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Editor's Note		<p><i>Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. For could the sun do that, then could I do the other; since there is ever a sort of fair play herein, jealousy presiding over all creations.</i></p>
Guidelines		<p>-Captain Ahab in Melville's <i>Moby Dick</i></p>
SNR's Writers		
Mail		<p>"Hey, Brandon, you wanna hear a joke?" Joe asked.</p> <p>"I guess," said Brandon.</p> <p>The boys swam opposite each other, clinging to the sides of a dingy off-white life buoy. It read <i>The Odysea</i> in faded stenciled letters.</p> <p>"Okay, how many lead singers does it take to screw in a light bulb?" Joe asked. Brandon made a slight shrug with his shoulders.</p> <p>"One. They just stick it in the socket and the whole world revolves around them!" He watched Brandon, waiting for some kind of reaction. Brandon scowled.</p> <p>"I don't want to hear any of your lame-ass musician jokes right now," Brandon said.</p> <p>"I'm just trying to lighten things up," said Joe.</p> <p>Brandon sighed, and wiped away some caked salt from the corner of his eye. It had been at least three hours since his uncle's fishing boat caught fire and capsized, but Joe still hadn't sobered up from the impressive amount of beer he swilled earlier that afternoon. It was all just a bad dream, Brandon told himself. Had to be. Fishing boats didn't catch fire twenty miles out in the middle of the gulf. He closed his eyes, trying to remember exactly what had happened.</p>

Brandon could remember the smell of the blackened grouper as it sputtered and jerked in the pan on his portable propane stove. There was an open bottle of cooking oil next to it, along with some paper plates and a cooler full of beer. Joe had left the lid ajar for easier access to the beer. The center console fishing boat belonged to Brandon's uncle. The two boys had finished their final exams and come home to Florida for the summer. They had grown up together, and though they went to separate colleges, still tried to stay in touch. Brandon's uncle lived on the water, and he was more than willing to let them take the boat out. Brandon sat on deck with his legs crossed, an arm's reach away from the stove. He wore a pair of knee-length denim shorts and a plain white t-shirt. He had forgotten his sunglasses in his car, and his eyebrows seemed fixed in a permanent squint. Every few minutes he prodded at the hunks of fish with a long metal fork. It didn't matter that they hadn't caught anything all morning. He had expected as much. Knowing neither of them were expert fisherman, Brandon stuck the grouper meat in their cooler as an afterthought before they disembarked. They could at least eat like fisherman while they drank in the sunshine and swapped college stories.

Joe was kicked back in the driver's seat behind the console, nursing his beer bottle and enjoying the shade under the blue bimini top. He was making a half-assed attempt to remember to steer the boat in a southward direction. The greenish screen of a small GPS unit on the console showed the crooked path they had taken from Brandon's uncle's house. The outrigger Joe was fishing from was on the starboard side, but he paid it little attention. The vessel was trolling along slowly, rocking gently as it negotiated the rolling waves. There was a steady breeze that made Brandon want to stretch out and sleep. Some ash-colored clouds were gathering near the horizon, but they didn't look very threatening.

When the sun was at its highest, Joe decided it was swim time. He was hot, and he had been waiting all spring for the water to get warm. Brandon decided stopping the boat would be a good idea anyway, since he could watch the stove more closely without worrying where Joe was steering. Joe folded his sunglasses neatly inside his Fender baseball cap, pulled off his faded blue t-shirt, and carefully lowered himself into the warm gulf water. His light curly hair vanished as he dove under the boat. After surfacing on the other side, Joe quietly swam over to the port side of the boat. Brandon's back was turned to Joe as he sat watching the fish cook. Joe scooped up some seawater and lobbed it towards Brandon's back. Brandon gasped involuntarily as the water splashed over his neck.

"Watch the stove, you asshole!" yelled Brandon.

Joe chuckled quietly.

"This is great!" he said, "We should do this every year."

