

George Vukelich is a 32 year old writer of strong promise. He has written book reviews and feature articles for the *Milwaukee Journal*; radio plays for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation; short stories for *Colliers*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Fisherman Magazine*, *The Sign*, *The University of Kansas City Review*, the *Martha Foley Anthology*, *Best American Short Stories of 1955*; poetry for the *Beloit Poetry Journal*, and *Botteghe Oscure*. His first novel, *Fisherman's Beach*, will be published in the near future by St. Martin's Press of New York. Mr. Vukelich's writing has been strongly rooted in Wisconsin, and *The Bosun's Chair* reflects this regional bias.

the bosun's chair

a short story by GEORGE VUKELICH

God grant me

the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change

Courage to change the things I can

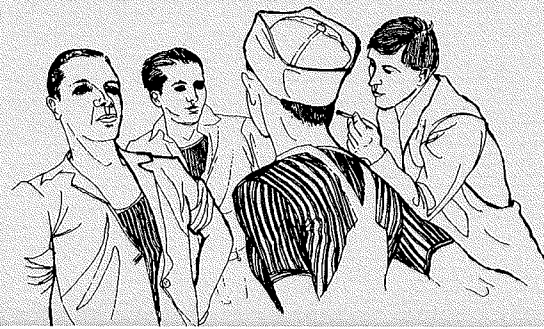
and Wisdom to know the difference.

The season was November and winter was sliding into the Great Inland Seas like a spearpole. A wet, ashy snow was falling from the industrial sky when we tied up at Indiana Harbor with a load of limestone for the cement plants. The great railroad crane was up on its skinny steel legs poising like a praying mantis over our starboard side, and then the shovelmouth began filling itself at our hatches and going away and disgorging and then it came crawling forward to feed again.

‡ It was a single shovel rig and that meant we would be unloading for the next 40 hours because this was the slowest dock on the Great Lakes. In the meantime the crew would get a chance to run over to Gary and Calumet City and Mary's Place in South Chicago.

the bosun's chair

‡ The ladder was lowered and the first offwatch men climbed down to the dock gingerly because they were dressed up for town and the handrails were wet and sooty. They turned and shouted up to the Bosun.



“Hey, you got fresh meat, Digger!”

They pointed to the little guy getting out of a taxicab and carrying a cardboard suitcase. They talked to him and hollered up to the Bosun again.

“Deck Department, Digger! Fresh meat!”

The men waved and got into the muddy red, white, and blue Vet cabs and rode away. As the new man began the long climb up the Ladder, Digger abruptly turned, nodded at me to follow, and headed for the Galley. This was S.O.P. with Digger whenever crew replacements came aboard. Ignore them. Ignore the hell out of them.

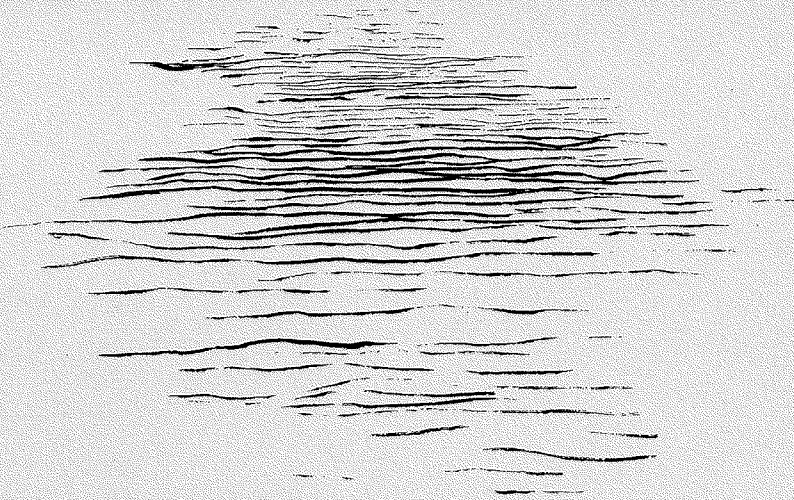
Digger was in his thirties. A Navy veteran of World War II, he had sailed aircraft carriers in Task Force 58 against the Japanese. He was married to his high school sweetheart, had two children, and now was making a career of the Great Lakes oreboats.

