

Winner of the *Crazyhorse* Fiction Prize

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A Brief History of the Sea

When the sea began to recede, the people of Rasvyet were untroubled. Only months earlier they'd watched from inside crowded pubs as a Soviet capsule circled the moon. Managing the Aral—which was falling a half-meter each year as its rivers were tapped to irrigate cotton—seemed easy by comparison. They were, moreover, people predisposed to stoicism, descendants of Tartars and Russians who'd paddled into town on the Amu Darya or arrived there on the Silk Road from Samarkand or, less frequently, on horseback across the steppe. Under their industry Rasvyet had prospered and ten generations later prospered still.

For a while the villagers held on. Proprietors of the hotel Tsvitok set up badminton on the lengthening expanse of sand. Pirozhki vendors replaced their pushcart wheels with larger treads and rolled to meet the tide. The state—prompted more by self-interest than largesse—trucked frozen sturgeon from the Caspian so the cannery could achieve its quota of a million tins a year. The fishermen themselves dammed bays to the east of Rasvyet and when those grew thick with salt loaded a few ships onto railway cars to take them to the sea. Each spring villagers repainted the sign at the edge of town: *Rasvyet Qalasi*—Welcome to Rasvyet—the words

encircled with a turquoise ring of fish.

After three years the sea had receded ten kilometers from Rasvyet; after five years, twenty. Without the temporizing effect of the ocean, winters grew longer and summers burned deeper. The Tsvitok closed. The cannery laid off most of its workers. Differences in personality and creed that before had been eased by plenitude began to show themselves. Graves were toppled in the Muslim cemetery and, two weeks later, windows were broken in the Orthodox church. When in 1991 Uzbekistan declared its independence, no one in Rasvyet celebrated much.

Long after others had given up, the fishermen persisted. After the railroad stopped running they dug a canal to the sea's edge, each morning steering their vessels through the brackish passage. The canal was dredged and redredged until finally, fifty kilometers out, it reached the Great Well, where salmon as fat as piglets congregated in the deep. The fishermen worked the Great Well and for a time their children had enough to eat. Then, when the last of the Aral's feeder rivers ceased to flow, the Great Well dried up. The final tide ebbed and did not come back. That day the fishermen were stranded along the length of the canal. It was the hour

before sunrise.

One by one they climbed from their ships. They were sturdy thickset men in dark trousers and the colorful shirts favored by their wives. All but the youngest had lines at their eyes and furrows on the backs of their necks. As they began the long walk home to Rasvyet, eels tunneled beneath their feet and fish tossed in the wet sand. Already the smell of death was in the air. Some of the men cursed St. Nikolai, a few bent down to throw what fish they could into dwindling pools, but mostly they were silent—afraid or angry or thoughtful in accordance with their natures.

Among the thinkers was Ivan Rusaikin, Kapitan of the port of Rasvyet, a man who had fished the Aral for four decades. During his thirties and forties the Kapitan had netted the fleet's biggest catches; during his fifties he'd supervised the shipments of fish that moved in and out of Rasvyet Bay. When the port had gone quiet he'd rejoined the fishermen. He was sixty-three, sun-beaten and lean, with the habit of touching his fingers to his straw-colored beard. Now he turned to the man whose boat was closest to the mouth of the canal. Unlike the other vessels this one was intentionally wedged sideways; over time, while her sisters were left intact, her pulpit would be toppled and portholes punched free.

"Turn off your light, Salikh," the Kapitan said. "You'll run down the generator. And why

did you stop like that? You make it impossible for others to pass."

Salikh laughed. "It's finished, old man. Can't you see?"

In part the Kapitan understood: Salikh had blocked the canal to put an end to it all. Still, they were a village of fishermen, only that. "We will find a way," the Kapitan said. "Old man. Remember, it is you who will turn sixty-five in two weeks, not I."

Again Salikh laughed. The Kapitan held two gaffs, a harpoon, and his radar box. Salikh carried a lunch pail. He said, "We will find a way, but not to bring back the sea." He squinted up at the searchlight, which illuminated the canal's steep banks and beyond that, the wet floor of the Great Well. "Let it burn itself out." He removed his boots, flexed his toes. "Eels. There's a market for eels, Ivan. For their skin, even for their flesh."

The Kapitan was a clear-headed man, had helped lead the transport of ships by rail to sea and after that the series of dredgings, but now confusion squalled inside him. He was having difficulty imagining tomorrow or next week, much less what could result from a livelihood of eels.

Salikh picked up his boots. "They say it tastes like cusk."

As they headed south along the canal, the two men joined a procession of three hundred who from above, from as high as the capsule had

flown as it left for the moon, looked like a line of ants. The ships themselves could have been a scattering of stones in a rift. The Kapitan kept his eyes forward, and he whistled to cover the sound of the flopping fish. His ankles began to chafe from the grit inside his boots.

“Stop, please,” said Salikh. “You can never carry a tune.” He pulled a harmonica from inside his pail and lifted it to his mouth. The notes collected in the air like something solid, reminding Ivan of the smell inside the market when it had still sold spices.

Around the third bend they arrived at a place where the canal was too wet to walk. The bank had caved in where the others had climbed vertically to the sea bed twenty meters above. Only one man remained, a twenty-year-old named Mustaf whose wife had just given birth. He was crouched in the wet, two tin buckets beside him.

“Here, Mustaf, what’s the matter?” said the Kapitan.

Mustaf shrugged. One bucket was piled with pogies. The other held kelp.