From somewhere nearby, Brandon heard the soft release of air. At first, he thought Brandon was mocking the way he gasped. He was interrupted before he could comment.

"Sharks!" Joe bellowed, clawing at the hull of the boat. "Help!" he screamed, trying to scramble over the railing.

Brandon bolted upright. His left knee collided with one of the legs on the stove as he rushed to port. He helped Joe into the boat just in time to watch a small pod of porpoise pass by.

"What's wrong?" Brandon said, laughing, "Afraid of dolphins?"

Joe watched them swim past.

“Dolphins. . .” Joe said

“Yeah, dolphins. They don’t eat people.”

Joe tried to look dignified as he wiped away the matted hair from his eyes. Then he stared over Brandon’s shoulder, his face brightening with amusement.

“Looks like you got a little excited yourself,” Joe said, pointing behind Brandon.

Brandon swiveled around, saw that he had knocked over the cooking oil. Its contents were flowing smoothly over the deck, forming a slick yellow puddle. Brandon swore as he made his way over to the console to grab the overturned bottle and look for some rags. His right foot slipped on the spreading oil, causing his knee to slam into the leg of the stove. The pan with the fish slid perilously close to the edge of the burner. Brandon extended his right hand instinctively to save the fish, sending his fingers instantly so that he jerked back, sending the pan end over end, and the entire stove tilting. A shower of steaming fish and scalding grease rained upon Joe and Brandon. Brandon felt a wave of heat on his hand. He watched as the stove’s brilliant blue flame ignited the cooking oil. The flames spread quickly. Brandon watched in horror as they licked at the propane tank next to the stove. Reaching over the fire in one quick motion, he grabbed the stove, propane tank and all, and flung it into the water. There was a muffled hiss as the stove broke the surface. Meanwhile, the deck of the boat had erupted into a field of bright flames. Brandon and Joe exchanged quick looks of disbelief.

“Where the hell does your uncle keep the fire extinguisher?” Joe said.

“How the hell should I know?” said Brandon.

Caustic black smoke began rising from the fiberglass deck as Brandon negotiated his way around the fire’s perimeter. The bottle of cooking oil continued to drain, sending a small stream of burning oil sternward toward the inboard motor. It was becoming difficult for Brandon to breathe, and his vision was obstructed by thick drifts of caustic smoke. He rushed over and lifted the padded lid of the captain’s seat. There was a dense tangle of various junk inside, but no sign of a fire extinguisher. In desperation, Brandon snatched a circular life buoy and tossed it overboard.

“Joe!” said Brandon, trying to locate him through the dense smoke, “Get in the water. Try to splash out the fire while I keep looking!”

There was a loud splash as Joe obeyed. Brandon continued digging through the junk: dusty old life vests, fishing gaffs, rusty crab traps, and tackle boxes. Joe began splashing water into the boat. Brandon watched as a watery cascade landed near the center of the deck. Instead of smothering the flames, it spread the oily fuel, sending the flames closer to Brandon’s feet. He was running out of room, and he could feel the heat singe his legs. He wondered where the fuel tanks were, and how long it would take before the flames would consume them. He wondered if they would explode. Brandon swore under his breath and then dived overboard into the dark water.

There was no dramatic explosion. However, the flames still managed to burn and melt their way through the hull of the boat. *The Odysea* was swallowed by the dark waves while still burning, dragged under by some invisible hand. Joe and Brandon could only watch helplessly from their buoy. Brandon retrieved a cell phone from his pocket. A thin film of water had seeped inside, leaving the LCD screen blank. The only other things that didn’t sink were their empty, charred cooler, a few partially melted flotation

devices, and a few other useless items. The remaining beer bottles sank along with the boat.

A minute later, Joe found a small red fire extinguisher bobbing near the surface. Brandon cursed vehemently. Joe decided to keep the device, along with some other buoyant wreckage. He shoved the pieces snugly under the retention line on their life ring and found that it then felt more firm under their weight. Brandon hated the idea of taking the ill-omened fire extinguisher, but Joe quipped that it would be an indispensable item to have in case their buoy ever caught fire. Brandon shot him the middle finger.

