Madison DiGirolamo

Palshaw

English IV

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A Sunday Night

The light in the fireplace danced, and a small boy stoked the coals. He stared into the fire with glazed eyes, ignoring his mother’s nagging calls and the cheers from old man’s football game excitement.

“Will, go wash your hands. Dinner’s almost ready. . .Will. . .*Will*!”

Will looked up quickly and his eyes focused. He set down the stoker and ran into the kitchen, where he nodded at his mother before running up a dark wooden staircase.

From the couch, Will’s grandfather chuckled and watched the boy struggle to reach each step as he went up. The old man looked at the fire for a while, and in the wave of small flames, his wrinkles drew tighter and his eyes narrowed. Dark green carpet glowed in the firelight and a grandfather clock ticked next to the mantle.

A loud snore erupted from the living room.

“Dad! Dinner is soon!” Will’s mother yelled from the kitchen.

The old man shot up in his seat. “Uh, oh. . . Dianne. Sorry.” He snorted and stood up, stretched his arms, and sat back down again. The game was still on, and the Niners were up by fourteen.

The front door slammed and a boy ran in, bursting through the left-over streamers from his double-digits birthday party he and his sister had the week before. He shook wet hair out above the entry mat, splashing water onto the floral wallpaper, and took off his oversized rain coat.“Will!” he yelled. “Where are you, man? Freddy from down the street moved, but he left behind a football. I paid Joseph Allen five bucks for it and now we can both have one!”

Will started down the stairs, holding onto the railing and carefully stepping down. Their mother came into the entryway and looked Tony up and down. She smiled at him, but handed him a mud rag for his shoes.

“Tony, tuck in your shirt!” Dianne said. “Elise! Time for dinner.”

Tony set down the new football and tucked in his red jersey; it hung down almost to his knees. “Mom, you can’t see that it says sixteen if I tuck it in!” He yelled after her, but he tucked it in anyways.

A timer went off and she rushed back into the kitchen. The smell of charred fish was spreading around the house. “Scratch the fish!” she yelled. “We’ll just have the pasta.” She sighed, took off her apron, and dusted crumbs off of it.

Will eyed the football and then looked at his brother.

“Buddy, it’s all yours.” Tony handed the ball to Will, who then ran into the living room with it.

“Ahh Will,” said his grandpa. “Maybe one day you will be like Montana too.”

“Or a superhero!” Tony added. “Maybe Batman! Uh, Will, you can be anything. What about a pirate?”

Will smiled and nodded, and then he folded his pointer finger into a hook and winked at the old man.

The grandfather chuckled. “Let me tell you about a time I saw pirates. I was running my father’s beauty of a ship for a couple weeks one winter. Her name was the--”

“Everybody! Dinner!” Dianne’s voice echoed through the house.

Elise burst down the stairs and her short blond hair bounced as she went down. Tony was almost the tallest kid in their elementary school, but Elise had him beat by an inch.

Dianne set an overflowing floral dish of rigatoni in the center of the dining room table next to a salad.

“Tony, get some salad tonight. Please.” Dianne pulled Tony and Will from the hall and they took their seats at the table. Elise skipped into the room and sat down, flipped her hair, and straightened up so that she was sitting perfectly upright. Tony stretched up in his seat and glared at her.

The family ate in near silence, and while Tony was on his third helping, Will just twirled the pasta with his fork and stared at the table.

“It’s good, Will. Try some.” Elise pushed his plate closer to him.

Will lifted his head and made eye contact with Elise for a moment and then looked away. He slowly ate a few pieces, but by the time he ate his plate, the family had been done with their food for a while. They sat with Will at the table and talked about school that day and how the old man’s favorite coffee shop was closing in a few weeks.

The old man sat down on the couch after dinner. The fire was still burning, but the flickering flames were smaller. The kids came down the stairs, now dressed in flannel pajamas.

“I can’t believe I never told this story to you. I’s probably only a little older than you two when it happened.” He winked at Tony and Elise, who had sat down by the dying fire. Will sat down next to his grandpa on the couch.

“It was the winter of ‘58. Oh maybe I was a little older than you. . .I think this was before I headed off to college. My father had just gotten a new boat, and she was a beauty--the Rosalia. He christened her with a trip to Alaska, but that winter he fell ill. I started taking short trips for him, catching squid mostly, but I stayed in the bay. It was no problem for me, ‘cept for I was in charge of my father’s crew, but mostly they knew more than I did.”

“Where are the pirates?” Tony asked. He was fidgety and couldn’t seem to find the right place to sit.

“I’m getting there! One day we were out on the water early in the mornin’, and there was nothing. No fish, no squid. Every trawl was nearly empty, and so was everyone else's. I went home that night and told the ol’man. My father gave me a very serious look that night, and he said the upwelling must have stopped and that all the fish would be gone for a few days. I had no clue what that meant, but he told me the only thing I could do was to go to Monterey Bay, where the upwelling always happened--”

“What’s upwelling?” asked Tony.

“It’s. . .um. . . when the water comes up from the bottom of the ocean. . . and the fish like it.” The grandfather looked from Tony to Will, who stared at his dangling feet. “Anyways, you know, I had to feed my family. My father was out and my sister was working, but we had a business to run and a crew to pay. So I made up my mind. The next morning we would get goin’ when it was still dark, and make our way down to Monterey Bay.

“I must’ve gotten up around four the next morning and we left around the crack of dawn. We sped down the coast like a bullet. It took us maybe just a few hours, but as we approached Santa Cruz, the sun that had risen disappeared and dark clouds moved towards us from the Santa Lucia. A few other boats that were making the same journey started to turn around. But I was young, and that day I only had two other boys around my age with me, and I decided to keep going.

