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Nests

MARY KATHARINE PARKS

He handled the pleasure boats as he handled other men's wives: with no proprietary zeal. While they went with him they were, by his code, his. And their owners, the brokers and 3M execs with Noxzema-white noses, got the cuckolding they deserved.

He was not in love. Even after seven months of winter with snow so deep that the trapping had been poor. Not in love, but randy with desire to get back on the boats. He had begun to dream at night of their musky, wet smell, their dizzy resistance and pursuit, and he awoke with his body's still reliable response.

There had been several women, though there wasn't one just now. They had all gone off to cities, Akron or Oakland or Altona, after varying periods of time spent living with Bruce in his trailer. They left behind their throw pillows and shower organizers; these he gave away. He read their glossy magazines, though, until the subscriptions ran out.

One of the women still sent him birthday cards and backward glances, though she'd left the first morning she saw the fox and beaver hanging on the shed door. He'd told her once, to comfort her, that animals in traps build themselves nests of pine needles, twigs, and whatever they can reach around them, and after the sun sets, they curl up and fall asleep. He often found them this way when he checked his lines in the early morning. He shot them then, one bullet causing the least damage to the pelt and killing them quickly. She knew, or had read, that animals chewed their feet off when they were caught in a trap. That, he had said, only happened to bad trappers who didn't check their lines every night. Animals did that when they needed to get to water, he told her, they don't understand the concept of captivity. He'd tried to explain it correctly, to be fair to the sport, but she'd gotten the car packed before he'd finished.

There was no work on the lakers or the fishing boats this spring so Bruce looked for work where he knew he could find it. There was always work at the Sarahsfield marina, each slip was booked from May to October with daysailors and sloops. It belonged to a guy he had known in high school. Gertz wore Topsiders and cruise clothes and drank Dewars like the shiney-faced boys from St. Paul, who rented his slips, bought him beers, and sent him for ice when their parties ran low.

Gertz was the treasurer of the Chamber of Commerce and worried about the negative effect of locals on the summer trade. Bruce's luau shirt and fat-stained jeans kept

showing up in, and ruining, the Chamber's photo calendars and he was accused of occasionally sweeping unwary sailors off the deck with a loosed boom. Still, Bruce was a good hand with the boats and Gertz always looked for him at the bar on the last Sunday in April. If he needed a job, Bruce would be waiting on the dock at six the next morning.

Five men had to work hard all day to put a dozen boats in the water. They scoured the hulls and made sure that the fridges got cold and that the chemical heads flushed. Once the weekend skippers came, the marina crew helped them off on day trips, caught the lines when they returned, or called the Coast Guard if they didn't. Repairs and nursemaiding filled the days and at night they drank together.

Sarahsfield was small, ragtag and isolated in winter; a place where hippies go to die, bringing recycling bins, poetry afternoons, no-wax skis, and community theater with them. Some taught at the VoTech, some ran the weekly paper, some worked for social services. Their kids made the schools pretty interesting. Bruce was regular at theater practice, even when he had been out until dawn on his trap lines. He was tall and heavy and content with a chorus part, and remembered the blocking for all the scenes, making him very popular with the other actors. Bruce only had time for plays in the bad weather, which in northern Wisconsin was enough for a full season. Sarahsfield was too fancy in good weather for Rogers and Hart.

This May the weather was not good. And on this particular May afternoon it was yellow and came on like nausea out of the southeast. The marina crew had finished putting the last boats in the water so their owners wouldn't miss the first decent weekend of the season. This wouldn't be it, Bruce thought as he looked back toward town. It was empty. The popcorn and fern bars hadn't opened yet and the shops and art galleries were still boarded up. There were a few pickups in front of the bar — trucks he recognized.

He minded the first summer weekend most, when the town bar would be full of flabby men talking nautical, shivering in their pretty windbreakers, and saying "she" this and "she" that about the boats he'd been banging all morning. The townies would grimace over their beers and mumble that they'd flatten the next bastard who used "yare" in any context. When the next one did, they'd know that money had Sarahsfield for the summer.

Bruce was thinking about this and about the beer and bump he'd have soon as he finished checking the bilge on the "Buns Voyage." They'd put it in the water this morning and it had sunk to the slings — the seams leaking madly before the planks

could swell. It was a double-ender, so they'd had to stencil the name along the side, under the rail, in large letters so it would show. The bilge pump was just keeping the name above water, but Bruce decided that things looked secure enough for the night.

The "Buns" was tied up near the end of the dock where Bruce's uncle was at work on the new ten-slip expansion. Bruce stepped from the neat, teak deck to the dock and looked, as he did, down the pilings toward his uncle's barge. Gertz didn't usually hire Bruce's uncle for any work he considered complicated — the uncle had too many sons and dogs to suit Gertz, who preferred to hire the marine construction firm at the end of the bay. But they'd been too busy building seawalls this spring — racing the ice to keep the shoreline cottages on shore.