“I work nine straight months,” he said, “and then I curl up next to Mama for three. When I make Third Mate I’ll have it knocked up.”

He didn’t drink too much and he didn’t whore around at all and he spent most of his time studying navigation because he intended to write for his Third Mate papers during the coming off-season. This was his first season as Bosun and he knew sailing all right but he didn’t know how to handle sailors and he was always calling the deckhands sonofabitch and whore and worse names that no real man would take and you had to call him on that or just get the hell off the ship. He was a rough Bosun only because he was trying so desperately to prove and prove that he was a man, a Real Man, and that is the worst kind of Bosun a deckhand can draw.

Digger was talking as we walked into the Galley for coffee and a cigarette. Digger liked to talk. If you knew anything at all about Digger, you knew that he liked to talk; and since you had heard this talk before you stopped listening.

I went over to the urn for coffee as Old Petersen came in. He had the new man with him. Petersen was always like money



from home. Coming from Ashland in northern Wisconsin, he had been a lumberjack in the Old Days and in a way he would always be a lumberjack. He was the kind of man who was happy only with a peavy in his great hands or a doublebitted axe or a bucksaw or a marlinspike or a heavingline or anything that took a man to handle. He was six-foot-two and he walked like a young man and he knew his way around and there was Life in his eyes.

Petersen got himself some coffee and sat down and he had that playful look again.

"I see your buddy's in the sack already," he said to me. "Old Buffalo."

That was the other deckhand, Billy Meyer from a little backwoods town in Minnesota. Billy was only 20 and already big as two men and Petersen called him Buffalo. Buffalo Billy. That was Petersen's sense of humor.

"He's still a growing boy," I said. "He needs his sleep."

"Well," Pete said. "You two guys won't be shorthanded anyhow. We got a new man again."

Petersen introduced me to the new man, his name was Frank, and then he showed him where the coldmeats and the bread were. Frank made himself some sandwiches and sat down. His cheeks bulged with the food and he washed it down with cold milk and kept chewing rapidly.

"I didn't get a chance to eat dinner," he said. "They wanted me to stick around the Lake Carrier's Hall."

"Sure," Petersen said, "Those bastards would let a man starve to death. It's like the army. You know, hurry up and wait." In the warmth of the galley, there was a thin stringlike whiskey smell around the new man. Petersen sniffed and looked at me and then at the new man.

"Too bad you didn't get a chance to meet the Bosun yet," Petersen said.

The new man had his mouth full. "I guess I work under him, huh?" He kept chewing and turned to Petersen. "What's his name, the Bosun?"

"Digger," Petersen said.

"That's right," the man said. "Digger. Gotta remember that. Digger."

Petersen looked around at me and then went back to cooling his coffee.

"It's an easy name," he said. "You'll remember it."

I watched Frank eating and didn't say anything.

"Well," Petersen said, "this makes how many deckhands this season for Digger? About 50?"

"About that," I said. Petersen looked at me and there was something smiling in his eyes. "But he's a good Bosun, ain't he? Gets the work out?"

"Bosun's bucking pretty goddam hard for Third Mate," Petersen explained to Frank. "That makes it rough on the deckhands. You know. They come and they go. Jesus, that's a lot of deckhands."

Petersen was still looking at me.

"Somebody's going to take him down on the Dock one day. Ain't that right, kid?"

"Who?"

"Digger. One day somebody's going to take that good Bosun down on the Dock."

"Is that right?" I said.

"That's right," Petersen said. "Somebody is going to take him down and clean his clock."

"I can hardly wait."

"I guess we have to," Petersen said. "Don't we?"

"Petersen," I said. "You're a nice old bastard. You are a nice troublemaking old bastard."

The new man finished his sandwiches and licked his fingers and then he asked where he could pick up his bedding.

"From the cook or one of the porters," Petersen said. He pointed through the Galley and Frank said he better get his bedding now and he went to find the cook.

"Well," I said. "What kind of a guy is this one?"

"One-tripper," Petersen said. "Alky all right. Reminds me of a

rabbit. You know. All twitchy and nervous. Nose like a rabbit.”

“He must be hard up as hell to come decking this late.”

