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The Drifter

By Grace Yon

When both of your parents are literature professors, sometimes you wind up named after an author, or even a character. Well, my parents decided that wasn't enough. They named me after a book. Which might serve you well if you end up in the same literary circles as your parents. You know, a joke among educated friends. Great icebreaker at fancy parties where everyone stands around talking about books and drinking champagne so dry it doesn't even taste wet. Not so great for a fisherman.

My name is Ukigumo Tanabata. I'm twenty-five and I work on a NISSUI fishing trawler off the East coast of Japan. A corporate affair, with printed baseball caps and everything. At least I don't have to wear a nametag. I'm not even captain or anything big like that. I work on deck, hauling ropes and smacking fish. I can identify a Japanese Flying Squid with my eyes closed, but give me a piece of classical literature and I'm lost.

The drifting cloud—that's what my name means, borrowed from one of the first modern Japanese books. It used common language instead of the musty old classical stuff people wrote before then so common people could actually understand it. My parents met in a college class devoted to Ukigumo and fell in love. Funny thing is, though, that they have never lived a single day as commoners. They're more at home with classical texts so Chinese they read like nonsense than the common book they named me after. Hell, I could probably get it better than they could.

Despite all that, I like my name. Not in the way that my parents intended me to—more like the opposite, really. I haven't opened a book in years. Sometimes I wish I had one, alone in the steel belly of the trawler. Trapped between sea and sky like an insect between sheets of glass. But mostly I'm happy to eat and stay alive, wandering everywhere but the lowest lev-

els, down where you can feel the pressure. You could say that I'm the captain of my very own one-man crew.

I spend my life with common men beneath a sea of drifting clouds. Most days the water is choppy, deep grey-green spitting white. Those days the wind chaps my face and my hands rub red from hauling wet rope. Some days, though, maybe a couple a month, are brilliant and clear. Water spread like fine Japanese paper, kinks softened by unseen hands. So smooth it feels like sailing on a sheet of glass, broken only by the frothy murmur of the engine. An endless mirror for the clouds.

When the tsunami hit, the sea was so clear I could have seen my reflection in it.

*

"Oi, Gumi," Yoshino spat, flicking a cigarette butt over the railing. "Did you feel that?"

"Feel what?" I turned to squint at him, wind ruffling the tufts of hair that stuck out from beneath my baseball cap. Turned backwards, as usual. I thought it made me look cool. This was the first time we had been in port for more than a few days in as long as I could remember—the sea teemed with squid that spring, ghostly white bodies like dead things that squirmed just beneath the surface, and we worked our asses off to bring in a big haul—so I really needed a haircut.

"I bet you hear that often," Yoshino grinned. I nailed him with my cap, flashing the half-moon sunburn on my forehead. He balled it up and threatened to toss it into the sea, but I wrestled it from him before he got close enough to the railing. The company would probably have just issued me another one, but I liked that hat, had marked it with my sweat. We don't need many possessions out here, but it's nice to have something that really belongs to you, you know?

"I meant the earthquake, idiot. Just a tiny one. Didn't you feel it? I heard they're stronger on the water."

"You're full of crap, man. I didn't feel anything."

A tremor seemed to bend the hulking metal for a moment. The whole ship groaned, and ripples spread into deep water. Yoshino laughed, great bell tower booms that shook his stomach. I kept telling him to lay off the booze. No girls were

going to go for him looking like that, not on a fisherman's salary.

“Welcome to the ring of fire, Gumi.” He threw his arm around my shoulder. I swear he's the hairiest Japanese guy I've ever met. “This is where we belong, you know. Living dangerously. No one's tougher than a fisherman.”

He chortled to himself and gestured across the waves, but I wasn't really listening. I was watching the clouds, cap still scrunched in my hands.