Salikh put away his harmonica. “Get up,” he said. “What will we tell Fadwa? That we left her husband in the canal? Get up.”

The Kapitan feared Salikh would kick the younger man, he felt the impulse, but Salikh’s foot didn’t move and slowly Mustaf stood. “What will we do now?” he asked. The look on his face was one the Kapitan would remember

more clearly for trying to forget.

The Kapitan hesitated. “We’ll climb the bank,” Salikh said. “Here, give me those buckets.”

At the top a gray expanse stretched in every direction. The dark was thinning, a breeze coming up. Usually as the wind rose with the sun, the sea did too, breaking into swells that stirred the fish below. Now the wind raised only salt and sand. It funneled around the men, filled the Kapitan’s nose and eyes. Within a year the sea would have a new name, *Aralkum*: the Aral Sands. Within five years only a handful of the fishermen and their families would remain in Rasvyet.

The house had two rooms—a kitchen, and one with several wooden chairs around a table and two small beds against a wall. Above one bed hung a painting of the Virgin nursing the infant Isus, above the other was a photograph of Leonid Brezhnev hugging a girl. For years the Kapitan had meant to take down the picture of Brezhnev, and he’d meant to move the other one over his wife Yelena’s bed instead of his own. Now, listening through the open window to the chickens complain as Yelena shooed them away from her wash, he studied the Virgin’s downturned eyes and wondered if she’d stopped loving Joseph after Isus was born. “*Nyet*,” he heard Yelena say. “Nothing here for you, old hen.” The Kapitan could picture the items on

the line: his wife's undergarments, her dresses, his shirts and pants, lastly his own underclothes—always the same modest order. The knowledge of this gave him a feeling of, if not joy, then some lower relation, satisfaction perhaps—he felt satisfied at the thought of another week's wash hung. He felt similarly about the breakfast they'd just finished, hot *choi* and the *yopkan-non* that Yelena baked daily, and the fact that soon he'd be absorbed in his own tasks at the port.

As he stepped outside, the wind lifted his cap from his head and spun it across the yard. At the line Yelena was struggling to fasten the clothes, which flapped and twisted as if captive. The Kapitan moved to help, but Yelena waved him off, her mouth set in a way that suggested he'd be better gone, so he retrieved his cap and pushed open the gate with his walking stick. On the street wind came at him from every direction, and with it the dust that Yelena would be unable to shake from the dried clothes when she folded them. As much as anything, it was the wind that reminded the Kapitan of the loss of the Aral. Before there had been wind and calm; now there was only a constant wind that carried sand from the seabed and dust from the nearby cotton fields.

It was 8:00 on a cold May morning—early enough for what must be accomplished that day. Early enough too to avoid people coming from the public bath, from which, as he rounded the

corner, he could hear a murmur of voices. Mornings in the outdoor tub—the only place in the village with enough water to accomplish a bath—were reserved for the men of *Rasvyet*. The Kapitan preferred not to bathe than to do so with other men in a cement tank fed by cotton run-off. Instead he washed himself at home in a basin one limb at a time.

Too late he saw Salikh emerge from the enclosure. His dismay over this chance encounter was matched only by his alarm at his friend's near-nakedness, his skinny body clad only in shorts. Salikh's wet legs collected dust as he came toward him calling, "Ivan. Ivan Rusaikin!" and when he got closer, "Good. I've been hoping to see you."

The Kapitan wanted nothing more than to take the towel from Salikh's head and cover his bony shoulders. He tapped his stick against the ground. "You're early today."

Salikh nodded. "A meeting. To see about expanding the cotton. Will you come?"

After his scheme to catch eels had failed, Salikh had tried dairy goats and something involving the barter of fishing implements for wheat. Ivan and Yelena lived off his small pension and her smaller one from the cannery, and Ivan had remained Kapitan of the port. Now he felt a pressure at the bridge of his nose. "Not cotton, Salikh. The rivers will never run again if they plant more cotton."

Salikh's hair dripped. "Five years, old man.

The sea is gone. You embarrass yourself by believing otherwise.”

As he often did these days with Salikh and the other men, even with Yelena, the Kapitan found himself without a response. “I want enough money to buy Sahar a Daewoo,” Salikh was saying. “A car. Do you understand, Ivan?”

The Kapitan felt a cough rising in his chest, swallowed hard against it. Once started it was hard to stop. He squeezed his eyes closed. Cotton—each fall the children were released from school because their hands were the right size to pick the crop. *Malenkye dobrovolcy*, they were called. The Little Volunteers.

In his mind the Kapitan had already hurried away on his bad legs, but when he looked again Salikh was staring. Always Salikh’s eyes had changed with the sea—green when the sun shone, gray before a storm. Now they were dun, the color of the fields, the sea bed, the color of the dust at their feet.

Like any place transformed by happenstance, Rasvyet showed a different face to each of its visitors. University scientists who drove from Kiev found a village depleted—drinking water fouled by pesticides, an overhang of dust that never lifted. The scientists took tissue samples from cows, and their published results pronounced Rasvyet finished. Photographers who came to document the Aral’s disappearance celebrated the saturated light that enriched their

pictures of tin-roofed cottages and chaban herding sheep from horseback. Children posed for the photographers, they peddled Coca-Cola and seashells, and when the photographers refused to buy more, the children shouted “shit!” and ran away. Visiting physicians noted illness: anemia, goiter, disproportions of cancer and tuberculosis. On summer days when the dust was particularly bad, the most diligent doctors offered oxygen cocktails from the dirt-swept yard of the medical clinic. Tourists of the sort who find comfort in misfortune thrilled at the sight of the boarded-up Tsvitok, at skinny dogs and men huddled in doorways, or were fortified by images of women baking bread in tandyr overhung with vines.