As the two men drifted lazily, Brandon uttered a soft sound of protest. Joe was nudging him, trying to get his attention.

“Are you ok?” said Joe. “You looked like you were kind of zoning out or something.”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Brandon said, “This kind of thing happens to me all the time.”

Joe rolled his eyes and resumed paddling toward what he and Brandon had determined to be a northward direction. Choppy gulf water stretched from horizon to horizon. The summer sun was finally fading on the horizon, and Joe sang to himself quietly, and off-key.

“Some say the end is near. . . some say we’ll see Armageddon soon. . .”

“What are you singing?” Brandon interrupted.

“Just a Tool song.”

“That sounds kind of familiar. How does the rest of it go?” said Brandon.

Joe cleared his throat. *“I’ve a suggestion to keep you all occupied: learn to swim. . . learn to swi . . .”*

“Swim, eh?” Brandon asked, smiling.

“It’s kind of funny,” Joe said, “I’ve been learning to play that song on guitar.”

“Life imitates art,” Brandon said.

“Cause’ I’m praying for rain. I’m praying for tidal wave . . .” Joe crooned, drumming his fingers on the buoy. His brain felt like it had been baking in the hot afternoon sun, and he couldn’t remember the rest of the words.

“Hey Brandon, what are we gonna do when it gets dark?”

“Same thing we’re doing now, I guess,” Brandon said, “We probably won’t be able to flag any boats down until morning. My uncle is gonna kick my ass, and rightly so. We have to think of something...tell him the engine caught fire or something.”

“Don’t sharks feed at night?” Joe said.

“Probably, but don’t wake me up unless you’re sure it’s a shark. I don’t want to have a heart attack over another goddamn dolphin. Just remember, sharks don’t have

blowholes.”

By the time the first stars appeared, they were too exhausted to paddle. There was a steady wind blowing that chilled their shoulders, but the water felt warm, and oddly reassuring. With no light pollution of any kind, the stars overhead dominated the sky. Even the faintest of them stood out boldly against the inky sky, and the waves were painted with their countless reflections, bending and stretching with the motion until they slapped against the buoy and shattered.

Joe and Brandon made what they could of their meager real estate. No longer paddling, they moved to opposite sides of the buoy, and rested their weary heads on the hard, unforgiving ring, anchoring themselves in place by sticking their arms through the center of the buoy. Though dehydrated and exhausted, they felt relaxed as they bobbed between the rolling waves, the sky illuminated with countless pinpoints of light. A long, heavy barge quietly passed ahead of them at midnight, but neither of them so much as stirred.

Joe awoke the next morning with the low rumbling of distant thunder in his ears. His tongue was dry and he tasted something like sour milk. He had slept with his mouth open all night. Joe could see a few clouds in the distance, but the sky was clear overhead, and the morning sun was already beating down on the tiny buoy, its reflection dazzling innumerable wave crests. Brandon was resting his head with his eyes closed, but Joe couldn't tell if he was asleep or just relaxing. He licked his lips, remembering the sunken cooler full of icy beer. One isolated rain cloud was expanding in the warm morning sun. Joe watched it greedily as he considered the prospect of drinking rainwater. He wanted to park himself right under its heavy belly and suck the water out until there was nothing left but a cloud of dust. Joe shook the buoy feverishly. The motion gradually worked Brandon from loose grip and his limp body slid into the churning water. An instant later, he came to and coughed up a lungful of seawater.

“We gotta hurry!” said Joe.

“Where's the fire?” said Brandon.

“That was yesterday, Brandon, now come help me...unless you can think of a better idea.”

Brandon rubbed his eyes in confusion.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Brandon said, squinting against the glare on the waves.

“Water!” Joe called, pointing to the gray cloud. Brandon smiled and quickly took his place next to Joe. His legs were still stiff from the day before, so he let Joe kick for a few minutes as he tried to wake up

“Damn sun is brutal,” said Brandon, pulling off his t-shirt. He wrapped it around his forehead like a turban, hoping to both shade his eyes from the sun and keep his head cool.