“Alky,” Petersen said. “Looking to get stakebound. He’s a one-tripper all right. You know, right up Digger’s alley.”

We didn’t say anything for a long time and Petersen was shaking his head.

“He was better off on the beach,” I said.

“Said he lives in Gary and Lake Carriers sent him out,” Petersen said. “He came aboard right after you guys left and I took him up Forward.” He paused. “Digger give him the cold shoulder at the ladder?”

“Digger’s got him cased,” I said. “I hope to Christ this guy’s got winter clothes.”

“I don’t think so,” Petersen said. “All he had was a little cardboard suitcase. No foulweather gear and that stuff.”

“The poor bastard. He was better off.”

Petersen got twinkly again.

“If you feel so sorry for him,” he said, “why don’t you show him your heart’s in the right place and tell him he was better off on the beach?”

“Oh, screw you, Petersen.”

Petersen laughed and drank his coffee.

“They all do,” he said. “They always do. That’s what happens when your heart is in the right place.”

We got up and carried our cups to the sink drainboard and Petersen went on Watch and I waited for the new man.

Frank came back with his clean padding from the Steward’s Department and then we went sloshing up the deck to our quarters past the gaping open cargo hatches that looked like toothless mouths and we didn’t say anything until we reached the deck crane which was dogged down Forward.

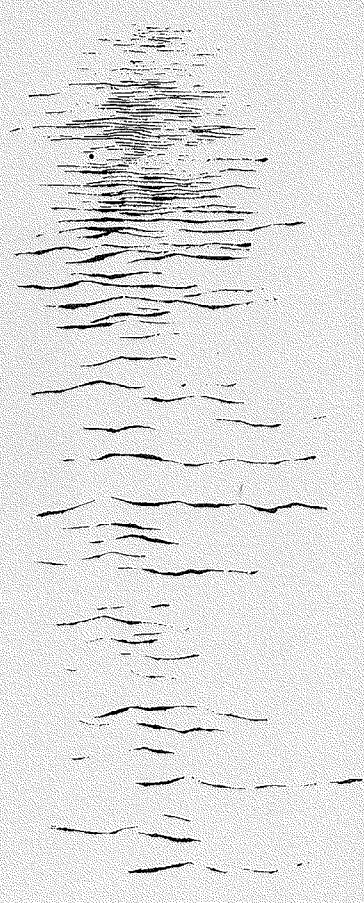
“I see you got an Iron Deckhand,” Frank said.

“We’ve got four Iron Deckhands,” I said.

“Four?”

“That crane. And Billy Boy. And you. And me.”

We turned at Number One hatch.



"Do they put *all* the deckhands down on the dock?" Frank was pointing to the boom and the bosun's chair. The chair was like a piece of two-by-four with a rope through it strung to the boom and you rode it with a lifejacket on and were swung out over the side as the tugboats pushed inward and the ship closed with the docks because you had to get down there in a hurry and handle mooring lines.

"Yeah," I said. "You know. The more the merrier."

"That's a dangerous goddam thing," he said. "What if you fall off?"

It was a stupid question and I knew because I had asked the same question of Old Petersen when I first came aboard. The 600 feet of steel ship simply closed with the dock like a visejaw. A man in the water would be like a peanut in a nut cracker. Now I gave Frank the same answer Petersen had given me.

"Once you fall off," I said, "it stops being dangerous."

We stopped. He stared at the boom and chair, clutching his bedding tightly and shivering. We entered the ladderwell and started down.

"They serious about that sign?"

He was pointing to the big blue metal sign with the block white letters.



**INTOXICATION PROHIBITED
BRINGING LIQUOR ABOARD SHIP
IS STRICTLY FORBIDDEN.**

"It protects the company if you get hurt," I said.

"You gotta be sober to sue them, huh?" He laughed. "You gotta be drunk to take a goddam job like this in the first place. And then you gotta be sober to sue them."

We crossed the dunnage room and entered the door stenciled,
DECKHANDS.

He had taken the bunk over Billy and now he threw down the new bedding and opened up his cardboard suitcase and began pulling out balled up, dirty laundry.

"I better do some washing," he said. "We can use that machine out in the dunnage room, can't we?"

"Yes," I said. "Only they don't like us to use it when we're docked up."

He stopped pulling clothes from the suitcase.