His uncle and cousins didn't live in cottages, but had a trailer on a piece of land not far from Bruce's. In the spring, though, they moved onto their barge and he stayed with them sometimes when they'd all been out getting blind. The barge had been a ferry once, carrying tourists from the peninsula to the island, but the insurance had gotten too expensive and they'd cut it down. The cabin was snug, and the engines were still all right, but it had a perpetual list to starboard. They chocked up the furniture legs on one side for compensation. The boat dog grew two of his legs longer.

Bruce favored the boat dog, his youngest cousin's, and borrowed him when he wanted a dog. The dog liked Bruce and minded him even when availed of a more lenient opinion. He had a copper and pepper colored coat and black marble eyes and was famous around town. He would sit under a table in the bar until closing, then herd Bruce home, down the dock, across the pilings and into the cabin. He had only one bad habit: he collected shoes. He didn't chew them, but rather adopted them, carrying boots or tennis shoes carefully in his mouth when he went to visit favorite smells. The cousins hopped after him, yelling, but they never broke him of the desire.

There were no lights in the cabin and Bruce knew that his cousins had stopped work for the night. They'd be at the bar by now and he would have to hurry to get in on the first round.

It was getting cold and he jogged for thirty yards or so, with his head down. His heavy footsteps startled the little jet-winged birds which lived under the docks, and they scattered. They weren't sea birds but rather some kind of swallow that found more building space here than in barns, which were rapidly disappearing in the onslaught of condos. Bruce sometimes swam out and under the docks to get a look at them: their nests crowned by downy heads and the parents patrolling. He wondered at the fledglings' make-or-break first flight: they had to get it right on the first try,

The boat dog grew two of his legs longer

as one tumble into water would be their last. Their homes — pilfered straw from somewhere, bits of their own shells, twigs, and trash — couldn't hold their attention. Bruce remembered that his trailer was low on propane and that he'd decided to tough out May without another refill.

Clouds had sewn up the sunset and the light had gotten grim. The boats yanked at their lines and the bay was choppy. House lights were coming on over town and the trees looked irritable. As if in denial of the weather, there was a baseball game being broadcast tonight: the Brewers and the Indians at County Stadium. This would be on at the bar. Bruce had made a bet on the game with the bartender, a guy who'd dated his sister, but he couldn't remember for how much or on whom. She seemed to think it was disloyal of him to make bets with her ex-lover, something he couldn't quite figure out. He wasn't, after all, betting on her.

By the time he stepped off the dock onto shore it was raining. The marina office was locked and his coat was inside with his Sea World cap. He wouldn't miss the cap, though he always kept track of it out of superstition. He'd found it on his head the time he'd been thrown out of a bar in Chicago and woken up under a pile of newspapers in Detroit. Perhaps he'd been to Sea World in the interim. He hoped so.

He was now very close to the bar and could see the Old Style sign glowing, across the city park to his right. The boats were behind him, blocked with studied randomness, like actors. He felt himself exiting too early and stopped.

Bruce turned around — wondering why it was taking him so long to get to the bar — and headed back out the dock toward the barge. The pier lights had come on and reflected dimly off the water, making him think of the country song, sung by the woman with the sweet teenage voice, that went “going once, going twice, going gone . . .” When he got to where the construction started he had to step carefully. Waves splashed up, soaking his pants bottoms, and he swore.

Bruce could barely make out the barge rail but he was already looking for the rope. In the dim light he didn't find it at first. He'd missed the first roll of the ship, when he tried to step from the dock to the deck, and had to wait until it rolled groggily back toward him.

The cousins usually allowed the boat dog to roam around the marina and into town unattended, but when he began to take their shoes with him, they'd resorted to tying him out on the deck of the barge. When Bruce found the rope at last, the dog was hanging by his collar on the other end. Whether the listing or the weather or desire inspired him, the dog had found the limits of his rope and fallen overboard.

When the barge rolled to the lee the dog disappeared under the water, and each time it rolled back again he came up and yipped. Though the list was to starboard and he had fallen off the port side and wasn't in immediate danger of drowning, the jerking of the rope had begun to make an end of him.

With one arm around the bollard, Bruce reached over the side and caught the dog under its front legs. He hauled it on board, a dripping pink slipper gripped in its teeth.

The story was told in the bar that evening when Bruce came in with the dog, both of them soaking wet and shivering. The bartender got them dry towels and the dog took his under Bruce's table and wadded it into a nest. The cousins were thrilled and bought round after round. The Indians won the game and Bruce discovered, through the commendable honesty of the bartender, that he had bet fifty dollars on them.