Today two men on motorbikes waited on the bluff that overlooked the dry seabed as the Kapitan came around the corner from the bath. They hoped for conversation, he knew, answers to their questions about the rotted wharf, the ships listing in a colorless expanse of shrub-dotted sand. They would ask about the cattle that wandered among the vessels and the windblown trash. What did they find to eat? Where did they go during storms? In exchange the visitors would offer a hearty commiseration the Kapitan disliked. He passed without returning their greeting, made his slow way down into the salt pan to his place aboard the *Xermak*.

Those visitors had gone but others would

come. Some would descend the bluff to take pictures of him or forage for souvenirs—chains or bolts or pieces of anchors—and the Kapitan would be forced to brandish an unloaded pistol to chase them off. No matter. He had his daily chores and his once-a-week ones. Each morning he swept the decks of twelve ships, ones fortunate enough to be moored that final day, ones not stranded in the canal. Daily he unlocked their cabins to wipe down the gauges that grew grotty overnight. Every Monday he walked out into the canal as far as he could manage to monitor the ships there. On Tuesdays he scraped rust from the hulls of all the vessels in port. Wednesdays he put in water to last a week. If he was not vigilant, if debris was allowed to collect in the hulls, weeds began to grow, the ships took on a neglected air and the looting was worse. Already, in spite of his efforts, several vessels had been cut apart for scrap.

Thursdays he painted over all graffiti. This morning he was repainting the side of the *Xermak*. He had his favorites and the *Xermak*, a cargo vessel that had brought food to fishermen on board their boats, was among them. He used its deck as his look-out, kept his thermos of *choi* in its cabin and photographs of his daughter and granddaughter on the instrument panel. As he brushed gray over the black scrawl—*Evan, Charles, Kate 2002 Plymouth England*—he recounted the *Xermak*'s history

aloud for entertainment and remembrance: “Launched 1956 from Aralsk, 210 tons, 600 horsepower,” then went on to others, “*Kharbarovsk*, 400 tons, the strongest of our fleet. *Molodyozh*, also Aralsk, a 300-ton trawler.”

The work was progressing nicely. Two coats would cover the letters: only *outh England* remained. “*Zubr*,” the Kapitan said. “A tug, launched 1961 from—”

He felt sand at his back before he heard the laughter. A second handful adhered to the wet paint. The Kapitan whirled to find a half-dozen village children with hoops and sticks. “Crazy old man,” said one of the boys, and the others took it up. “Crazy, crazy!” The Kapitan recognized them; they came often, scavenged bottles or played on the wide deck of the *Kharbarovsk* until he took after them. A girl with a cleft lip threw another handful of sand. “Stop,” said the Kapitan, reaching for her, but that quickly the children were gone and with them his walking stick, which had been propped against the hull. “Scoundrels,” the Kapitan shouted after them. “Bring it back!”

But the girl was loping away, pushing her hoop with his stick. A boy snatched the stick from her, and she gave chase through a knot of cows. The Kapitan could hear a crushing sound as the cattle dispersed through the crusted sand. Finally the girl caught the boy's collar and struck him a two-handed blow from behind. The boy

pitched face-first. When he tried to get up she shoved him down with her foot. As he cried out, an older boy in a blue prayer cap grabbed the stick and held it aloft. The girl began to cry too, but the stick remained out of reach and the thin cows resettled around their patch of scrub.

Fatigue pressed on the Kapitan's back and shoulders. Quickly he painted over the rest of the graffiti, a poor job, leaving grit where the sand had stuck. He climbed the ladder then went into the cabin to sit in the captain's chair. It was a comfortable chair, leather and soft, and he'd sat in it a hundred times. He thought now of Sergei Voskerovich, the *Xermak's* captain, who'd roasted goats on deck, who had died three summers ago at 52. He'd been a drinker, Sergei, and when the Kapitan first started caretaking the *Xermak* he'd found vodka stashed all over. He wished he had some now. Age and infirmity had made him a patient man, but the loss of his walking stick discouraged him. It reminded him of his weakened bones, the cough, the weekly phone calls from Tashkent during which Zinaida admonished him to take his pills. *Papa*, she would say, *Don't be stupid. You will only get worse.* Zina was a research physician who dealt sternly with illness. She didn't care to hear that the pills took his appetite and made his hands shake.

The *Xermak's* joints creaked in the wind and an occasional cowbell pealed, but mostly it was quiet with a weight and persistence that finally

settled him. He awoke to sun shining through the western porthole. In his half-dream he'd been listening to *The Internationale*—a song he'd always disliked. Awake he detected the hardly more palatable strains of American pop. As he pushed open the door, he heard a scrabbling sound, saw a flash of blue. The boy with the cap was running for the edge of the deck. Hurrying to follow, the Kapitan tripped over his walking stick, which had been laid on the deck. "Hallo, you," he called, catching the boy's ankle as he leapt.

The leg was the dirtiest the Kapitan had ever seen. All over the boy's body, in fact, dust was so evenly spread it seemed deliberate, and his weathered feet looked hooved. But beneath the cap his eyes were lit.

"I brought it back," the boy said. "Don't do anything!"