*

My routine is pretty simple. I've been on my own ever since the tsunami hit, but I know that eventually the trawler will drift close enough to land that people will come looking. No one knows I'm alive, especially after this long. They'll have lost hope, too busy rebuilding their own lives to worry about mine. But I'm here, waiting. Not like it's hard to survive on a ship stocked with enough canned food for a small army. But still, it's nice to have a routine.

I'm up early every morning, on deck to watch the sunrise. Some people say it's one of those things—you know, you've seen one sunrise, you've seen them all—but I disagree. It's something about the colors in the clouds, how they seem to catch fire and come blazing over the horizon. Watching sunrises now makes me think of all the sunrises I didn't watch before, because I was too drunk or too lazy to haul my ass above deck. Mostly, though, I was too busy working to notice, an endless dance of casting and reeling in.

There are a lot of things I was too busy to do before. Now that I have all the time in the world, I get kinda lonely. That's why sometimes I wish I had a book with me, to keep me company. I never got that before, but now I think I do. How characters are almost like real people. Maybe that's why my parents named me after a book. I could be anyone I wanted with a name like that. But no books survived the crashing waves, at least none that I've found. I'm too coward to venture to the deepest levels, where white corpses drift on black water. So I've taken to talking to myself, just to hear a voice echoing through steel hallways again.

It's pretty cold even after the sun comes up, so I bundle into the mess hall and scope out something to eat, telling myself what I'm going to do with my time.

"Maybe I'll try to get the boiler working," I say. The boiler is a bit of a lost cause, but I try anyway because it's so damn cold. I check my compass every morning, just to make sure. The ship and I are drifting north. This morning, ice crystals glittered on the prow.

Breakfast is a can of cocktail wieners. The mess hall is too empty and makes me feel even more alone than I really am, so I gather up some cans of food in folds of thick wool blanket and waddle to the captain's office, clanking. Somehow, when I sit behind a dead guy's lacquered mahogany desk and munch cocktail wieners off a camping fork, I feel important. I'm the only one taking care of this ship now, though sometimes I think it's taking care of me. Hell, I always wanted to be my own boss. Now I'm not so sure.

My favorite thing about the captain's office is the row of pens and pencils lined up along the front of the desk. After the first jitters wore off and I felt safe enough to wander, I started finding them everywhere. Stuck in cracks in the deck, poking through shreds like bullet holes bleeding light into the hull. When I brought myself to search the last of the crumpled packs in the bunk room, I found them there too. Now they sit on his desk—my desk—and wait for me, stout and determined. I have decided to write a book. I guess you could call it a memoir. It helps me sort out dreams from memories. Pretty ironic, really. Before the tsunami I barely ever wrote a letter. I wish I could get word to my parents. That's honestly the first thing I would say—not "I'm alive" or "I miss you" but, simply, "I'm writing a book." I think they'd understand.

Every morning, after I finish my breakfast and set the camping fork on the rim of the empty can, I pick one of the writing utensils and start. I know most of them now, normal pencils with sharp corners, fountain pens with nibs so dry you have to suck on them just to get the ink flowing, ballpoints with chewed ends. Today I pick up a ballpoint encased in bamboo, made to look like a twig or something. Probably some dol-

lar store number, but it makes me feel more proper, like an old haiku poet sitting on a rock in the middle of a field and just writing what his senses tell him.

But today, for some reason, the words won't come. I sit in the captain's mock-leather chair until my ass goes numb, cold fingers creeping up my back. Writing and rewriting the same sentence over and over again, but it never comes out how I want it to. A feeling tingles in my fingertips, something I can't explain. The scar on my scalp itches. It makes me antsy. So I leave the office and wander, grabbing another can of cocktail wieners just in case I want a snack. The end of my blanket makes a hissing noise on the bare metal floor.

Slowly, I make my way down to the boiler room, pretending I'm doing an inspection of the ship, poking my head into each room just to make sure everything's still how I left it. Darkness encroaches with each level down until I have to squint to see my own arms. I keep a flashlight in the boiler room, but the batteries are almost dead and I like to save it for real emergencies. Soon it's going to get too cold to move encased in all this steel, so fixing the boiler is pretty high on my list. Not that I have much hope, though.