“Just as we got past Santa Cruz and into the bay, the wind picked up. It howled and whipped the sails. We were forced to the helm, but the wind came in even stronger punches, and we held on for dear life. The mountains were gone. Santa Cruz was gone! All we could see was a few feet in front of us, into the black mist. I thought we must have been in a hurricane!”

Will now looked at his grandfather, legs crossed, waiting patiently for each line.

“Hurricanes don’t happen out here,” Elise said.

“I know that now, but at the time I didn’t. We held on for what seemed like hours, and my hands became pruned. I feared they would slip from the metal and I would fly into the wind tunnels. I was probably nineteen, but I thought I had said my last prayer.”

“But you are here now,” Elise said.

“Yes, Elise. I am, but the storm isn’t where this ends. I went to Heaven on Earth first.”

“You said there were pirates,” Tony added.

Will’s face lit up and he looked back and forth between Tony and his grandfather.

“Patience, Tony.” The old man smiled at Will next to him, and Will sent a grin right back. “I don’t quite remember the storm ending, but I know that at one point the cloud cover burst above us, and the sun peaked out, glistening on the Santa Lucia’s, far south of Monterey. But when the sun burst overhead, we found ourselves in Paradise. We were in a cove, where the cliffs around it were covered in ice plant and wildflowers--lupin and poppies in winter!--and the water below us was crystal blue. Even at the edge, in the deeper water, we could see the ocean floor! And there was a tiny beach, with perfect white sand, so fine to the touch that it was nearly liquid. In the shallow water a few seals splashed around, playing with each other.”

Tony cracked his knuckles and picked at the buttons of his pajama shirt, and Will stared at him.

“But there was another ship in this Paradise we found. It was further inland than we were, so we decided to move a bit toward them, but our damn--I mean dang--sail was twisted. One of the other guys, Johnny, was up on the mast, climbing like a monkey and untwisting the sail. Meanwhile, I looked out at our new friends. Their boat was painted recently, a nice dark grey, but as far as I could tell, it had no name, and that is strange for a fishing boat around here. But they also had no nets. We drifted towards them and as we got closer I could see their flag. In that day, most people flew the flag of their home country with a United States Tony, so the stars and stripes clashed with the Tricolore. But this ship wore no colors. Their flag was black, and as their ship moved swiftly in the water, it’s dark mass blocked the white sand beaches behind it.”

Tony held up a hooked finger. “Aaaarggg me matey!” he cried, and stuck the hooked finger up his nose.

Will cackled and laughed in a fit.

“That’s disgusting,” Elise said.

Tony swung his arm back and forth. “*Hi-ho* a pirate’s life for me!”

Even the old man chuckled. “But Tony, this ship was not alive with song. There were no colorful songs or pirate hats--no Captain Hook!”

“The crocodile finally got to him!” Tony said.

“Tik-tok, tik-tok.” Will quietly mocked the crocodile and swung his legs to the rhythm.

“These pirates were ghostly. They wore dark clothes and had the palest skin you have ever seen, but their eyes were circled, maybe with charcoal. I caught glimpses of daggers glinting in the sunlight. The moved around their boat quickly, making no audible noise, but they stared at our ship.

“I swear, I’d never been so scared in my life. I couldn’t yell, we weren’t moving, and they were coming right at us.

“Johnny yelled at me; he had just noticed the nature of our ‘friends.’ They were maybe only a hundred feet out when he got back down and we started out to sea, back into the black clouds of the storm. We sped north as fast as we could, but we were against the wind and the other ship moved as if it was in a tailwind. They got closer and closer, and we headed deeper into the dark fog. They were getting close, but through the mist we could barely see them. They disappeared. We thought they were on our tail, so we kept going, pushing as hard as we could into the wind. When the mist let up, we were off of Santa Cruz, and no one was behind us.”

“Maybe you dreamed about the pirates,” Elise said.

“No, I’m sure they were there. The other boys saw them too. . .Their dark eyes haunt me to this day. Wouldn’t be so vivid in my mind had it been a dream. And the cove. . . the cove was Heaven on Earth.”

Tony turned and whispered to Elise. “I think this was a dream of his.”

The old man pointed at Tony. “This was no dream mister. But anyways, we made it back to the Bay by evening, with no fish in our nets. My father was disappointed of course, but when I told him about the pirates, he forgot all about the empty trawls. From his bed, where he lay too weak to get up, he told me the story of when he saw the same ship and the same ghostly looking people. He said he had never told our family, for fear of being called crazy, but he has heard a legend on the docks that they show up straight out of the storms here on the coast. We aren’t the only ones to have seen them. One of my father’s friends came to call them the Ghost Gang. By my counts, they are probably still out there.”

Will’s jaw dropped and his eyes widened in both fear and excitement.

“No way,” said Tony. “They would be way too old by now. . .No offense Grandpa.”

Will glared at his brother.

“I’m just saying.” Tony shrugged his shoulders.

Dianne came into the room; her hair was clipped up and her shirt was stained with pasta sauce. “Ok guys, it is getting late. You gotta head upstairs.”

“You never know what’s out there.” The old man winked at Will, who smiled but yawned and closed his eyes for a moment.

The three children scrambled up the stairs, Will trailing behind the twins.

“Thanks Dad.”

“Anytime.” The grandfather turned the TV back on. Football highlights blared in the dim room and the old man fell into a deep sleep on the couch, snoring loud enough for the sound to travel upstairs.

In his bedroom, Will got into his bunk underneath Tony’s. He pulled the covers up to his eyes and rolled on his side, staring at magazine images of pirates and astronauts taped to the wall. His eyes fluttered and closed, and the little boy dreamed of great ships and crystal coves.