"Why?"

"It uses up too much hot water," I said. "Christ, I don't know. Only we don't wash clothes in Port."

"I really should wash this stuff," he said. "I don't have anything clean." He began pulling dirty clothes from the suitcase again.

"What the hell," he said. "It won't take me long. If anybody bitches, I can tell them nobody told me anything."

I took off my boots and worked my toes to get the chill out of them. Frank had a huge pile of clothes now and he took a good armful and went out the door. The pile left was still sizable and I knew that he wouldn't get through it in less than two or three washer loads. Then I heard Billy's soft slow voice.

"What the hell is that?"

He was looking at the sprawling pile on the flooring.

"We've got a new man," I said.

"What's he doing? Taking in washing?"

"He doesn't have anything clean."

"I can see that. What kind of a guy is this one?"

"Petersen says one-tripper."

"Boozer?"

"Smells like it."

"What did Digger say?"

"He's still thinking something up."

"Uhuh. I can see we're gonna have a real ball again. I hope this guy doesn't see snakes all night."

"I don't care about nights. I just hope this guy doesn't see anything wrong with working days."

"Oh, Digger will have him loose as a goose, buddy."

"I don't know. This guy's pretty scared. He's gonna be real rough up there. The bosun's chair scared him stiff."

"How the hell could it scare him? You mean looking at it?"



"Yeah. Looking at it."

He reached over for his cigarettes and his lighter.

"The Old Man get his orders yet?"

"I don't know," I said. "Dock Boss says we've got Up Above next."

"No more stone?"

"He says not for us. A couple of self-unloaders from the Bradley fleet are taking the run right up to Layup."

"Good goddam deal," he said sitting up. "We get us some overtime, Daddy."

The Deck Department always drew time-and-a-half when the ship passed through the Locks at Sault Ste. Marie and was lifted into the waters of Lake Superior. Coming back, the process was reversed and the ship was lowered and that was time-and-a-half too. The Company maintained a supply warehouse at the Soo Locks and a supply boat would come alongside and unload skidsful of meat and foodstores, drums of propane gas for the Galley, everything and anything the ship had requisitioned in advance, and all of the stuff had to be pulled off the skids and checked and hauled and trucked away to the department that had put in the requisition.

From 100-pound bags of potatoes to 100-watt bulbs, the deckhands handled the new supplies and it was going to be a bitch at The Soo this time because we would be taking on heavy supplies for Layup in addition to the usual stores and already a good cold winter was working Up Above.

"It's a goddam good deal all right," I said.

The door opened and we could hear the washing machine humming and Frank came in and stood over his pile of clothes.

"I just put one load in," he said. He saw Bill sitting on the bunk and stopped.

"Frank," I said. "This is Bill. Bill, Frank's our new man."

The door opened and there was no washing machine hum this time and there was Digger, stepping slowly inside and leaning against the bulkhead. He looked owly and was wearing slippers and now he stared slowly, tightly at the pile of laundry in front of Frank and finally his eyes came up to Frank's face.

Frank smiled uncertainly.

"I'm the new deckhand," he said. "You the Boats?"

Digger slouched with his hands in his dungarees.

"Those your clothes in the machine?"

"Yes," Frank said. "I don't have anything clean—"

"Get 'em the hell out of there."

Digger was landing on the new man with both feet. It was like watching some great bird measuring and circling and then dropping like a knifeblade into the crippled body of a small animal. Frank was not a pro and Digger was all pro and he hated the one-trippers like poison.

Frank was trembling.

"I don't have anything clean and—"

"Listen, boozer," Digger snapped. "Nobody washes clothes when this boat's in port. *Nobody.*"

Frank stood there and his lips were tight and working like he was going to cry.

"I turned off the machine," Digger said. "Now get your stuff the hell out of there." He straightened up and took his hands out of his pockets and went out the door.

Frank stood there for a long time and we didn't say anything and when he turned there were tears in his eyes. He looked at me and shook his head and bit his lips and knelt down to pick up the dirty laundry.

"Jesus Christ," he was murmuring. "Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ."

"Digger's kind of an S.O.B. Don't let him get you."

"We got a bottle," Billy said. "Do you want a shot, Frank?"


"No," he said. "No. God no."