I have gotten pretty good at finding my way around in the dark. To get to the boiler room means going down into pitch darkness, the belly of the ship. I walk slowly with my arms held out in front of me, sliding each foot out like I'm practicing kendo. Hush of white socks on a gymnasium floor, bamboo warm beneath my fingers.

My biggest fear is finding a zombie down in the dark, my only warning a cold rush of air and clammy flesh against my palms. I know I'm just winding myself up, but it's hard not to think about that down here. Don't tell anyone, okay? You'd be scared sometimes too, stuck on a floating tomb with no one but corpses for company, all just waiting for you to join them. Sometimes, when soft spray sprinkles the deck, I can almost hear them whispering to each other. It makes my skin crawl, but it's true.

I stumble over a pipe that has shifted since my last visit and stub my toe, curses echoing down the staircase until I can

hear myself, far below. The can of cocktail wieners falls from my blanket and rolls along the floor. I hear it teeter for a moment. Then it tips and I wince as it clangs down the stairs, quieter and quieter, until the sound fades away. My fingertips are still tingling. The feeling fills my body, silence ringing in my ears.

It is bitterly cold in the boiler room. My fingers shake as I fumble for the flashlight, feeling my way down corrugated stairs, socks snagging on sharp metal. But it's no good—the flashlight must have fallen, coaxed into some moldy corner by the gentle sway of the waves. I take another step down, and icy water seeps through my sock. It feels like the same icy water is swirling through my chest. The ship must be sinking ever so slowly, water creeping through the lower levels while I ate cocktail wieners and played captain.

There's no way to get the boiler working again with three feet of water in the room, and I write the flashlight off as lost. The tingling feeling saps energy from my muscles and I practically crawl back upstairs, back where light still seeps through, though I can't feel its warmth anymore. Not this far north.

When I finally make it back to the office, night has fallen. Have I really spent that much time below, black water lapping at my feet, or are the days just getting shorter? Exhausted, I cocoon myself in blankets and curl into a ball on the captain's chair, making sure my feet stay off the floor. I haven't had a real night's sleep since before the tsunami. In my dreams, black waves swirl through me and tug my breath away. I am always drowning. Water so cold it burns.

As usual, I am rocked to sleep by the slow groaning of a ship that's lost its purpose, the tireless slap of waves against an empty hull.

The sea itself shook. Yoshino yelled something but I could not hear him over the sound of metal tearing. I had felt earthquakes before, sure. It's hard to imagine living without them. I felt them so often that it seemed commonplace to wake up in the middle of the night, shadow of a quake still rattling your mind. But I had never felt an earthquake like this.

The earth shook so strongly that I could feel the energy moving through the water in waves, buckling steel girders like tin foil. The deck bucked and I hauled myself along the railing, corded muscles pulled taut by my own weight as I struggled to remain onboard.

The shaking stopped.

It could only have lasted a few seconds, but my ribs already ached from frantic heartbeats. Men shouted and bodies swarmed across the deck, throwing greasy ropes to tiny figures bobbing in the waves. I tried to move, but my body seemed static, muscles thick and heavy. The world swam in and out of focus.

When my senses finally adjusted, a rush of sound and light that nearly blinded me, I realized that Yoshino had disappeared. I thrust my head and shoulders over the railing and called his name. Dozens of guys clung to shattered boards, calling to each other and waving at the men on board. From a hundred feet above the water they all looked the same. Dozens more floated, unmoving. Water stained red and brown. I was sure that I knew some of them, the ones drifting facedown, skin already bloated. Maybe Yoshino was there, too.