The Kapitan could have laughed. Instead he reached inside the cabin for his thermos, poured, and handed the cup to the boy. The other children were disappearing into the sand again, the sound of their transistor fading.

The boy drank, and when the Kapitan looked away, he wiped his mouth on his sleeve then patted his pocket. "What's that you've got?" said the Kapitan.

The boy's face darkened. "Don't take it."

"What?"

"It's mine."

"Show me." Slowly, the boy extracted a

knife, an expensive multi-purpose one. “The market was out of rice. They had these though.”

The Kapitan ran his thumb along the blade. Always the market was running out of flour, rice, milk. This week, along with a dismal assortment of tinned goods, it was selling daisies and lottery tickets. And knives, the Kapitan had seen them there when Yelena sent him for choi.

The boy glanced at him sidelong. “I didn’t steal it.”

“Of course.”

With nimble fingers the child extracted parts to inspect them. Scissors, bottle opener, tweezers, three screwdrivers, and several instruments the Kapitan could not identify. Watching the boy’s intent profile, the Kapitan realized he was the one an Italian film crew had featured in their movie about the Aral’s disappearance. The choice of the boy had deepened the divide between Orthodox and Muslims, the priest at St. Mihail arguing the child did not, in any case, represent the face of Rasvyet’s young. The film crew followed the boy for a week, filmed him by the road selling seashells, in the schoolyard, and once—the Kapitan had refused his own chance to be part of this particular scene—sitting beside a ship in the canal. Before they’d started that day, the crew had painted the hull white, and they’d borrowed a dog for the boy to hold. They’d also promised to come back and show villagers the

film, but a year had passed and they hadn’t.

The Kapitan glanced again at the boy’s knife. At least they’d paid him. He said, “Thank you for returning my stick. What’s your name?”

Pieces of the knife snapped into place. The boy polished it on his pants and put it away.

The sun was lower now, the stretch of sand dotted with the scant shadows of brush and the barely more substantial ones of cows. The wind had died back. The Kapitan screwed the cap onto his thermos. It was time for the boy to go. Instead the Kapitan said, “I have to sweep a boat. Would you like to come?”

Always when he crossed the sand the Kapitan felt a strangeness at walking over that which he’d only imagined. As a young man learning to fish he’d stared into the water and conjured seaweed as large as trees and sunken cargo in the arms of squid. Instead the sea had left rusty beams, rotted planks and an abundance of shells. And sand—hills and valleys thickly overglazed with salt. Now, his boots breaking ankle-deep through the crust as he walked with the boy, he realized the child had never known anything but *Aralkum*. He began to tell about the flying fish he’d sometimes liked to watch, the way they’d lingered by the boat, the hissing sound of their wings. It was a brief story, and when the Kapitan was finished he felt embarrassed. The child pushed back his cap. “My name is Farshad,” he said.

The next day the Kapitan would talk again

about the sea. Farshad would ask to sit in the leather chair, and the Kapitan would say no, but later he would rinse the boy's legs and let him. On Tuesday the boy would use his knife to help scrape rust from the *Xermak's* deck. Now they picked their way through the scrub, toward the tugboat *Zubr* and its low deck that required sweeping twice a day. Here and there grew red solianka, bright against the sand. Farshad ignored the flowers, picked up bolts and cigarette butts and put them in his pockets.

Once there had been two rivers. From its eastern origins the Syr Darya collected a thousand streams until, by the time it reached the desert to the north of the Aral Sea, it was wide and strong. The Amu Darya too was a river of character and import, but swifter than the Syr Darya, winding through villages along the steppe to the south of Rasvyet with standing waves that fluctuated with the seasons. Periodically the Amu overflowed its banks, especially in the north as it approached the sea.

The family of Ivan Rusaikin—melon farmers in the Amu delta—had learned to live with the river's capriciousness, its sudden thaws and the floods that forced them to vacate their house and live for weeks upon the roof. The spring that Ivan turned 21, the Amu Darya surged with unprecedented force. The family gathered provisions for a week and climbed onto the rooftop, but that night the little house wrenched

loose of its foundations and began to float downriver. By morning, the other members of the family had leapt to the banks. Only Ivan remained—out of restlessness and a vague sense of chivalry toward the cottage in which he'd been born—and he alone saw, as the house rounded a bend, a black-haired girl picking grapes in an arbor. The girl stood, and so, without forethought, did Ivan, stood and dove straight from the roof into the roiling water.

Her name was Yelena Iliovich. Her father was a fisherman, and that morning, after Ivan had breakfasted with the family, he agreed to take the place on board Petyr Iliovich's boat of a crewman who'd run off to Kursk. It was a morning of event: two loves born, the second as the ship left Rasvyet Bay and sturgeon began to jump, and for the first time, Ivan Rusaikin found himself at sea.

By day Ivan fished with Petyr Iliovich; by night he sat beneath the grape arbor with Yelena. She was not especially pleasant but she was beautiful, the fat that would overtake her merely suggested in her youth by plump fingers and dimples in her cheeks. Within two years Ivan Rusaikin had saved money enough to buy his own small boat and to ask Yelena to marry him.

The month after they returned from their honeymoon in Samarkand, with Yelena already pregnant with Zinaida, the state decreed the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya would be

siphoned to irrigate cotton fields. It would be doubly beneficial, the people were told, a way of holding floods at bay and of furthering the common good.

