

About 2253 Words

Gulf

Mark Jensen never over-packed for this two-week stints on the oil rig, but he always included his favorite coffee cup.

It was the the one Janie got him for his birthday their first year together; the cup was as important to Mark as his anxiety meds, which, up until until signing with BlackGold Energy, he rarely needed.

Once outside, he pressed against the front door of the apartment slow and firm to prevent the lock from engaging too fast, because in the quiet of sunrise it sounded more like a sledge-hammer striking a rail.

"Happy anniversary," Mark whispered as he walked away.

A thin slice of fog lay over the rooftops. Mark eyeballed the taxi sitting at the street corner; its motor idled while white balls of smoke bellowed from the end of a dangling exhaust pipe. Mark threw his duffel into the back seat, climbed in, and remembered the mix of diesel fuel and cologne.

"Grand Isle?" the driver asked.

"Yep," Mark said. He pressed on the window button until until it slid down some.

"Not too much, please," the driver said, watching from the rear view mirror. "The air conditioner," he said, as he smiled into the rear-view mirror.

Jazz played low on the radio. Mark recalled the phone call he'd gotten the night before, from his childhood friend, someone he hadn't seen in over twenty years and only a few weeks before had connected with on Facebook. This led to a series of catching-up phone conversations. During the latest call, Mark learned his friend had gotten married in Las Vegas — this after two failed ones. His childhood friend said this would be the last.

Janie had been quiet. Mark knew something wasn't right; he could read the signs, including how she'd sink into a kind of passive-aggressive warp, something becoming more frequent. He knew about her parents' health, how they used a large portion of their retirement savings to pay for medical necessities they had no insurance for, and the effect this burden had on Janie. Mark couldn't reconcile how those things invaded his relationship — his intimacy — with Janie.

Time lost, he thought.

Mark grabbed his duffel, closed the cab door, and paid the driver. He took in a deep breath. In the distance, beyond a wavy heat vapor, surrounded by orange cones, the BlackGold Energy company's helicopter waited on an open portion of parking lot, its blades turning slow.

The pilot held open the passenger door for Mark. Minutes later the helicopter rose, lurched forward, and flew headlong and fast over murky-brown shallows soon giving way to blue-black ocean depths.

The oil rig was three hundred miles into the Gulf of Mexico.

Mark adjusted his headphones, wiped the sweat off his face with the back of his hand, and yawned. He thought about how Janie hated it when their bodies touched in humid weather, and that time in Chicago, not long after they married, when she held his hand while they walked Michigan Avenue at three a.m., and how they kissed for a long time under a lamplight and it started to rain. He felt for the coffee cup in the duffel; she'd kept it from the bed and breakfast in Skokie, the one he'd said he liked, and how, back at home, she gave it to him.

He closed his eyes.

When he woke, the rotary engine pounded on his eardrums. He used the bottom of his shirt to wipe the sweat from his face. He shook his head and laughed to himself at the excitement in his childhood friend's voice about marrying again. He loved Janie's green eyes, her vanilla white skin pocked with galaxies of freckles. She always wore her hair down, its rich, auburn falling just right, over her collarbone and shoulders.

Once on the rig Mark made his way to the sleeping quarters and pushed open the bunk room door with his boot tip. His nostrils flared. He sniffed twice. The aroma was different.

The sleeping quarters were not large. The walls were painted a gloss grey. Two floor-to-ceiling steel shelving units stood side-by-side, one stocked a variety of items, the other empty. Two cabinets of drawers stood the same way, several magazines covered the top of one of them, as did a carton of cigarettes, and a few books. The other one remained empty. The only sink and mirror in the room were just outside the bathroom.

A man lay on the top bunk. He faced the wall and snored. Mark lobbed his duffel toward the lower bunk. It bounced off the side of the mattress and landed on the floor, with a muffled shattering sound.

The man turned and made eye contact. "Re-really?" he said.

"Sorry," Mark said, worried about the bag.

"Who are you?" the man said. He reached over and turned on the switch of a sconce-style light.

"Mark. Mark Jensen. You?" He opened the duffel and removed some coffee cup fragments.

