of sunglasses, all the while licking my sandpaper-parched lips in an attempt to get some saliva going. Why didn't I bring a Coke?

On a weathered sloop an old woman with her arms full of ropes stood on her deck and glared at us. Her gray hair was tied back with rubber bands, and the lines in her forehead were creased like bark on a dying oak tree.

"Hi there," said Trent with his hands up.

Behind me, an old man dressed sharply in a crisp white suit and wide-brimmed ivory hat shuffled by, whistling to himself as he made his way to a large boat at the edge of the dock. I started to yawn, feeling like I was stuck in some surreal David Lynch dream-sequence, when suddenly the cranky old lady shouted at the old man.

"Hope you drown out there you crap-shit piece of—"

"Yow!" Trent shouted, backing away from the old woman.

"Vile man!" she hissed. "Racing his big fancy boat all through the Sound. Making huge hauls from the devil knows where!"

I narrowed my eyes at the blurry form stepping onto the last boat; he had thrown us a casual wave and lowered the brim of his hat, shading his features.

"Ma'am?" said Trent. "Want us to chastise him for you?"

Jack and I could run after him and defile his mother's name while insulting his manhood."

She looked at Trent as if he had just appeared from the sky in a beam of light. "What... the hell... do you want?"

"Trent..." I said. "Come on."

"Wait," he urged. "I'll level with you, ma'am. We're here to ask some questions. Affiliated with the Hyannis police department, if you must know."

Her hands tightened into fists.

"Listen, lady, someone turned in a report of a possible murder out in the Sound four nights ago, and we're just—"

"It weren't me."

Trent blinked at her. "Obviously not, ma'am. You're still alive, and therefore—"

"I mean, I never called no stinkin' police." She made a sound like a hiss, then turned her back and stomped over to the aft tether. "Even though I might've seen some others, I never called anything in."

"Others?" Trent and I said in unison.

The old lady spun around, a frayed rope segment in her hands, like she was about to strangle one or both of us. Then she craned her neck to the open sea. "Him's the one ya should be questioning."

"The old guy in the hat?" I asked.

"Ayuh."

Trent slowly looked from her to me. "And... why? What have

you seen?"

She threw down the rope. "There's others down there in that unholy place. He puts 'em there, and now look at him. Mighty proud. New boat. Big catches every day. Ask him yer damn questions." She spun around with surprising speed and stormed into the cabin, calling back: "And while yer at it, kindly slit his throat and sink his goddamned ship."

Trent leapt to my side, and together we turned our attention to the departing vessel - named the Looking Glass, we saw with some satisfaction. The nautical marvel was in pristine condition, the envy of its humble neighbors, curiously avoided by the gulls, yet caressed by the swollen waves.

###

"You heard the old crow," Trent whispered when we had cut the motor. "Other bodies, other dumpings. -Other murders."

I shivered. The night air had turned crisp, and our collective breaths tumbled out of our mouths, coiling in snakelike precision. Trent strapped on his boots, tightened his gloves and spit into his mask.

We finally caught up with the Looking Glass just as twilight kissed Nantucket's hilly ridges. We had rushed back to the shop, loaded our dive boat, and put to sea. Four full tanks were on board, as well as two spearguns, a pair of binoculars, two underwater flashlights, several bags of potato chips and three six-packs. Trent debated about bringing his prized possessions - four depth charges he had been saving ever since his stint as a

consultant for an underwater blasting company; but in the end he decided that the temptation to blow up the audacious and out-of-place cruiser would just be too great.

Of course, there was no way we were going to act sensibly and call the police to let them know our plans. "Listen," Trent said, "something bizarre is happening under these waters. My guess is that it's localized around a certain spot. And whatever it is, I believe our Mr. White stumbled across it by accident, and he's been profiting from it ever since. I'm betting he's going to visit there again tonight."

"How do you know? Maybe he's just out to do a little fishing?"

"In that atrocious white suit? Come on. This isn't his fishing time; I'd say it's his 'maintenance time.'"

"Huh?"