They were relieved to find that the cloud blocked the glare of the sun as they approached. It was cool and shady underneath. There were no more signs of thunder, but the air stirred with a moist, warm breeze that chopped up the surface of the water. Joe looked ahead, while Brandon watched the cloud intently, waiting for any signs of rain.

“Do you see that?” Joe asked.

Brandon followed Joe’s finger, and nearly cheered as he caught sight of what looked like a white boat approaching. Brandon spotted a spray cloud, and he was sure it was a motorboat coming to rescue them. There was no engine drone, however, and the two of them spent a moment in optimistic suspense before Joe pointed to the hazy funnel that dipped down from the cloud’s wayward edge like a sharp, dirty finger.

Brandon felt Joe’s fingernails sink into the flesh of his shoulder.

“Is that a fucking tornado?” said Joe, watching in awe as the dark waves at the surface were pulled into a white vortex.

“It’s only a waterspout,” Brandon said.

“Like a water-tornado?” Joe asked.

“Well, yeah. I don’t think they’re very powerful.”

“Thank God. I can’t take this shit much longer.”

“Well, don’t worry,” Brandon said, “This’ll be a piece of fucking cake. Hell, we’ve been through fire, dehydration, and starvation. Just be happy we’re in the shade.”

The wind picked up momentarily, and the buoy rocked as it drifted over the larger swells. A light band of rain began to descend on the left side of the funnel cloud. Within a few minutes, the intense circulation began to dwindle, and the dark funnel above began to disintegrate, as if the light rain was tearing it apart. They watched as the withered finger retreated back into the cloud, taking the gusting wind along with it.

After reassuring each other that they would be safe, Brandon and Joe kicked swiftly toward the narrow band of rain. A sparse pattern of raindrops finally fell about them, making tiny divots in the surface of the water. Brandon licked his salty, chapped lips in anticipation. Further ahead the rain fell steadily, scattering the sharp reflections on the water’s surface, and turning the sea into a flat, dull plane. To Brandon, the gulf waters seemed to solidify, forming a smooth, stony field. It seemed like something more solid than water, with gentle rolling hills and a smooth matte surface. Brandon wanted to haul himself out of the water and test his footing. He wondered if he could follow the cloud all the way to land, his feet treading softly on the cool, gray stone.

He was about to ask Joe if he felt the same way, when a tiny droplet splashed on his turban. Another drop moistened his bottom lip. The rain was finally theirs. Brandon and Joe clung to the buoy with their eyes closed and their mouths open, catching as many sweet drops as they could. Brandon wished the cloud would stay over him forever. He felt safe under its shadow--wanted the rain to fall into his mouth until his stomach swelled.

Ten minutes later, the rain cloud had exhausted itself, and it passed briskly overhead, as if it had done them a small favor, and it had to hurry away to get on with more important matters. Brandon watched reverently as it passed.

“Did you get much?” Joe asked.

“A good mouthful,” said Brandon.

Joe nodded. The sun was out again, casting its cruel glare across the water. Brandon and Joe had a brief argument about which direction they should be heading, and then took turns paddling wearily against the stubborn waves.

They were reduced to passive floating by mid-afternoon, their energy sapped by the merciless sun. Joe regarded Brandon in silent horror. Wiry strands of dark hair poked out from under the turban, which had drooped down to his eyes. His lips looked pale and shriveled, and his nose and forehead were ruddy and blistered below the dried salt. Joe guessed that he looked equally haggard.

A few hours later, Joe claimed that he spied a vessel in the distance, but Brandon told him his eyes must be playing tricks on him. Nothing was there. They shared fantasies of cargo ships filled with Gatorade and sirloin steaks, and rain-swollen cumulus clouds, all the while trying their best to sound sincerely optimistic as the steady waves carried them further into oblivion.