The man inhaled through his nose. His fingers raked through his shoulder-length hair, then down to his full beard, twisting and scratching it with his fingertips, and yawned. "Antonio T-Tombi," the man said. "Just got here a f-few hours ago."

"The new guy," Mark said, noting the man had a stutter.

"Sort of. Worked off the Cali coast. San Diego. T-two years. Closed her down. Boss said you'd show me the steps." He noticed the coffee cup fragments. "Sorry 'bout whatever broke."

Mark cleared his throat and pointed to the top bed. "Thanks, but the first step is that's my bunk you're sleeping on."

Antonio strained and swung his legs off the side and readied himself to jump down.

"Damn."

"Don't sweat it man." Mark walked over to the lower bunk, grabbed his duffel from the floor and tossed it on the mattress. "It's all good."

"Look, I didn't —" Antonio tried.

"So where do you stay off rig?" Mark asked.

"Pilottown. Cheap motel not too far in the city."

"That where the chopper picked you up?"

"No. Shell Central. Three a.m. today. Y-you?" Antonio said.

"Leeville. Not quite as far. Get some rest. I'll show you some of the steps after dinner."

Mark removed his shoes and lay on the bottom bunk and wondered what Janie was doing, maybe if she'd thought about their anniversary — if she wanted to see another one. Panic came. He wanted to call her. He grabbed his duffel and pulled out his meds, went to the sink for water, turned for his coffee mug and sighed, tossed the pills into his mouth, bent over and drank from the faucet.

On his way back to bed he stopped to look at himself in the mirror. He leaned in, and for the first time in as long as he could remember he looked at his own eyes. He'd always thought they were brown, until Janie convinced him they weren't, that they were more hazel. He smiled a little. He noted his chestnut-brown hair, no grays, messy as usual. He had his father's nose — strong, Roman. It was his father who taught him how to fix things, make things, how to use his hands. Given he didn't like school, he was grateful to his father for that. He returned to his bunk.

The one-ring dinner call sounded on the Rig's intercom system. Mark heard Antonio slide off the bed; moments later the toilet flushed and Antonio walked out of the bathroom, his hair undone and long. Mark rose and sat on the edge of his bed. He slid the palms of his hands over his face and his head. He remembered when his hair was long, and the look on Janie's face when he came home with an extra short haircut, and later feeling the guilt for not telling her first.

"Smells like sh-shellfish," Antonio said. The cage elevator vibrated and jarred side-to-side as it descended a single level before coming to a stop. "You fish?" Antonio asked as they stepped off and walked into the dining area.

"What?" Mark said.

"Fish. You ever fish?" Antonio asked.

"Here, on the rig?"

"Yeah. I brought my stuff, few extra p-poles too. They're old, but they work. Fishing keeps me sane, especially on a rig. Join me sometime?"

"Nah, but thanks."

"Think about it, man. On days like today, some downtime, n-nothing better."

"I'll take a rain check, man," Mark said.

"Suit yourself," Antonio said.

Mark checked his phone.

The two men stood in the food line, doubled paper plates in hand. Antonio noticed the women in the room. "We didn't have any ladies on my last rig. How many on this one?"

"Six or seven maybe."

"No kidding. S-so, you married?" The server grabbed Antonio's plate and heaped of mound green beans on it, followed with a square of cornbread, salad, and a pulled-pork sandwich. Antonio pointed toward a platter of cold cuts behind the glass case. "How about a couple of slices of that salami?" he said.

"What, the sandwich isn't enough?" the server said.

"I love salami," Antonio said. He watched the server pull a couple slices of salami with tongs. Antonio grabbed them then looked at Mark. "So, you got yourself s-someone?"

"Married. Five years," Mark said.

"No sh-shit?"

"No shit. You?"

"Not married — yet," Antonio said. "Her name's Hannah. She's looking for a job. She hates this shit, the r-rig two weeks at a time." He grabbed a napkin and placed the slices of salami into it and rolled it up, packing it in his pocket. "Sh-she likes to screw." He looked into Mark's eyes. "This is the kind of job that makes me wonder — and worry — if she likes it too much."