By the time Zinaida started secondary school, the floods had stopped entirely and the region had become an exporter of what planners referred to as “white gold.” But cotton was a thirstier crop than even the state had calculated and the rivers were dwindling in their banks. No matter, the people of Rasvyet were told, the well-being of the rivers, and of the sea they fed, was secondary to the fulfillment of quotas. At a meeting in the village schoolhouse an official stood to argue that the diminution of the Aral could even be a good thing. That way, he said, the domain of the fields could be expanded to include portions of the seabed. From across the room Salikh Islamov—known equally for his industry and his lack of restraint—tossed an eraser at the official’s head. “*Durabt,*” he shouted. “Fool! We are fishermen, not farmers.”

It took three men to pull Salikh from the room. Flanked in their child-sized seats by his father-in-law and Yelena, Ivan Rusaikin remained silent. His happiest moments had been raising a net heaved with bream, and the Sundays when Yelena packed a lunch and brought Zina, and the three of them picnicked in the bay. All the same, in this roomful of people Ivan said nothing.

For years to come, long after Salikh himself

had turned to what opportunities remained, Ivan would regret that he’d stood up neither for Salikh nor for the sea. To atone he accepted the position of Kapitan of the port even though it was clear there would soon be no port. It was he as Kapitan who conceived of damming the bays and later he who oversaw the dredging of the canal and, finally, he who guarded what remained of the village fleet.

Yelena did not approve of so conspicuous a stance. Conformity and piety had become the cornerstones of her life. For all things she prayed to St. Nikolai, patron saint of fishermen, who in her eyes possessed the kind of generalized benevolence that would save her daughter the lifelong curse of a failed marriage, her husband the misguided notion that the Aral would return, and herself the embarrassment of public notice on either account.

“*Gospodi Pomilui.* Lord, have mercy,” Yelena said the evening she learned the boy Farshad had been visiting her husband daily on the *Xermak*. “Not just a Muslim but a Tartar.”

Such distinctions mattered little to the Kapitan. He had fished with good men and bad men, that was all. He kept his face straight as Yelena bowed three times to the ground. She rose with increasing difficulty until at last he reached out to hoist her by the elbow.

“*Gospodi Pomilui,*” he said when she was again upright. That day, a Monday, he’d walked with Farshad out into the canal. It had taken

longer with the boy talking and running in the sand, but the Kapitan's bones had hurt less with Farshad beside him.

"*Nyet!*" Yelena snapped. "Isn't it bad enough you waste your time on those rotting boats? Now this?"

"Just a boy," the Kapitan said.

"Foolishness."

"How did you hear?"

"Of course I heard. What do you think?"

She frowned at the icon of Nikolai over the kitchen door. "Maybe you should stay at home."

The Kapitan knew his wife well. She did not want him in her way as she washed and cooked and went about her days, but rather that—rather, even, that he watch soccer on television or idle his time in the arbor—than any kind of spectacle.

Yelena sighed. "Zina is coming. She's bringing Anna, after school on Friday." She began to pull dinner things from the cupboard. "We will celebrate your birthday."

It was the Kapitan's turn to glance at Nikolai. "No party," he said.

"Of course. I even invited your friend Salikh."

"No."

"I saw his Sahar this afternoon at the bath. They are coming."

The Kapitan had hoped this birthday, his sixty-eighth, would pass without notice. He

had hoped for a day as quiet as any other. All the same he was somehow cheered that Yelena had taken notice. He watched as she pushed a damp curl behind her ear. It pained him to think of her undressing with other women and bathing in the public tub. "Yelena," he said, suddenly sorry for her losses. "Listen. Tomorrow I will weed the vegetables."

She shrugged. "The tomatoes are dying."

"I will look at them." The Kapitan saw her squatted in the small plot, brushing dust from the leaves, from beets and cabbages rimmed by four straight rows of carrots.

He would get into his skiff and row out to his boat. It was dark, windless, Jupiter still shining in the southwest sky. The air carried the scent of tide and something less tangible, something anticipatory, like a stage before the curtain goes up. Soon the wind would rise, the sea would swell, and the port would fill with ferrymen and boat builders and other fishermen. Now he was alone. His oars dipped, dripped, and the skiff pulled against his shoulders. Seagulls called, an occasional dog barked in reply. Bigger vessels drifted on their moorings in the green-black water. Later he would own a trawler of his own, and after that a dragger, but he was still a young man then.

After he'd tied his skiff, unloaded bait and ice, he motored north for open sea. The Aral was clean, with a hundred kinds of fish. As the

sun rose to the right and the water lightened, he began to see the sift of plankton, the swirl of kelp, and deeper still, the secret motions of sturgeon. He slowed the boat, cast his baited rod. The waiting was heavy with expectancy, the stillness that much quieter for what would come.

He asked the fish where they had slept that night and whether they felt like eating skate or chum. The sun made prisms in the water and he watched for warpage, for any subtle shadow, and then there was a bite and often nothing after that. But sometimes the line grew taut; he felt certain of life on the other end. He pulled, the life pulled back, and the ache in his shoulders intensified. When finally it was over—the whole boat shivering and the smell of blood everywhere—he withdrew his harpoon and watched the sturgeon fade from its blue-green sea color to gray. Then he slit the fish from jaw to vent, spilled his entrails and laid him on ice.

By noon light hardened the water and he could no longer see into it. Still he cast his rod, the wait more mysterious than before because now he fished by feel. Sometimes he pulled in things he could not name—they came over the gunwales with water pouring from their sides, with extra eyes and tentacles that lashed—and these he threw back. He never tired of watching them swim off, these odd ones: first life-sized beside the boat, then small, smaller until finally

they were gone.