"Crow lady said he was pulling in crazy loads of fish, implying he's got some hidden technique, or more probably – some magical source; it's like the Holy Grail of fishing, except he's got to sustain it now and then." Trent drummed the motor slowly, keeping about a hundred yards from the lights of the Looking Glass, matching its patient pace.

He rubbed his gloved hands together. "Bodies tossed overboard, victims gutted and discovered days later, still bakery-fresh. A very alive walrus which had no business swimming around. As Melville says, 'These extravaganzas only prove that Nantucket is not in Illinois.'"

The cold I felt before was actually receding – a combination of the alcohol and my wetsuit, or maybe I was just warmed by the plain stupidity of chasing a possible murderer and debating plots involving the use of resurrected corpses as fish-bait.

The motor purred, then went silent, and we drifted a little too close for my comfort, when Trent clutched at my arm. "Jack!" he whispered. "He's cut the engines... and do you see that?"

"What?"

"A buoy. Like a yellow volleyball—right there. It shouldn't be out this far."

"So, he's marked his site?"

"Count on it." He crawled to the edge and lifted the binoculars. "Jack, did you ever read Through the Looking Glass?"

"Nah," I said. "Alice was painful enough. All those big words, like Tweetle, and Dee."

"There's a poem in there about a walrus and a carpenter, and of course – oysters."

"Of course."

"The walrus and carpenter convince these young oysters to come trotting along the beach with them, only to trick them into making of themselves a nice little feast for the travelers. 'Oh Oysters, it was so good of you to come, and they ate them every one.'"

I shook my head. "And the relevance...?"

Trent adjusted the focus on the binoculars. "I believe our Mr. White is running a similar game. Duping people out here,

then inviting them to a feast. Shhhh. Here he comes, onto the upper deck, leading a young man by the hand. Looks like the kid is drunk, or drugged. Just turned him around. Get ready, Jack..."

My heart tightened, my mouth ran dry and the beer slid from my hands. I stared and tried to resolve the twin moving images on the boat.

"Shit! A knife!" Trent lunged past me and pushed the drive into gear; he held on to my wrist for balance as we lurched ahead, then quickly pulled me up to man the wheel as he grabbed the speargun and rushed to the side.

A scream sounded over the engine, and I raised my head to see the young man dropping over the side, arms flailing over his head, his feet tied to a block.

A double splash, sickening in its brevity. "Go after him!" Trent pushed me aside and took the wheel, turning us into a parallel angle with the Looking Glass; we pulled alongside, near a silver ladder.

In seconds I had my fins on, the vest secured and tightened, and I stepped onto the side. I wished I had strapped on more weights before - now I would have to kick as hard as I-

Trent shoved me, and suddenly I was one with the sea, greeting the rush of cold and the blast of living waves. I descended rapidly and switched on the flashlight as I angled my body. Turning while pumping my legs, I tracked the shaft of light swooping through the black depths, and quickly located the trail of bubbles - oxygen escaping from dying lungs.

Even underwater, I could still hear his scream. And I shuddered to think, in these depths of over eighty feet, how the intense pressure would be crushing the man even now. I couldn't, wouldn't think of it, as I cleared my sinuses as fast as I could, barely slowing, following that trail into the murky gloom.

I kicked harder as the darkness pressed in on all sides, kept only partly at bay by the twitching flashlight beam, still focused on where I hoped the victim had fallen. My ears felt like homes to icepicks, and my eyes were like squeezed grapes. I couldn't make it much farther without rising and waiting to adjust..

But then something flickered into the light. Something big. And dark and wriggling. Then it was gone.

I paused, breathing shallowly - and foolishly, I knew, burning through oxygen and coming dangerously close to hyperventilation. But if the victim was right there, beyond the gloom..

Something darted into the light.

And something else poked my ribs. I tried to scream and released only a cloud of bubbles. I spun, and felt something nudge and peck at my leg. The light went wild, twisting and roaming. I didn't know which direction I swam, only that I madly attempted to flee from whatever nipped at me.

Suddenly, into the light turned the attacker - or one of them. A huge Bluefish, nearly four feet long, eyes blazing in the light. Red, dusty clouds puffed from its mouth.

Another one nudged it aside, approached me as if sniffing my midsection, then curled around and vanished. A few more brushes against my side, another nip at my shoulder, then I felt the currents subside, and I floated again unmolested.

