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At Home, At Sea

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He was alone on the boat. He thought he liked it that way. He was docking the ketch under sail. It was windy and the tide was ripping by but he was skillful, or just naturally at ease on his boat. The old dockmaster came out of the shed and looked at the sailor. The dockmaster had grey hair, steel blue eyes and his skin was aged by the sun and wind. He kept staring at the sailor. His eyes focused on the sailor as he neared the dock. The sailor tossed him a line and it hit the dock but the man just looked at the line as it slid off the dock and splashed into the water.

A black man who worked on the docks was sitting against a piling. He was half asleep with the sun on his face. He noticed the sailor and got up to catch his line. He tied the weathered lines to the cleats. As the sailor lowered the sails and tethered the halyards his hands looked dark and worn but strong. He had lines on his forehead and around his eyes from years of watching the wind. When the ketch was at rest he thanked the man for helping him and took a final look at the day. He liked how the water turned glassy and the wildlife settled down at the end of the day. He internally predicted the evening's weather and adjusted his salt-stained cap. His hair curled up around the edge of the cap as if it knew where to go. It was wind blown and looked unnatural when he combed it.

When he was satisfied the boat was safe he began to wash the day's journey from the deck. He removed his soggy shoes and poured a bucket of water over them. A few grains of sand flew over the deck and were now part of a land very different from their origin. Although he had longed for a home he remained on board because to him his ketch was his home.

The black man asked him if he needed to refuel sir and he replied, "I'd refuel if she had an engine but I never seem to need the power. Can I dock 'er here for the while?" But he didn't know how long he'd be there. He'd never stayed anywhere for too long. Land life was something he could only remember but something made him want to experience it for now and maybe tomorrow too. You see, this sailor was carrying something

deep within him. He knew a legend, a story his grandfather used to tell him back at the time of his first childhood memories. Was it true? There was no way of knowing now. Anyone else who possibly could have known was gone, he thought. But he still felt sharp pangs of guilt, for something he hoped was not true.

That evening he sat back in his cabin and thought about his life. He had had a few friends but they were long gone so he thought about himself. "Where am I going? What does life have in store for me?" He dimmed the flame in his lantern and squinted as he tried to look at the lights of the town. He could see people in their homes reading or eating dinner but he could not get a real feeling of what it was like to live there in that small sailing town.

This town was one that sensed any subtle change, so when the sailor walked down Morris street the next morning, he was noticed. He wasn't a tourist; he was thinking about staying. When he walked into Pope's Corner Store the creak of the door sounded different than usual. He paid for his coffee and some foreign coins got mixed in. He never got a "Thank you, have a nice day" from the cashier. When he left his eyes glanced back but he didn't turn because what he saw around him was more important to him than the reception he was getting. He saw trees with roots wrinkling the ground; the swaying of the trees in so different a rhythm. Some things reminded him of the sea; the rocking chairs on the porches and the swings that went back and forth. And the mothers' arms cradling their newborns were like the ocean rocking his ketch. Something was changing in him. He would always have the sea but he was drawn to the land and people now.

People. He was drawn to them but the people of this town were difficult for the sailor to get to know. As the days passed he realized that there were several categories of people there. There were the tourists who came and went, never leaving a trace; the local whites who never shed a bit of warmth to the sailor; and the blacks who for some reason welcomed the sailor as if he had returned from a long voyage.

As time went on the locals became accustomed to the sailor's habits. They didn't stare as long now and children

asked him silly questions when he sat on the wharf even though their parents still warned them to stay away from the sailor. The children asked him if he could swim fast and if he liked fishing – and he did like both, but he always made them go away when they became a nuisance. He was lonely but he kept an air of confidence and stability about him.

In a way he was famous – in this town. He was their "old man of the sea," thought of as quaint by the tourists. The locals never completely welcomed him but they liked him there. They kept their distance and just referred to him as Jake. He was good for business. People bought whatever tackle he was using that day and they ate lunch on the wharf to see if they could see what he saw on the horizon. But they couldn't.

Fall came to the town and the tourists departed but Jake remained. He acquired a routine that fit into the rhythms of the town. He rose, scrubbed the deck and headed down to Pope's for coffee with grounds in the bottom of the white styrofoam cup. Then he fished in the afternoon and scared the children on the wharf with spooky stories of the sea.

The days were getting shorter now but the rhythms of the town were the same. Boats came in; people meandered Morris street; the trees swayed; and boats went out. Jake liked Oxford. It felt more like his home now but there was an emptiness in Jake that convinced him that there was more to learn.

One day Jake was walking back to the wharf down a back street when he spotted a beautiful black woman in a garden. She was strong and proud but she looked so tired. Her back was bent at an aching angle. Her basket was full of tomatoes, squash, and onions she had dug up from the dry soil. Jake could not ignore her. He wondered who she was and why she was there. But as she turned her ebony face to look at him, he ducked behind a tree and just kept walking.

That night as he got into his hammock to sleep, Jake felt unsettled. He got up, put on his cap, and went to the Mast-head, a local bar. All the regulars were there and it was sufficiently late for them to be adequately drunk. Jake had had several whiskeys when he found himself talking to Plink, the retired captain of the ferry.