The boy seemed to like the shoes. He picked them up and smelled them, ran his fingers down their rubber soles. The Kapitan had bought them at the market which, this week, was selling canvas sneakers alongside ham and three kinds of vodka. He'd waited until afternoon to present them. "Here," he said. "You need something for the canal."

Farshad glanced below the *Xermak's* deck, to where his friends played a game that involved much running and the throwing of shells. All of them were barefoot. A wind that had been building all morning kept erasing their baseline. Nearby, cows faced rear-end to the sand and dust. He shook sand from the tops of the shoes. "I like blue," he said. "Thank you." The Kapitan watched him slide one on. Soon their insides would be as black as his feet, but at least the skin would be protected.

"Here, stand up," the Kapitan said. He pinched the tips with his thumb. "Good. How do they feel?"

"Alright."

"They fit. They're even large. You'll be able to wear them for a while."

"Yes." The boy removed the shoes, set them neatly by the ladder. "Should we wash the portholes now?"

The Kapitan mixed water with ammonia, located rags. They started outside the cabin, he

to starboard, Farshad to port, then moved inside. After a while the boy said, "The director gave me pants. Corduroys. They were also blue."

The fumes were making the Kapitan's eyes smart. "Well. Did you like being filmed?"

"Not so much." The boy polished the edge of a porthole. "They didn't come back like they said they would."

"I know that."

"They paid my mother."

The Kapitan finished his side. He returned to the front, lifted the photographs to wipe the instrument panel. "My daughter and granddaughter are coming tonight for a visit," he said. "My granddaughter's your age."

"Twelve," said Farshad.

The Kapitan was surprised. Anna was eight, though taller and sturdier. "A little younger than you," he said.

Farshad was recleaning the porthole where he'd started. "Dirty again," he said. The wind was coming stronger from the north; already debris had collected on the outside of the glass. Ever so slightly the *Xermak* pitched and yawed. The Kapitan felt a strangeness. Of course they'd paid Farshad's mother rather than him. So he'd stolen the knife after all?

"We'll stop now," he said. "There's no sense to repeat our work."

In the distance a rumble preceded a concussive thud. "Thunder," said Farshad.

"It's dynamite," said the Kapitan. "They're looking for oil in the sea bed. This storm will bring no rain."

Below, the children had given up on their game. Only the cattle remained. Farshad held the sneakers as he descended the ladder and the Kapitan followed, careful on the thin wood rungs, stopping twice to cough. At the bottom he touched the boy's shoulder. "Put them on and go," he said. The boy wedged his feet into the sneakers, sprinted into the blowing sand. Halfway to the bluff he turned and began running backwards, one hand held to his cap.

The Kapitan started out. Salt in the air was swelling his lips and his pants whipped around his legs. The wind made a low whistle as it crossed the sea bed unimpeded, licked the bluff and worked its way through Rasvyet's empty streets. The villagers had come to understand these storms—that they were worse for their dryness, that early capitulation was wise.

At home, Zina's car was parked in the yard. Chickens squawked from inside the tandyr and, beneath the tamarind tree, Yelena was in a fret. Even here the wind was unbroken, napkins blown and candles fallen from the partially-set table. As the Kapitan latched the gate, the tablecloth itself swelled and rose, hovered, then settled over Yelena. She stood motionless, her pink dress billowed. For a moment the Kapitan believed she would be carried off.

Then the tablecloth lifted once more to lodge

in the tamarind. Yelena eyed him coolly. "Ho, happy birthday," she said. Her dress was still hitched around her thighs.

Dust had balled in the Kapitan's throat but, in spite of himself, he found his voice and asked, "Whatever were you thinking, bringing things outside?"

Yelena spared him an answer so he bent penitently to gather the napkins. When he carried them inside he found Zina and Anna at the table playing pinochle. Yelena did not keep cards in the house.

Anna grinned up at him. "*Dyedushka!*"

"Hallo, you two," he said. "Why aren't you helping *Mah!*?"

"We are," Anna said.

Zina shrugged. "I'm watching the potatoes. But hello, Papa. Happy sixty-eighth." She blew him a kiss. Anna picked up a discarded Jack of Spades.

Yelena came in then, laid the tablecloth directly on the draw pile. Zina pushed it aside. The Kapitan was struck, as always, by the resemblance among the three of them—their high-colored good looks, dark hair and thick bones countered by cat-like agility. Sometimes they seemed foreign; more often he felt lucky that the genes of Petyr Iliovich had overtaken his own blond tawniness.

"I've brought some test tubes," Zina said. "For sputum, to test for metals."

At the stove Yelena clacked her teeth. "You've

let the water boil off is what you've done." She poured from the kettle, slammed a lid. A pan of stuffed cabbage warmed on one burner, borscht on another. All of it looked lovely—the Kapitan was certain she'd spent all day and their week's money making it—but he wasn't hungry.

"Metals and DDT," Zina said. "I should probably take hair samples too."

"I hope you had a fine trip up," the Kapitan said. He rubbed his beard. "And that the roads were good."

"Worry more about yourself, Zinaida," said Yelena. "For example, when is the last time you cooked a meal?"

"It was slow," Anna said. "We couldn't see through the dust, could we, Mama?"

"No, Anushka, we could not. But no one was here when we arrived anyway."

"I told you," Yelena said. "I was at the bath."