"That's right about Digger," Billy said. "Don't let him get you."

"No more," he said. "I'm not going to drink any more. Not for the trip."

"Sure," Billy said.

The morning after we left Indiana Harbor, we ran into a heavy pus colored sea and the thermometer on the boat deck flattened off at ZERO. The empty carrier was skidding high and rough like a corkfloat and the decks and hatches were coating up with ice. Digger got the deckhands out before breakfast



and we rigged a lifeline back to the Afterend. We had it done before Frank came on deck. He had a flapping red kerchief around his head and was wearing street shoes and his nose was running and he looked like he was going to freeze to death and blow away.

"Where the hell were you?" Digger shouted.

"I don't have any clothes," Frank said. There was that thin smell of whiskey about him again.

Digger started to say something and didn't and we finished securing the lifeline and then we went to breakfast.

"I don't have any clothes," Frank kept saying. "I was looking for some clothes to wear."

After Digger left the table we ate without talking for awhile.

"I was looking for some clothes to wear," Frank said again.

"Sure," Billy said. "That's all right, Frank."

"I wasn't trying to goof off and make it rough for you guys."

"Don't you worry about that," Billy said.

We finished eating and got into our jackets and Frank wrapped the red handkerchief around his head again. On deck we staggered and slipped our way forward along the shardhung rail. The wind was rising.

We came down the ladderwell into the Dunnage Room and there was Digger, dressed in his black raingear and pulling on his long rubber gloves.

"Mate says we have to hose her down, boys. Let's go."

Billy and I didn't say anything.

"Jesus Christ," Frank said. "It's freezing out there."

"We got live steam coming," Digger said. "Get your raingear and get that hose out."

"I don't have any clothes," Frank said.

Digger turned on Frank.

"That's your lookout. You boys get your foulweather gear on."

"Not me," Frank said. "I can't hose down."

"What was that, boozer?" Digger said.

"I can't hose down."

"That's mutiny," Digger said. "You refuse to work. The Coast Guard can take care of your ass."

"I don't refuse to work," Frank said. "Why can't we work in the Cargo Hold or below deck somewhere? I don't refuse to work. I refuse to hose down."

Digger stared at him.

"I *don't* refuse to work," Frank said.

"Christ, you were drunk before breakfast. You can't pull that stuff out here," Digger said. "Goddammit. You signed articles on this boat and if you refuse to work, that's mutiny."

"I don't refuse to work."

Digger looked at Billy and at me.

"You guys heard him," Digger said. "He refused to work."

"No," Billy said. "He refuses to hose down."

"That's right," I said. "He only refuses to hose down."

Digger stared at me.

"Only?" He screamed. "Only!"

"It is pretty goddamned stormy," Billy said.

"We have work in the Cargo Holds," I said. "It's safer."

"That's mutiny," Digger said. "All three of you. The Coast Guard can take care of all three of you."

Billy looked at me and slowly pulled off his gloves.

"If the Coast Guard comes out in this gale, they're crazier than you are."

"He'll get 10 years," Digger said. "They can put you all in prison for 10 years."

"Why don't you just give Frank a break?" Billy said. "Let him work below?"

"Billy and I could handle it on deck. Let him work below. Right, Billy?"

"Hell, yes."

"No," Digger said. "He hoses down like everybody else."

"But we don't need him up there. He'd freeze to death out there. Like Billy says, why don't you give him a break?"

"He refuses to work. That's mutiny."

"Digger," Billy said. "You're talking foolish."

"Foolish," Digger said, "I'll show you who's talking foolish when I get the First Mate down here."

He started up the ladder and then Billy yelled at him.

"Digger!"

Digger stopped and half turned.

"Yeah?"

"Digger," Billy said, "why don't you just use a gun?"

We turned and filed into our quarters and Digger went hustling up the ladderwell.

We sat on our bunks and waited and didn't say anything and the wind was running hard outside the deadlights and Billy got his fifth out and stared at it. It was half gone. He rummaged around in the drawer.

"The pint's gone," he said. "You take the pint?"

"No," I said. He was staring at Frank when the First Mate came in.

"You boys don't want to get in trouble for mutiny," he said.

"I don't refuse to work," Frank said.

