

## Quiet

Jerry spent the entire afternoon polishing the brightwork on his boat, arguing with himself the entire time about whether it was a boat or a ship. In reality, it was a yacht, although he didn't know where 'yacht' fell on the spectrum between boat and ship. It was thirty-five feet long, and beautiful. It wasn't the top of the line, but it fit him. Even though it needed work, which he'd done, the guy who sold it to him guaranteed its seaworthiness.

It was the culmination of a dream for him. He'd spent the first thirty years of his working life in a factory, working twelve hour shifts and saving his money. His wife, Ann, didn't share his dream of being on a boat in the middle of the ocean. She got a little sea-sick at the idea. To her, an afternoon round of golf with her girlfriends was enough. That, and the little house they'd shared with their two children.

The children did as children do; they grew up. Both married now, and starting their own families. Ann spent more time on the golf course, and Jerry counted his pennies even closer. Then he hit the lottery. It wasn't a magnificent sum, to most. It totaled just over a million, before taxes. After taxes, he had over seven hundred thousand dollars. Ann wanted to put it away to leave it to the kids. Jerry argued that it was his chance to buy a boat.

In the end, they split it, along with his savings account, in the divorce.

The split, after Ann bought out his half of the house, left him with right at five hundred

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thousand dollars. He went shopping for a boat. He found the one he had in south Florida, packed up four changes of clothing, a few books, and moved.

Now he spent most days polishing and cleaning. The harbor wasn't very busy, but it did have pleasure boats that went out in the morning and came back in the evening. Three commercial fishing boats operated from the marina. Jerry would be up to watch them go out in the morning before he started on the day's chores. He'd found that he loved the smell of the ocean in the morning.

One day when he climbed the stairs to the deck, he found a woman sitting in an aluminum lawn chair on his back deck, facing the rear of the vessel. About his age, maybe a year or two younger, she just sat there. Jerry didn't know what to do, so he did nothing.

He looked her over closely. Trim, wearing khaki shorts, a sleeveless white shirt, and white tennis shoes with no socks, she defined plain. Lines etched her face, but didn't ravage it. Her hair was in a ragged bob that barely covered her ears. A pair of sunglasses and a wide-brimmed sun hat with bright flowers on it completed her ensemble.

At lunch time, Jerry made her a bologna and cheese sandwich and served it with a handful of potato chips on a paper plate. He put a t.v. tray beside her chair and put the plate on it. Then he got a glass of iced tea and put it beside the plate, with a bowl of sugar and a spoon. She didn't touch the sugar, just ate the sandwich and chips, drank the tea, nodded to him and went back to staring at the harbor.

He decided that she was probably nuts, but harmless.

On a normal afternoon he would go to the wheelhouse at the top of the boat and either read or stare at the ocean. The seagulls provided an unending source of entertainment to him. Late in the afternoon he started the engines and let them run until they were warmed up, then shut them off. The man who taught him how to handle the yacht told him it would keep the engines running smoothly.

On the fifth day, Jerry caught one of the fishermen coming in.

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“Hey, Bob!” he yelled at the man on the fishing boat. The man looked up at him and waved.

Jerry jumped to the dock and walked over. Bob was folding his nets and hosing off his deck.

“Do you know that woman sitting on the back of my boat?”

Bob looked over, stared at the woman for a few seconds, then shook his head.

“Never seen her before,” he said. “She's not from around here.”

“Okay. Thanks.” Jerry went back to his boat and climbed the short ladder.

It wasn't like she bothered him. She stayed out of his way and as far as he knew, she didn't have vocal chords. In the morning she would arrive wearing the same clothes, set up her chair, and sit.

The sixth day, she got up and went to the small galley below deck just before noon. Jerry watched her go with some trepidation. There wasn't much she could damage, but it made him nervous. He decided to wait a few and see what happened. He thought maybe she wanted to use the head.

After twenty minutes, she appeared carrying the t.v. tray. Setting it up in it's usual spot, she went back to the galley and came out again carrying a paper plate and a glass of tea. She set the plate and glass on the table and took her seat. He looked at her and raised an eyebrow, she nodded her head toward the galley.

A paper plate sat on the small table where he ate his lunch. It held a bologna sandwich and a handful of chips. The bread was toasted; the bologna fried with the cheese melted on it. A glass of tea sat beside it. She'd cleaned whatever pan she'd used and the galley was spotless.

He ate the sandwich and drank the tea, then headed for the wheelhouse. She took her paper plate and the empty glass down to the galley, then came back and resumed sitting.

That evening, he told her he was going to take the boat out the next day. She shrugged.

“I'll probably be out overnight,” he told her.

She gave him an 'oh well' shrug. After another hour, just before it got dark, she folded up the chair and left.

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The next morning she was back. When she came on board, she carried two plastic bags in one hand and the aluminum chair in the other. She handed him the bags. One contained a loaf of bread and a bag of chips. The other a pound of bologna, a package of American cheese singles, a small jar of mayonnaise, a smaller container of mustard, and a box of tea bags. There was also a dozen eggs and a pound of bacon.

When he took the bags, she went to her usual spot and set up the chair. He took the bags into the galley and put everything away. The food would save him a trip to the store. After putting the food where it belonged, he went back up on deck and started the process for leaving his slip. He disconnected the electric, water, and black-water pump. He had topped off the fresh water and fuel tanks the previous evening. When he finished disconnecting everything, he cast off from the dock and went to the wheelhouse.