"What are you going to do?" Mark asked.

"Have to take it as it goes. So what's your wife's name?"

Mark waited. "Janie," he said.

"She a good woman?"

Mark sighed and furrowed his brows. "She's someone to love." He thought about those words, and how he said them without thinking. "My trips here, the job, are good for us, our relationship."

After dinner, Mark gave Antonio a brief tour of the rig. Antonio's experience showed and he caught on fast. "You're right, you do know the job," Mark said.

"Just puttin' my time in," Antonio said.

"Maybe I'll take you up on that fishing deal."

"Awesome man. But why the change?"

"I don't know."

A few days passed. Mark and Antonio worked well together. Mark's suspicions about Antonio faded and the two got on well enough. They respected each other's space, ate supper together, and even played a game or two of cards. Mark liked it that Antonio talked alot, which made it easier for him.

The cage elevator slammed onto a gusty, salt-stained fourth and lowest deck — an expanse of steel grid that stood five or six meters over a restless ocean.

"We're lucky," Antonio said. "Little rough, but we can drop some lines and see what bites."

Mark didn't answer. The whale watching trip a few years before came to mind, when he and Janie gasped at the only breach seen the entire time; she reminded him to bring his raincoat.

"Show me what I need to do."

Antonio reached into his tackle box and pulled out the wad of napkin and opened it.

"The salami," Mark said.

Antonio smiled back. He showed Mark how to attach the meat to a hook. In minutes both had their lines dropped in the water. "I got an offer in Pilottown."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Running a lathe at a bits f-factory."

"No kidding." Mark examined his hook. "So what do we do with our catch?" he asked.

"Toss it back."

"What if I hook a shark?"

"With this line," Antonio laughed, "you got nothing to worry about. Somethin' that big'll snap it in a nano-second."

Mark felt a tug on his line.

"Pull it up and wind your reel, man," Antonio said. "Hard."

Mark grunted and lifted his line. Out from the water came something big, shiny, and squirming, landing on the deck floor, flopping.

"Sea bass," Antonio said. He helped Mark remove the hook and set the fish free; both watched as it sliced back into the water. He looked at Mark. "So what do you think about my opportunity?"

"Kind of like me, and fishing."

Antonio smiled.

It would be their final night together on the rig. Both shelves in the room were empty and both men packed and ready for pick up the next day.

The springs of the top bunk strained. "Antonio?" Mark said.

"Yeah, Mark."

"Told you these two weeks were gonna fly by."

Antonio waited. "Hey, can I tell you s-something?"

"Yeah."

"You never said anything about my stutter."

"Because it doesn't matter," Mark said.

A few moments passed. "Back to Leeville tomorrow?" Antonio said.

"Yeah. And you — Pilottown?"

Antonio yawned. "Might have a better place to stay now. Worked with this dude in Cali. Texted me today. His cousin has a big old house he shares with his t-two sisters. Said the three of them are a little closer than normal. I don't care about that, s-so long as I have a bed. He put in a word for me."

Antonio's voice softened into puffs of breath becoming a snore.

"Good luck," Mark whispered. He couldn't sleep; he eased himself out from his bunk and grabbed his duffel, removed the last few coffee cup fragments, flicked them to the deck floor. He climbed into his bunk and lay, looking at the underside of Antonio's box spring, his phone in his hands, his eyes squinting from the light of the screen. He read and re-read Janie's old texts and couldn't help but wonder why things had taken such a turn. He scrolled enough to find a text written months before, when the stress wasn't there. "I love you," it read at the end.

Often, Janie'd sit on the edge of their bed quiet, silhouetted against moonlight in the window. She'd take a shower and smell like soap, her hair damp, and fragrant. She'd wear satin pajamas. He'd spread his hands over her shoulder blades and pulled her in — their mouths open, pressed together.

His phone pinged.

When you come back I want to talk

About?

You know

Why not now

No. face to face.

Mark turned and slid off his bunk. He shuffled through his toiletries case for his meds, popped a couple, and leaned over to take a drink from the faucet. Once on his bunk, he turned off his phone, and rolled over for the night, worried about what he would say about the coffee mug.