"It was a misunderstanding," the Mate said. "We got a wrong weather report. The Old Man changed his mind. He wants you to work in the Cargo Hold." He looked at Frank for a long time.

"You don't want to get in trouble for mutiny," he said. "Do you?"

"No, sir," Frank said.

"You'll be paid off after we dock at Two Harbors. You're all done," the Mate said.

"Done?" Frank said.

"It could be worse," the Mate said. "If you were reported to the Coast Guard."

"For not hosing down in a gale," Billy said. "Crap."

"The Old Man's sore as hell at both of you, too," the Mate said. "You guys should know better. I don't think you'll sail for this company again."

Billy and I looked at each other. We had our mariners' documents and we could sail anywhere. Fresh water. Salt water. What the hell. There were good ships and bad ships and there was a world of water to work and we looked at each other and at Frank. Frank looked stunned.

"You're breaking my heart, Mate," Billy said.

"Look, boys," the Mate said. "You know I'm not a hardnose. But I gotta be a hardnose when you don't play ball with the

Bosun. You put him in a crack and I gotta back him up every time. Anyway, what the hell. Finish your drink and then get some socket wrenches and a flashlight and go check manhole covers in the Cargo Holds. Take all damn day but play ball with Digger now."

Billy smiled.

"Below deck, huh, Mate?"

"Hosing down was on the work sheet," the Mate said, "but we got a wrong weather report. It's not Digger's fault the gale broke."

"Like you said, Mate," Billy said. "You gotta back him up."

"Okay, kid," the Mate said. "We see eye to eye. That's why I'm paying you off in Two Harbors, Frank. Bosun can make it pretty rough on a deckhand." He paused. "Well. Don't take all damn day."

Then he was gone and we took off our heavy foulweather gear and got grease and socket wrenches and flashlights and went to check manhole covers in the Cargo Hold. We took our time and made the job last and we didn't see Digger at all.

"He could kill me," Frank said when we broke for a smoke. "I can see it." He grabbed Bill by the shoulder. "The Bosun *can* kill me. In that chair. That bosun's chair."

"You'll be all right," Billy said.

"Not on the chair," Frank said.

"Yes, on the chair. All you have to do is hang onto the rope."

Frank looked at him.

"And stay sober. Hang onto the rope and for Chrissake stay sober. You ride that thing drunk and you'll kill yourself."

"I can't do it," Frank said.

"Oh hell. Sure you can. Christ, it's simple."

"I can't do it."

"Jesus Christ," Billy said. "All right. You can't do it. Only what the hell did you sign on for then?"

Frank looked like he had been knifed.

"We get paid for this kind of stuff," Billy said. "What the hell did you expect, a vacation cruise?"

"I don't refuse to work," Frank said.

"Oh, crap," Billy said. "You give me that no drinking business and then you steal my booze. What the hell do you expect us to do? You want us to do your work for you too?"

Frank stared at us.

"If you want to panhandle your way, why the hell didn't you

stay on the beach?"

Frank didn't say anything for a long time.

"I'm afraid of the chair," he said in almost a whisper. "You don't know how it is."

"I know all right," Billy said.

"I'm afraid," Frank said.

"You're yellow," Billy said. "You're lazy and you're a drunk and you're a thief and you're yellow to boot."

We stared at the bulkheads and listened to the wind screaming.

"Look," Billy said. "I was talking like Digger just now. I'm sorry. I didn't mean you were yellow."

"Sure," Frank said. "I know."

"Okay, Frank," Billy said.

"Only you were right," Frank said. "You hit the nail right on the head. I am yellow." He looked at us. "I'm old enough to be your father. You hit the nail right on the head." He began that whimpering little crying again.

"Jesus Christ," he said. "Jesus Christ. I'm old enough to be your father."

"Hell," Billy said. "Just hang in there. Hang tough, Frank."

Frank stopped the whimpering little crying and he reached a pint bottle out of his jacket and it was Billy's. As he extended it, the bottle slipped from his hand. There was a crash in the black empty cargo hold far below.

"I'll pay you for the bottle," he said hoarsely. "Honest."

"That's all right," Billy said.

"And I'm not going to drink again."

"Sure," Billy said.