"And I've told you, you shouldn't bathe in that water. It's poisoned, like everything else here. Ruined by our comrades."

"The new roads are that much faster," the Kapitan said.

Yelena pulled her fork out of a potato.

"Done," she said. "You know, Zinaida, you are not young for so much longer."

Sand pelted the window, marked the already-pitted glass. It occurred to the Kapitan to tell Yelena that Zinaida's failed marriage was not St. Nikolai's responsibility, and Zina that were it not for the Soviets she wouldn't be a physician,

nor would she, in all likelihood, ever have had the opportunity to go to university at all, but the door was opening. Salikh and Sahar—Zinaida rose to greet them, did so effusively.

“You look very well,” she told Sahar, who wore a caftan threaded with silver.

Sahar pulled a towel from a tray of baklava and set it in front of Anna. “Good, bad. Feh. It is Ivan’s birthday.” She brushed sand from her lotioned arms. “Smells wonderful in here.”

“Then you will eat,” said Salikh. He pulled a chair for her, handed a package to the Kapitan. “For you, old man.”

“No, please.” The Kapitan’s fingers detected something solid beneath the wrapping. He’d been avoiding Salikh for three weeks. He didn’t want to know, couldn’t not ask: “What was said at the meeting? About the cotton.”

“Open the gift.”

A worn leather book, familiar. “You recognize it?” said Salikh.

The Kapitan did—the log to the *Lazerev*, his last vessel, the one stranded fifty kilometers out in the canal. He’d never been able to bring himself to go back to her.

The log’s pages were worn from being turned. He’d written daily in it, recorded catches and weights, noted events worth remembering—the day a school of bream had made the net float up like it was full of rubber balls, the time he’d jumped in with a rope around his waist to rescue a crewman overboard. “Thank you,” he

said. “But how did you get it?”

Yelena pushed between them. She gave Anna the first bowl of borscht, “there, darling,” stroked the girl’s dark head as she reached for a spoon.

“Mustaf picked the cabin lock. He’s working near the Great Well, on the oil survey.”

The Kapitan stroked his beard, felt that it needed trimming. “How does she look?”

“Mustaf didn’t say. They’ve cut the beams out of mine though. And the pulpit’s gone.”

When Yelena placed the next-to-last bowl in front of him, the Kapitan inexplicably found himself with appetite. He marbled the soup with cream, broke apart the potato. The rope around his waist had been because he didn’t swim well. Zinaida did—she’d learned at one of the summer camps for children on Rasvyet beach—he’d seen to that. When she was young she’d often gone to sea with him, sitting over the bow. She’d been unsqueamish with the fish.

Sahar pushed aside her bowl. “Today at the clinic I heard a joke. It won’t offend you, Zina. Listen—two doctors are examining a patient. They look him up and down. ‘Well, what do you think,’ says one. ‘Should we treat him or let him live?’” She placed her palms on the table. “Ha!”

Salikh’s eyes shone. “We’re saving to buy a Daewoo,” he announced. “Five speed. Both of us will learn to drive.”

Sahar laughed. “What do I care about

driving?”

“You do. We will drive to Samarkand to see the palace. To Tashkent to have dinner. This is why the cotton matters.”

Zinaida turned to Sahar. “What did the last counts show?”

Sahar laid down her spoon hard enough to spatter broth. “Smart girl, Zina, you must learn to leave things be.”

Zinaida reddened but said nothing; always she had granted Sahar a latitude she did not allow her mother. Instead she turned to Anna, who had pushed away her soup and was shuffling the cards. “Why don’t you show them some tricks?”

Later, after Salikh and Sahar had left, after the kitchen had been cleaned and Anna put to bed, the Kapitan stood outside on the porch with Zina. Dust eddied around them, and they covered their mouths against the grit. Zina pulled something from her pocket for his cough. She told him she was considering moving with Anna to France, to work there in a university hospital. “Don’t,” the Kapitan said, “you will break your mother’s heart.” Of his own he said nothing, but he realized that for all the teaching, he never saw her swim.

First they’d dug out Zinaida’s car—the Kapitan and his granddaughter while the others slept—then the tandyr and the arbor. The cessation of sand against the tin roof had

awakened him at dawn. He was a poor sleeper anyway, restless, unlike Yelena who never stirred from her back. Early in their marriage he’d sometimes held a finger beneath her nose to reassure himself of her breath, but he’d been long since convinced of her robustness. This morning Zina had been lying in much the same position on the pallet by Yelena’s bed, their pale large feet protruding from the sheets like fence posts.

He’d found Anna outside in the yard. She followed him to the shed, accepted the smaller of two shovels. The sand that had drifted against the car was heavy, far heavier than snow, as heavy as water, and it slid and poured as they lifted it. The Kapitan’s back hurt from the start. Wind storms altered the landscape much as the floods once had, left it silent and unfamiliar. But unlike water the sand did not evaporate.

Now, mid-morning, the Kapitan and Anna were sitting on the deck of the *Xermak*’s bow. The seabed had been blown clean of hoof- and footprints, transformed into a new topography of hills and valleys. Most of the ships were buried mid-hull. They’d only started sweeping the *Xermak* when Anna complained of hunger. The Kapitan offered her *choi*, but she shook her head. “Sometimes Mama gives me coffee.” But he had no coffee, had drunk it only ever twice—once when he’d stayed at sea twenty days in a row, and once at Salikh’s where Sahar brewed it so strong it peeled the inside of his mouth. He

broke the remainder of last night's yopkan-non in two, gave her the larger.