A bout of seasickness came over me then, worse than I have ever experienced. I tossed the contents of my stomach over the railing and staggered to the cabin door, which hung from one hinge and rattled with the movement of the ship. Somehow I found my way to the bunk room, struggling upstream against a seething current of bodies. I think I may have been shouting, but I don't remember.

The bunk room was completely empty. I turned the thick wheel on the door to lock it behind me and breathed deep. Thick steel dampened the shrieks and groans that filtered down from above, and I let silence wash over me.

Huddled on my bed below deck, smeared with sweat and spray and puke, I did not see the wall of water that sprinted to harbor. I did not see yachts and rowboats tossed a hundred feet in the air by the force of the wave, not clear blue but brown with silt and destruction. I did not hear the moan that rose as one from my colleagues, who stared up at the wave and knew

that they were all going to die.

The trawler turned somersaults. The force tore me from the safety of my bed and flung me against the wall. I don't remember anything for a while after that.

I woke slowly, shadowy fingers still pulling me in, trying to drag me under the swirling black surface of my dreams. My head throbbed so painfully that I hurled again. I was pinned against the wall by a pile of canvas sacks. It took a while for me to realize that they were duffel bags, the most personal belongings of men I had lived with for months. Friends who were probably all dead. I had no idea what had happened, nothing but a nagging suspicion I longed to disregard. I wouldn't figure it out completely until I finally stumbled onto the deck and saw nothing but ocean in all directions.

One side of my face pressed against the wall. Wetness trickled over my closed eyelid and dripped off my chin. I coughed and blood splattered onto the nearest duffel bags in thick, half-congealed droplets. When I moved, my whole head ached and fire lanced across my scalp. I worried that what I found might make me sick again, but I felt the side of my face anyway.

My fingers probed up the side of my face, smearing blood. My hair felt wet and it glommed together in chunks, tips already crusted. I almost passed out when I found the wound—my fingers dug into it and sharp stabs cut through the dull throbbing that filled my skull. My eyes streamed and the world turned somersaults, vision swaying in time with the turbulent waves in my stomach. Gingerly, I set my head back against the wall and waited for the heaving to subside.

I woke up again. Somehow I had fallen asleep. I touched my head and felt the gash, ragged flesh wiggling beneath my fingers. Damn. I had hoped it'd all been a dream, but the bunk room was as empty as ever, and my head still ached. I felt a little better, though. The storm in my stomach had died down and I could think more clearly.

I tried to stand and almost threw up again, slumping heavily against the wall and jolting my skull. I shut my eyes and little lights erupted through the darkness. That wasn't going to work.

Instead, I stayed seated and rummaged through every duffel bag I could reach, hoping for a few choice items. I moved like a tortoise, drawing one bag toward me and pulling back the long zipper, setting it to my left when I had finished.

It took a long time to go through all of the duffel bags, and by the time I had finished they were stacked several layers high in a neat wall that closed me in. Laid out on an old Tokyo Disneyland t-shirt in front of me was a small collection of valuables. Three bottles of water, a sewing kit with a tiny pair of scissors, two lighters half-full of fluid, a bottle of aspirin, a Ziploc bag filled with granola bars, a package of seaweed, a bar of soap, a toothbrush and toothpaste, and some floss.

First things first. I poured one of the bottles of water over my head, scrubbing carefully to get as much dried blood from my hair as I could. Then I popped a handful of aspirin and sat back, listening to the blood on my cheek crackle as it dried. With one of the lighters, I sterilized a needle from the sewing kit. Fire and smoke blackened the tips of my fingers, but they were so calloused from working on the trawler that I hardly felt a thing. I wish I could have said the same for my scalp.

When I probed the cleaned wound, my fingers met a tangle of mutilated flesh and something smooth that felt sickeningly like bone. I'm bad at sewing even when I can see what I'm working on, but somehow I managed to stitch it together. Each time the needle pierced a flap of skin, I bit my tongue and swallowed bile. Finally, my fingers met whole flesh. I tied a clumsy knot and clipped the thread.