Jake knew all about Plink from conversations he had over-

heard on the docks. Plink was the localest local there was. He was part of the Masthead. Whenever anyone was there, Plink was there. Plink knew everybody in Oxford, except Jake, until that night.

Jake was in one of those moods in which he didn't care what he said. He needed an ear and Plink wasn't leaving his barstool so Jake started talking. He told Plink that he really liked Oxford but that the people seemed, well, a little distant. He remembered the blank stare in the dockmaster's eyes and the chill he got when he walked into Pope's that first day. Plink said they were like that with anyone who was not born and raised there. He said it all went back to this old legend they all believed in; something about some kid burning a slave ship, or something.

Plink began to tell that legend to Jake as if he had been there those days back in 1801.

"It was a big day for everyone; October 27th, 1801. Slaves were coming to the Eastrn Shore and the boat was due in from Africa. The square sails were spotted out in the Bay and the townspeople cheered. They set up the town square for the slave sale and finally the ship had docked. All the plantation owners and townspeople were ready to bid for a man to help them in the fields or a woman to do household chores. All except one, Jeremiah Tilghman."

"Oh God," thought Jake. "Plink's heard the legend. They all must believe it's true." Jake remembered the legend as his grandfather, Jeremiah, had told it to him years before.

"Something gnawed at Jeremiah inside. It made him sick to think of the beautiful black-sinned people becoming no more than animals. As the slaves were led slowly off the ship, their chains chinked on the dock. One African rebelled. He raised his chained wrists and tried to hit one of the slave traders. Several men immediately surrounded him, attacking the Negro. A man with a whip sent a blow to the slave's chest and he fell back off the dock into the water. Jeremiah ran to dive in and save the man but as he looked in the water he could see the slave's brown back rise to the surface. The slave trader said, "No sense you getting all wet for a nigger. We can make plenty of money without him. Let him float." A woman began to

scream hysterically when she saw the man in the water. She had lost her parents to traders and now her husband was senselessly killed. She had no energy left to grieve. She looked at Jeremiah with tired eyes, eyes that could no longer react to the sharpest pain, Jeremiah would never forget her face. He had never seen anything so cruel. His anger grew every second. The scene flashed in his mind over and over.

That night after most of the slaves had been sold, Jeremiah could not sleep, remembering the splash of the man's body in the water and the horrified black faces. He got out of his hammock and went down to the docks. He could see the lanterns glowing through the windows of the slave ship. He slowly boarded the creaky ship and found the slave's quarters. He raised his chin up to a small iron grate and saw their eyes brighten as they realized he was setting them free. He could see in the woman who had lost all her family that her only instinct now was to survive. She padded quietly down the planks and silently slipped into the water. Jeremiah remembered her sickening moan at the loss of her husband and the horrified looks on the faces of slaves who had been sold to separate plantations. Unconsciously he searched the ship and found the captain's quarters. His rage seized him as he unhooked a lantern and spread the flames over the deck. He did it again and again with every lantern he could find. Then he dove off the bow and swam as fast as he could, only glancing back once at the blazing ship.

The next morning he woke up face down on the muddy bank of a small island he didn't know. A muscular man grabbed his shirt collar and pulled him to his feet. Jeremiah had that sickening feeling again but now it was worse. Did they know he had done it? Did the men get out of the ship or had he killed them? At that moment Jeremiah's cause did not seem worth what might happen to him. The man put Jeremiah in his boat and rowed him back to the town square. Burned planks from the ship passed by in the water as the man rowed. In the town square several officials were surrounding a woman, a black woman, the one in whom Jeremiah had seen a flash of hope the night before. But now her eyes were open with a different emotion. The man took Jeremiah to the woman and

asked her, "Is this the one?" She would not blink or say a word until she felt the crack of a leather whip across her back. She blinked tears out of her eyes and they rolled down her cheeks but she never told the man that it was Jeremiah who freed them and set the ship afire. The townspeople could not prove it but they knew Jeremiah had done it. He had killed the most important founders of their town in a fit of confusion and rage.

Jeremiah went back to his home and tried to live a normal life. Several weeks went by. No one in the town spoke to him. He could not buy any goods in the town. He was outcast. One foggy morning before dawn he moved all his belongings, packed in a great crate, his wife and his son, who was no more than two years old, all onto his small boat. He sailed out of Oxford through the fog never to return."

Jake remembered every detail of that legend. He looked over at Plink whose eyes were shut and whose chin was propped up on his empty tankard. Jake slowly got up off his stool and walked out into the early morning mist. He went to a small cottage along the wharf. He knocked on the door and a beautiful black face appeared. The woman knew Jake and she knew his legend too. Her grandmother had known Jeremiah Tilghman. Jake took her hand and led her to his ketch. He untied the lines, hoisted the sails, and sailed out of the harbor. Plink woke up and noticing Jake was gone, stumbled out the door of the Masthead and onto the docks. As he wiped his eyes he thought he saw a woman seated by Jake's side in the cockpit. Plink just watched as the sails got greyer and blacker.

Marjorie Judd