The night before we docked at Two Harbors, Minnesota, Old Petersen came in off watch and asked Frank how it was going. We had scrounged foul weather gear and boots for Frank. He was dressed for the deck now and he was eating three squares a day and scrounging oranges and fruit and he wasn't drinking at all and we knew he was giving himself the cold turkey treatment and we watched him trying and we didn't talk about it.

"How's it going, Frank?" Petersen asked again. "They got you looking like an old pro."

"It's going all right," Frank said. "I'm hanging tough."

"Sure," Petersen said. "A man has to stay loose. Then it's all right."

"Loose as a goose," Frank said. "Christ, I'm hanging by my thumbs."

Petersen laughed.

"That's right," he said. "Oh, it ain't so bad, you know. A man has to have clothes though. Then it ain't so bad on deck. I bet you didn't think sailing was like this, huh, Frank?"

"She's a home," he said. "She's a home. She's a feeder."

It was the time honored endorsement that sailors give to the ships that prove tolerable.

"Only that bosun's chair. I can't do that. I can't do that."

"Sure you can," Petersen said.

"No."

Petersen dug out his wallet then and opened it and took out a little card and passed it to Frank. Frank read it and read it and then he read it again.

"That's the Alky prayer," he said.

"It takes one to know one," Petersen said. "You'll be all right, Frank."

"How long you been dry?" Frank asked.

"Long time," Petersen said. "Long time, Frank. You know the score. We don't preach to anybody."

We didn't say anything about that and then the door opened and Digger came in. He was wearing slippers and a clean T-shirt and a long-billed cap.

"I made some popcorn," he said. "You guys want any popcorn?"

No one said anything.

"It gets behind my plate," Petersen said.

Digger looked around us and settled upon Frank.

No one said anything.

Digger seated himself on the flooring and crossed his legs and leaned back against the bulkhead.

"Well," he said pulling off the long-billed cap. "Won't be long now and I'll be curling up next to Mama for the winter."

He was looking past everyone and staring at the deadlight. Then he turned to Petersen.

"You know it's been a long goddam time, Pete. We fitted out March 16."

"That's a long time all right," Petersen said.

"Damn right," Digger said. He looked at us. "That's the roughest part of sailing. Fitting out. Layup's a goddam snap compared

to fitting out. Chip and scrape. Hell, we got all the hull painted before the crew ever come on board. Got most of the Cargo Hold sprayed too."

"Yeah, that's a long time," Pete said. "I could take it when I was young. Now a couple three months is plenty. Just enough to get stakebound. You know."

Digger was squinting at Petersen.

"Let's see," he said. "I left home on March 14 and I ain't seen the wife and kids for . . ." He broke off and was calculating. ". . . almost nine damn months. It'll be over nine when we hit the layup dock."

Frank looked up for the first time since Digger came in and now he was watching Digger closely.

"Nine months," Petersen said. "Yeah. That's a long time."

"Got a big bonus coming too," Digger said. "Company'll send that one in January sometime and I'll be cuddled up close to Mama. Hell, let her freeze tight then."

He sat there without speaking and without looking directly at any of us and we listened to the water sloshing below us in the Blind Tank.

"How long you been sailing ore boats?"

The question was Frank's and the voice was careful and yet clear and clean and sharp.

Digger cocked an eye at him.

"Eight years," he said.

"You been married all that time?"

"Jesus, I better be. I got a wife and two kids to prove it."

Frank shook his head.

"Eight years," he said. "That's a mistake."

Digger scowled.

"What kind of a crack is that?"

Frank leaned forward.

"You know, Boats," he said. "Most guys make a mistake when they love a woman. They tie her down with kids and then they take off. One way or another they take off. That's a mistake, Boats."

Digger was clenching and unclenching his right hand.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You leave a woman alone for nine months every year," Frank said. "What do you expect?"

Digger was punching his right fist into his left palm.

"Uhuh," he said. "Uhuh. You goddamn rotten drunk."

"I knew a guy once, Boats," Frank said. "Married. Left her alone a lot. You know why he did it, Boats? Because he was afraid of her. Afraid of his own wife. I guess he was afraid of all women from way back."

Digger slid to his feet and stood spreadlegged.