Having completely lost my bearings, I kicked slowly to try to right myself. My ears were screaming, my lungs starving. I had to ascend, so I fumbled for the BCD valve and inflated the vest a touch. As I rose and discovered which way was up, I swung the flashlight down once more, making a sweep of the depths.

To my astonishment, I found I had struggled my way almost to the bottom. It had crept upon me: the seaweed, coral towers and vegetation swayed eerily in the powerful light.

I rose, but not fast enough, not nearly. For the rest of my days I will wish my flashlight batteries had died, or that I had just been content to give up and retake the surface. Anything except to have my memory forever ravaged by the sight of what hung between the oddly translucent coral shelves, the ethereal weeds. Floating listlessly, weakly attempting to rise, their hands pulling, reaching, somberly grasping at nothing. The Bluefish nipping at palms, pecking at eye-sockets, ripping out hair. Bigger fish fighting with the smaller ones for the choice parts – the insides exposed and pulsing.

Over ten, fifteen, dear God – maybe twenty people down there. Men and women both. Flesh torn, clothes faded, chests gaping. And the blood – like black dust puffing out from their cavities as the pink organs continued to work, tiny hearts

pumping, vainly maintaining, somehow, the basics of life.

As the horror overtook me and the flashlight slipped through my grasp, as I kicked and pulled and dragged myself up through the cold sea, I couldn't resist one backwards glance – and there I saw the newest addition settling into a nice alcove. He was flanked by dark green reeds which lovingly caressed and held him as the bluefish swarmed, called by the promise of freshness.

In the two agonizing minutes it took to safely reach the surface, my mind cruelly replayed the image of how his mouth kept moving, opening and closing in a silent plea for help.

###

When I cleared the surface, I ripped off my mask, spat out the regulator and took in huge gulps of clear air.

What had happened while I was under? Did Trent get the killer, or was he in trouble? These thoughts barely entered my numb brain by the time I made it to the ladder of the Looking Glass. Seven rungs later, I heard a thud from just above, and I paused, ascending slower, as quietly as I could, but fearing every sloshy step would give me away. I reached for the knife at my belt as my other hand gripped the top rung.

I cautiously lifted my head, blinking away the water dripping from my hair, when somebody hopped onto the rail just a few feet beside me. His white shoes made a heavy sound on the wood, and when I looked up, it took a moment to register the rope around his ankles–

And the block in his arms.

Mr. White had a knife clasped in one hand while he gripped the block tight. I noticed blood dripping down the back of his white suitcoat – and only then did I register the spear jutting out and wobbling just under his left shoulder blade.

"I'll come back," he choked through a mouthful of blood, then said: "but not like them." His feet slipped, he teetered, and I saw a blur on the deck.

Trent rushed the edge, the speargun in his left hand, reaching with his right. I felt a breeze fly past me, then heard a tremendous splash and a whistling sound as the harpoon's rope hissed over the rail.

"Shit!" Trent shouted. He fumbled at the gun, but then noticed me for the first time. "Ja—" was all he managed to get out. The rope was caught in his weight belt, and it suddenly and violently yanked him forward.

Trent slammed into the edge with a bone-crushing groan. He reached for the rail even as his legs were carried over and his fingers slipped on the wet wood. I gripped the rung, then stretched – only to just miss his wrist.

Without thinking, I donned my mask, held it tight, took the regulator into my mouth, and stepped off the rail after them.

###

Some Classical author – I'm sure Trent knew which one – would have spoken about the futility of wrestling with fate. Trent would have brought up Poseidon and his divine wrath against mortal Odysseus, and how one should take care not to piss off the

lords of the sea.

-Or some such nonsense. But that night, under those fiercely uncaring stars, several miles out from the launching of Ahab's ill-fated voyage, I thought I could rise above myself, thought I could slip on those godlike sandals and go shaking my fists in mockery of the ocean.

I dove back into those frightful depths, and to my mind came thoughts of heroes descending into the underworld in the hopes of rescue. Orpheus, Perseus, some other Greek guys whose names I forgot at the time.