Joe and Brandon cheered weakly when the sun finally began its descent that evening. Brandon dipped his t-shirt into the center of the buoy, then re-wrapped it around his head. He looked feverish.

“I hate the sun,” Brandon told Joe in confidence. “I mean, we have enough water in our body to live, but it’s like sun wants to take it from us. The sun takes water from the ocean, and makes these huge clouds of water, but it won’t let us have more than a mouthful, because it’s so greedy. It’s like the sun wants us to die.”

“I know, what you mean, man,” Joe said, “It’s like everything’s against us.”

“It’s the sun,” Brandon said, resting his head on the buoy, “that’s who’s against us.”

“Yeah, fuck the sun,” said Joe, tenderly resting his sunburned forehead on the buoy.

That night, Joe slept motionlessly in the starlight. He dreamed he was stranded in a desert of coarse, black sand, sweating profusely. Dusty, barren trees grew upside down in the dark soil, their twisted roots snaking high above Joe’s head. There were three angry red suns glaring overhead in the stark white sky. The largest of the three seemed so close that Joe wondered if it would burn the ground. He toddled about the desert aimlessly, his feet pulverizing the scattered skeletons of primordial fish. When he could go no further, he dropped to his knees and clawed at the soil in desperation until he felt moisture. He continued digging until he had a small well of warm, dirty water. Joe reached inside with a cupped hand, and dumped the stuff into his mouth in great handfuls. It was thick and fishy, and stuck to the roof of his mouth, making him even thirstier than before. He swallowed more to compensate, but he could

feel it desiccating his insides. Joe flung the remaining muck into the hot black sand, and shrieked vengefully at the greatest of the suns, which intensified, reveling in Joe's misery. He shielded his face from the intolerable heat.

"Learn to swim," the three suns sang mockingly, *"learn to swim."*

Joe jerked awake. The first rays of sunlight were peeking over the horizon. Brandon was on the other side, resting his chin on the buoy and staring into oblivion. His eyes looked glazed-over, as if he hadn't blinked for some time. His turban had started to unravel.

"I've been watching," Brandon said, his voice cracking. "I've been waiting for it to rise."

"I hope there's only one of them today," Joe whispered, rubbing his eyes.

"There's always just one," Brandon said, "but it likes to play tricks. You just have to remember, there's only one of them, and two of us. I've been watching for a few hours, and now I can see what it's up to. It tried to come out a few hours ago, while you were sleeping. Tried to sneak up on us, but I wouldn't let it. Then it sent a boat, but I could tell it was just a trick."

Joe was staring into the distance.

"That looks like my father out there," he told Brandon, "do you see him?"

"It's playing tricks on you," Brandon whispered.

"We can beat it," Joe said.

"It tried to trick me with a dream last night," Brandon said, "Just like when I thought I saw that boat the other day. You said my eyes were tricking me. Now I know it was the sun that tricked me."

Joe felt his body wilt in the summer heat.

"But last night," Brandon said, "I dreamed there were rescue boats. They picked us up and handcuffed us to the guardrails. They left two buckets of ice water and a big stack of buttery pancakes just out of reach. We pulled against the handcuffs until our wrists bled, but we couldn't get close enough. They just stood there and laughed at us, and I could feel my face burning like it does when the sun is out. It wants to trick us."

"Learn to swim. . " Joe cooed.

Joe rested his chin on the edge of the buoy and peered into the dark water. His stomach felt like a raisin. He wondered what would happen if he just took a small drink. Just a sip. He could see Brandon's uncle's boat down there, or what was left of it. That goddamn sun must have tricked them, he thought. They hadn't made any progress at all. They had been stationery above the boat the whole time. Joe smiled knowingly as the pod of porpoise swam by underneath him. They had scared him on purpose. He should have known it all along. The whole thing was planned out under the sun's guidance. They all wanted him to die. Joe could see all the way down to the sea floor—saw that it was black like the desert in his dream. Slowly, he closed his eyes and pulled his head away from the center of the ring.