Moving out past the buoy at the entrance to the harbor, he pointed the yacht at the open ocean and opened the engines up a bit. He looked back at the woman and saw she was still sitting, watching the wake. He wasn't sure, but it looked like her shoulders relaxed a little.

After an hour, he turned off the engines and went down to the deck and threw out the sea anchor. He went back to the wheelhouse and picked up his book. It was a book of poems by Billy Collins. He liked it because in it, Billy said Chinese monks described 100 kinds of silence, and said only a few of the most dedicated had identified all of them. Then he said that he'd made that up. It didn't matter to Jerry, he just liked the idea.

The sea was calm. Jerry looked up and around and saw clouds gathering to the rear of the boat. He turned on the radio and tuned to the weather channel. They were broadcasting a squall warning; not a very big one, and it wouldn't last long. Maybe thirty minutes.

Jerry decided to just stay where he was and ride it out. He opened the window of the wheelhouse and called to the woman.

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“There is a squall coming. It's not going to be bad, and won't last long.”

The woman nodded her head so he closed the window. As the squall approached, she got up, folded up the chair, and went into the salon. After a few minutes, she came back out, stark naked. Walking to the spot where she usually set up her chair, she stood and watched the clouds come.

Jerry wasn't completely dumbfounded, but not far from it. He looked at her slim body and realized she was the opposite of Ann. While Ann had allowed herself to become chubby in middle age, the woman didn't have a spare ounce on her.

Her lack of body weight concerned him. He looked at her for several minutes, then went down to the salon and opened the door of his tool cabinet. Taking out a length of nylon rope, he closed the door of the cabinet and went up to the deck. When he got close to the woman, she watched him. He held up the rope, and indicated that she should tie herself to the boat. Squalls could produce winds of up to fifty miles an hour, and he didn't want her to get blown overboard.

She nodded her understanding, then held out her arms. He looped the rope around her waist and tied it. He didn't tie it tightly, but enough that it wouldn't slip down past her narrow hips. As he did, he realized that he was inches away from her pubic area and didn't feel anything. Her small breasts were almost flat against her chest, and he saw some faint scars that might have been stretch marks on her abdomen. There were a couple of small, faded tattoos on the inside of her left arm, but other than a few moles, she didn't have any marks on her. She lowered her arms and let them hang by her sides.

His sex life with Ann had dwindled to nothing over the past several years, and he briefly wondered if he had lost his libido completely. He walked to the rear of the boat and tied the rope to a cleat there, with a little slack. The woman might get blown around, but she wouldn't go overboard.

After that, he took a quick look around the deck to make sure nothing would blow away, then went back to the pilothouse. He could feel the barometric pressure drop as the squall approached.

When the rain hit, she raised both arms and held them straight out to her sides. She tilted her

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face up so the rain was hitting her directly. The wind pushed her back against the rope. Jerry watched from the pilothouse. She stayed until the clouds passed them and the wind stopped. Jerry went down the interior stairs from the wheelhouse and got a towel from the small closet by the head. He took it out to her.

He handed it to her and she took it without changing her expression. Quickly untying the rope, he wound it up and took it back to the tool cabinet.

She dried herself, then spread the towel on the deck and laid down on it. After twenty minutes or so, she turned over. After an equal amount of time on her stomach, she went below deck and put her clothes on. When she came out, she set up the chair, then took the towel and draped it over the rail of the yacht to dry.

That evening, he made the sandwiches and took hers out to her, along with a glass of tea.

When he went to bed, she was still sitting in her chair, staring at the ocean behind the boat. After a while, he heard her come into the salon. She laid down on one of the bunks on the other side and went to sleep. He lay feeling the gentle rising and falling of the boat in the small swells, then he drifted off.

When he woke up, her bunk was empty. He went to the head and did a quick wash, then came out to find a bacon, egg, and cheese sandwich on the table in the galley. The small jar of mayonnaise was open and a butter knife was beside it. Finishing his breakfast, he tossed the paper plate and found a small tablet and a pen. He wrote; "Why don't you talk?" on it, then took it out to where she sat in her chair. He laid the tablet beside her plate on the t.v. tray where she could read it. She picked up the pen and wrote, in neat block letters: "Talking hurts people."

He read it, then looked at her and nodded. He wrote: "I understand. What are you looking for?"

She looked at him with great sadness in her eyes, then wrote; "A different past."

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He gave her a quizzical look.

“You can't live in the past,” he said.

“I have no future,” she wrote. He shrugged.

She moved the pen down the page.

“What else is there?” she wrote, and laid the pen on the table.

He looked her in the eye and said, “Now.”

She shook her head sadly, closed her eyes, took a deep breath and let it out, then opened her eyes. When she did, the extreme sadness was gone. She picked up the pen.

“You?” she wrote.

He took the pen, thought for a few seconds, then wrote; “A destination.”

It was her turn to give him a questioning look.

“I'm looking for a place of quiet, where I can just be,” he told her softly.

The look of sadness briefly left her eyes, and she almost laughed.

“What?” he said aloud. She picked up the pen again and wrote.

“You are here.”