To my friend's great loss, I was no hero, no Athena-blessed mortal. I was Jack Haggins, educated loser and one-time dive champion of Elma James North High.

And that night, I lost to the sea. There in cold futility, I met my white whale. Water — the unrivaled element — beat me.

I had no light, no bearings, and not enough air. I descended as far as I could, hoping to home in on the lamp I had dropped before, but it must have been enveloped by now in the jungle of bottom-muck. Kicking and pushing myself deeper and deeper, I eventually hit a wall of pain and was repelled, metaphorically limping, to the surface.

I waited and waited, floating vulnerably while scanning the breaking waves for a sign, a sound, a hand. Anything.

But no— I took back that wish at once. Not anything, I corrected, remembering Mr. White's last words, about coming back— but not like them. I shuddered and kicked slowly towards the

Looking Glass.

Numb in so many ways, I grudgingly pulled myself up the ladder, fearing all the while some clammy hand would rise from the waves and yank me down to join the undead hatchery, to feed the local fauna, forever and ever in unending pain, and hopefully – mindlessness.

That one thought clung to me as I ascended to the deck and gave the sea one last look-over. Were they mindless? The dead.. How could you know? Was it just the flesh re-animated? And where, asked the philosopher in me, was the soul? Had death cleaved it free – and as Melville claimed, bundled it with eternity?

I hoped so. For their sakes.

For Trent's.

###

I returned with the Looking Glass five hours later, just preceding sunrise. The sole vessel out on this cold, silent Sunday morning. Even the gulls were absent.

I found the buoy, cut the motor to throttle, but didn't drop the anchor.

Instead, I tossed overboard the pouch I had prepared on the way here. Four depth charges with timers set, fastened and secured snugly to one of Mr. White's cinder blocks.

Down it went, and immediately I revved the engine, hoping to put the Looking Glass about two hundred yards away in the two minutes I had left. Counting off on my watch, I shut down the

motor with seconds to spare, then stood on the stern to watch as the sun squeezed itself over the rim of the sea-

-only to join me in witnessing a large patch of the sea turn white and bubble over like an untended pot of water. I squinted and reflexively reached to cover my ears - but it wasn't necessary with this soundless and anticlimactic underwater blast.

I pulled up a chair, cracked a beer, and stared out over the frothing, turgid waters. Lifting the binoculars, I scanned the area slowly, seeing at first tips of green, brown and earthy patches ascending, cut loose from the sandy bottom. Then other bits. Some white, others pink. Limbs, heads. Pieces.

And then came the fish. Teeming numbers of them, some still twitching, gasping along the surface, but most in grisly flopping chunks. I put the binoculars down and just sat, leaning against the side. I didn't want to scan the wreckage any more. In a few minutes, I would radio the Coast Guard, and maybe even work up enough of a buzz to talk to Lieutenant Miles.

In a few minutes.

Another gulp of my beer. It was getting warm, but the sound of my swallowing was comforting. It drowned out for the moment - just a moment - the wet, sloshing thuds arising from the side of the boat.

I took another sip and waited, calmly, still focusing on my dirty sneakers. The squishing sounds grew louder. Just to my left, clearing the rail. On the deck now. Heavy, shuffling footsteps. Dripping, splashing. A cold breeze heralding my

guest's approach.

I looked up, and thinking of nothing else to do, extended my beer to the dark figure outlined against the sun.

Trent – or what I hoped was still him – seemed to fold into a kneel; then, with effort, sat cross-legged beside me. He was pale, so white. His lips – what was left of them – were so blue.

Trembling, I shook the beer expectantly.

It seemed to draw his attention. Clouded eyes moved to the sound. Water dripped heedlessly from his nostrils and seeped from a nibbled hole in his cheek. His lips opened and a cascade of dark, putrid liquid streamed out.

His eyes went white and his body sagged, and it seemed something else, along with the water, flowed out of him. The power animating his flesh departed in a flood, its strength destroyed with whatever I had demolished at the ocean floor.

A gurgling came from his throat. And one hand lifted in my direction – for just a second.

Before it fell, preceding the collapse of his entire body, he spoke – of course in a quote, issued with the first and last breath of his unlife.

"...so kind of you to come."

END