"This guy wanted his wife to whore around when he was gone," Frank said. "Damn right. He wanted her to do that and then he could find out about it and he could feel better because—because he *wanted* his wife to be a whore—"

Digger cracked him then, the right fist smashing full on the bridge of Frank's nose and Frank spun into the wicked steel bunk and bounced and fell to the flooring. For a long time it looked like Digger was going to kick the life out of the thin scrubby rabbit body.

Frank raised his face slowly and his face looked like a smashed jam jar and the blood was running loosely and full from his nostrils and spattering his T-shirt.

"That guy I was talking about," he said. "That guy is me."

Digger stared at him for a full minute. Then he spun around and slammed out of the cabin.

Petersen went over to the sink and soaked a white washrag under the cold water tap and knelt down and held it over Frank's nose probing the bridge with his finger.

Petersen shook his head.

"Jesus, that's doing it the hard way," he said. He shook his head again and looked at us. "I think it's broken. Christ. That's the hard way." Frank was saying something and his words were muffled around the washrag and Petersen lifted it and went to the sink to rinse it. Frank raised himself on his elbows.

"You know," he said to Billy. "You're right about that Bosun's Chair. All you have to do is hang onto the rope. How in the hell can anyone fall off if they hang onto the rope?"

"They can't," Billy said.

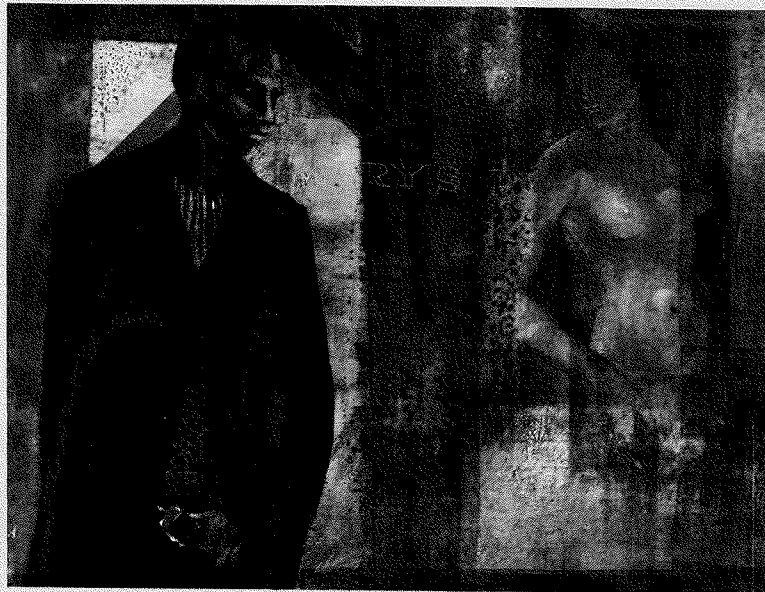
"That's right," Frank said. "That's right. They can't. They *can't* fall off." He was getting to his feet and peeling off his T-shirt.

"Listen," he said. "I want to go first in that bosun's chair tomorrow. I *have* to go first. Is that all right?"

Billy looked at me.

"Sure," he said. "Hell yes."

"Damn right," Frank said. "They *can't* fall off. Not if they don't want to. They plain *can't* fall off." He dropped his T-shirt



on the flooring and dragged out his cardboard suitcase and dumped the contents on top of the T-shirt.

"You better get that nose looked after," Petersen said. "The Mate's got a kit."

"I'm gonna put a load in the washer first," Frank said. "Gotta have clean clothes for tomorrow." He grabbed up the dirty laundry and his nose was still bleeding and his back was small and white like the underbelly of a bird.

"I'll tell the Mate I caught my nose in the wringer," he said.

We watched him go banging out of the door and we didn't say anything until we heard the humming of the washing machine in the Dunnage Room.

"I'll be goddamned," Billy said. He was sitting up and reaching for his lighter. "I'll be good and double damned. Frank."

"Is his nose broken?"

"Goddamn right," Petersen said.

"Then they won't let him swing on the chair tomorrow."

"How the hell are they going to stop him now?"

"Frank." Billy repeated. "And I'll bet he'll sail through the air like a bird too." He shook his head. "Frank."

Petersen threw the dripping red washrag into the sink.

"It's an easy name," he said. "You'll remember it."