"Your mother used to like coming to the boat," he said. "When we fished. Has she ever told you?"

Anna chewed and swallowed, shook her head. The crown of her hair shone blue in the sun. The Kapitan had been wrong in his comparison. She was bigger by half than Farshad. Strong, even-tempered. He didn't know her as well as he should.

"Yes. There were so many fish, we used these same shovels to move them. Your mother was a good worker." Zina was one of the best lumpers he'd ever had—steady, muscles in her back shifting as she scooped armfuls of fish from the hold and dumped them into tubs. Sometimes she'd loaded them faster than he could hoist them onto the chute to the ice house.

"I like batter-fried fish," Anna said.

"Well. Often we stayed out from sunrise to sunset."

"Look there," she said. "Cows." The cattle were wading through the sand to their usual spot between the *Xermak* and the *Zubr*. Only one cow lagged behind.

There was a knocking at the stern. Anna got up. "Mama," she said, then "Baba!"

The Kapitan stood to check—Yelena would not come to him at the *Xermak*. But yes—there she was with Zina, both of them breathless. Yelena rapped her knuckles on the hull.

"What were you thinking, taking her? She didn't even eat breakfast."

"Yes, I did." said Anna. She waved a crust. "Here. Soon I'm having choi."

"No choi," Zinaida held out her arms. "Come. I have a book for you to read at Baba's."

"I don't want to read. You used to go fishing with Dyedushka."

"The tandyr is still sandy," said Yelena. "How do you expect me to cook, Ivan?"

The Kapitan passed Anna the rest of his yopkan-non. "Zina, listen. Do you remember the time the two of us pulled in the bluefin? You were very helpful. Remember how he fought?"

Zina stared up at him, her face knotted with resentment, but to the Kapitan it was something else—concentration—the look she'd had when he had handed her the gaff, the way she gripped it with small chapped hands and waited for him to reel the bluefin alongside. He went on. "Do you remember how you used to kneel in the chair to steer? You did everything so well."

"You have tuberculosis. Sahar has cancer." Zina's voice was flat. "I never liked to fish."

"No," he said. She couldn't refuse him. "You loved it." The Kapitan shifted to Yelena. "She loved to fish. Tell her."

Yelena stood ankle deep in the sand. She spread her arms. Sea gulls cried in the quiet, but there were no longer any gulls in Rasvyet.

Yelena turned. "God help us," she said. The village children were running from beneath the wreckage of the wharf, sticks and hoops in hand, bearing down on the lone cow. Farshad followed them. The cow struggled in a drift, and then the children were upon her with their sticks. The tallest girl struck first. "Savages," cried Yelena. "Jackals!" Others joined the girl, the sound like hits against a drum. Already Zinaida had pulled Anna off the deck by her ankles; they were running with Yelena toward the bluff. The Kapitan called out—surely he did—but his family kept on and the children didn't stop. They bent over the cow's head, their blows harder still, until her knees buckled and she fell.

The Kapitan had made it to the foot of the ladder when the children turned and fled. The cow was lying on her side, her lips pulled back against her teeth. Farshad had the knife in his hand. "No," he shouted as the Kapitan came closer. "I will do it!" The cow was clearly broken, along her ribs and spine. The Kapitan grabbed the knife blade-first. He raised the cow's throat, cut from ear to ear and then, easily, she was gone. The knife, when he threw it, made a small explosion in a distant drift.

More blood than seemed possible was pooling in the sand. The Kapitan held a thumb against his palm to staunch his own. Farshad was crying. "I told them no," he said. He pressed his fists into his stomach. "No and no.

She didn't even have any meat!"

Yelena and Zinaida had reached the bluff with Anna, their tracks parallel to the ones they'd made before. Two in, three out, the exit prints spaced wider. Before they disappeared over the lip of the bluff Zinaida turned back to pull Yelena by the arm.

The cow still bled, but slower now. The sand absorbed it quickly. Fifty meters away the rest of the herd grazed on solianka. The Kapitan's cut hand was pulsing; he didn't have the will just now to walk back to the *Xermak*, to begin the task of digging it out. Three days at least for that, more for the bigger vessels, then weeks to scrape and wash.

It was warm when he sat down. Farshad sat too. "The fish," he said. "Did they swim better than they flew?"

"They flew when they had to."

The wind was picking up; often after storms it rose again, briefly, if only to show that it could. Sand blew along the ground, shrouded the cow's curves and collected in the furrows of the Kapitan's pants and, farther out, drifted that much higher on the hulls of the ships. The light was yellow and thick, the seabed purpled. None of the visitors understood. Even the few who descended the bluff to walk among the boats did not truly see. For—this the Kapitan had known and knew as the sand blew and the cow disappeared beside him—the Aral was still beautiful. It carried the feeling of the sea, the

vastness and the depth. Even now, the sand rose and ebbed as the water once had.

The cow was nearly covered. The Kapitan unfastened her bell, handed it to Farshad. He told the boy the flying fish had come at windless times when the sea reflected the sky. They were strangers out of water, he said, took to the air as if surprised by flight. For that reason he was

ready the day one left its school to leap, haphazardly, onto his deck. Late afternoon, the fishing done, the Kapitan was coiling his lines. The fish flipped, spun, and he bent to pick it up. Until it flew back into the sea, he held it in his hands. It was cold, fish-like—no bird. And its eye: gold and black, circles within circles, as detached as a saint. 