Brandon was on the other side of the buoy, resting his chin just like Joe. His eyes were closed, but he was humming a song off-key.

“I wish that sun would just leave...just...” Brandon trailed off, struggling to concentrate.

Joe nodded, but Brandon’s eyes were still closed. Brandon detected a low, droning noise in the distance. The sun was up to something.

“Don’t listen to it!” Brandon said, sticking his fingers into his ears, “It’s not *real!* Just ignore it like the last one!”

Brandon opened his eyes to see if Joe was listening. He hadn’t really paid attention to how Joe looked before. His face was blistered and red, and his curly, wild hair radiated from his head like the sun’s rays.

“Is it you?” Brandon mumbled.

Joe stared off, absently.

“You’ve *changed,*” Brandon said.

Joe swooned, then rested his head on the buoy again.

“You’re with Him, aren’t you? I can see right through...” Brandon whispered. “You *wanted* me to spill that oil, didn’t you?”

Joe’s dry throat bulged as he tried to swallow.

“They’re all against me...” Brandon said. There was a large white powerboat gliding on a perpendicular course. It was still a considerable distance away, but the droning was getting louder. It was just another trick. Brandon tried to spit at the boat, but his mouth was so dry that only a weak puff of air issued.

“I say fuck the sun,” Brandon said, “Fuck the sun, and all who follow it.” He groped blindly under the buoy until he felt the fire extinguisher’s cold steel body. His hands shook with fatigue as he struggled to pull the pin free from the handle. Then he angled the nozzle skyward, directly into the face of his fiery tormenter. A thick white cloud gushed out, enveloping both of them in a dense fog. “You too...traitor,” Brandon released a second blast, this time in Joe’s general direction.

A few minutes later, Joe was cursing at two crewmembers of a large charter boat. They had seen the white plume from the fire extinguisher, and said they wanted to help him and Brandon. They asked the two men how long they had been stranded. Joe knew better than to answer. The men had seen Brandon take a stand against the sun. They knew he had a weapon, and they were worried. Brandon and Joe both put up a valiant struggle before they were torn from their buoy by a couple of tan, muscular men wearing dark sunglasses with colorful foam retention straps, their noses slathered with zinc oxide. Joe cursed wildly as they pulled him from the warm water. He could feel the heat of the sun as it consumed the moisture of his pale, exposed skin. Everything jolted into a sickening spin, and Joe drifted quietly into darkness.

When he came to, he was lying near Brandon on a bed of bright orange lifejackets. Strange, tan men were trying to force a plastic tube down his mouth. He felt a surge of energy as a stream of cool liquid ran into his mouth, but he knew better than to swallow. Gathering his strength, he spat the stuff with all his might. It splashed against someone's tan, perplexed face, and Joe watched as it turned into the same kind of viscous, oily water that he drank in his dream. The face looked down at him, its eyes wide in disbelief. They obviously hadn't expected Joe to know about the tar-water. Joe turned his head and saw Brandon laying beside him, flailing his arms and legs wildly at the sun and the man who knelt over him. Concerned charter boat patrons had formed a circle around them. Tourists. People wearing tacky shorts and tropical souvenir t-shirts. People who drove down to Florida from hundreds of miles away, bought postcards, and crammed themselves into fat, slow-moving caravans with stickers that read "soccer mom." People that wore too much sun tan lotion, cheap flip-flops and pink flamingo hats, and strapped plastic waterproof cameras around their necks. They were sun worshippers.

Brandon laughed hysterically as he struggled against his opponents. He clawed at legs, and snapped his teeth at fingers, refusing the filthy water the men offered him. Joe felt honored to bear witness to such a triumph of humanity. He felt the urge to weep with pride as he watched Brandon writhe heroically on the ground.

"Fuck the sun!" called Joe.

"I'm sorry I ever doubted you!" yelled Brandon.

"*Learn to swim,*" they shrieked in unison, "*learn to swim!*"

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