I struggled through fevered dreams, body aching each time I lashed out. Clammy sweat began to eat through the blood and vomit on my clothes. I fought to stay above the surface of a churning ocean, black waves pushing me down, currents tugging me under. Sodden bodies brushed against my feet.

I woke covered in duffel bags. At some point I must have kicked out and knocked them on top of me, the thick canvas keeping me warm. My forehead still prickled and my limbs weighed like lead, but I managed to move a few bags and sit up

without hurling. I guess I had nothing to bring up at that point, anyway. My stomach grumbled and a hollow feeling spread between my lungs and into my throat.

In the end, the gnawing in my stomach got me moving. I kept one hand along the wall and shuffled to the door, which was shut so tightly I almost couldn't get it open again, even though I was the one who had closed it. How long had it been since then? My arms were thin and yellow, and when I pinched the skin it took a long time to slump back down. At least I knew where I was going—I could have found my way around the ship with my eyes closed.

I had never tasted anything as magical as that first can of cocktail wieners. I ate it in one mouthful, ignoring the stitch in my side, and washed it down with a whole bottle of water. After my first meal in days I felt solid and warm. It was a good feeling, and I really just wanted to go to sleep, right there on the aluminum tabletop. But for some reason I forced myself to keep going. I made a pot of rice and ate several scoops with my hands, leaving the rest on the stovetop for later.

I hadn't expected to see anyone else, but it still felt lonely traipsing through the narrow hallways, nothing but my footsteps and shallow breaths to combat the pressing silence.

Stepping onto the deck was like being born again, a burst of air and sound and smell. Wind rushed through my hair and whistled in my ears. My nose filled with the tang of salt and the fresh, empty smell of open ocean. I stripped naked and threw my old clothes overboard, letting spray wash sweat and blood from my body.

It was a clear day and the trawler cut through stunted whitecaps. Rays of sunlight blazed down through atmosphere unclouded by smog and cigarette smoke and warmed my bare skin. I lay on the deck and basked, soaking in warmth and feeling the energy return to my muscles. It began with a tingling at the tips of my fingers and spread down.

Lying on my back, I watched clouds drift slowly across the horizon. It felt like I was looking overboard and watching their reflections on a glassy sea.

Something wakes me earlier than normal. Gunk crusts my eyelids together and my back is stiff from sleeping in the captain's chair. For the first time since the tsunami, I do not remember any dreams.

Sound echoes through the ship, clanging footsteps and what sound like distant voices. I am up in an instant, racing out of the captain's office with a blanket still draped around my shoulders. I hurtle down long hallways and up flights of stairs, stopping to catch my breath and listen for the sounds. Sometimes they seem closer, sometimes more distant, echoing through a maze of steel.

I chase the voices through the lower levels, stumbling in half-light. I race through the mess hall and the bunk room, past the control rooms and rows of offices, past the sorting rooms for fish and squid and the freezer rooms, which stink of rot. I race up a flight of stairs, taking them two at a time, and try to hear the voices over my pounding heartbeat. After all these months, I am finally not alone.

Ice clings to the deck, and I immediately begin to shiver. A group of men in thick orange jackets huddle at the prow. Each is tied to the railing with a length of rope. Some of the ropes are taut and snake past me, but most still hang limp. The men peer toward me—they must have heard me slam the main door. It still hangs on one hinge and bangs against the wall whenever the wind is rough.

I wave my arms and jump around, shouting. I tell them my name, how long I've been on the ship, how I never thought anyone would find it. I talk more than I have since the earthquake. I talk until my voice cracks, until my throat is raw. But none of them say anything. They lose interest in the door and turn away, dispersing over the deck, walking like it might collapse at any moment. One man walks past me, so close I could touch him. I reach out and feel nothing but a cool breath of air. My fingers look solid, but they pass right through him.

And that's when I realize. I really am drifting.