

“Last time, honest now”

Geoffrey flipped a shiny silver coin, tumbling fast at first but quickly slowing until it fell heavy back in his palm. Opening his calloused hands he imagined a crest only to be faced with a crowned Hanovarian. Unlucky again.

He may have been a boy here on land, one barely tall enough to meet eye to eye the road sign he leaned on pointing to the harbour, but he was man enough for a ship. A ship that paid a signing bonus from which that shiny crown was the last remnant of. Geoffrey needed to consult the experts if he was going to waste that last crown wisely.

“The Bloody Mouth” proudly stood as the only pub regularly full at this time of the morning, and the one always filled with more or less able bodied seamen. One could stumble no more than 15 steps off the dock before bumping into it, the primary merit for its popularity. The sun may be rising outside, but inside such a pub it might as well still be the evening with windows covered and candles burning out. Geoffrey leaned up against the bar, next to exactly the man he wanted to see, the only man who was always here, the only man he knew who could sleep standing up at a bar. Geoffrey slowly got his hand around the flagon in front of him, to --

“Whatch’ya think yer doin’ there ye knave! Ay drink bought wit blood canee NEVER be stolin!”

The boy knew that would wake him up, quickly he retracted his hand.

“Just makin sure yew were still with us there Arthur, as if a bilge rat like yew nary had cause to spill blood.

Geoffrey would regret this offhand challenge. The recently comatose scallywag rose to his full height, cleared his throat and boomed.

“No more than a spit off the Carnatic coast we was! In the employ of the Company, skipper directee us ta the plunderous french outposts, overflowin with sweet spices and indio gemeralds and booty but not looked after....”

Geoffrey realizing his mistake opened his mouth to intervene but..

“BUT THEE WERE LOOKED AFTER! 2 score triple deck ship o the line lie waitin for our dread squadron. After hours of pitch black cannonade and rope pullin a third the crew had met its maker and the mast be teeterin. Stranded with nary but french steel before us and barbarin jungle to run to, a midshipman no older than yerself handed me cold steel. We pushed those frogs off our deck like bilge rats, the frothing foam of the coasts turned crimson carnelian. Tis closest we would come to any rich stones that voyage. By the time we got back here to Portsmouth for repairs another half the crew was dead of sickness and here we is.”

“But that be years ago Arthur, how did that blood from then buy yer drink now.”

Arthur, just now realising what had actually set off this tale, looked back down at his drink and grumbled.

“Investerments boy, speculations.”

The only investments Arthur had made lie in front of him.

“Well Arthur, I am wishin to soon have stories of my own. I signed onto the *Asclepius* for a tour in the trade of nutmeg and they gave me a fancy bonus just for signin on. After takin care of mi mothers landlord I have one crown left. What would a salty sea dog like yew spend it on to ensure I make it back from the indies?”

Arthur took his gaze off his drink and met Geoffrey’s eyes upon hearing the ship name.

“The *Asclepius*? Why, boy, dontee know why that barge is offerin such a bonus? Last time it come back here to Portsmouth more than half the crew be dead from sickness! Tis a cursed ship! They always be sailin straight to the spice isles, never stopping at port at the cost of the crew! But if ye already spent the bonus I suppose you are committed lest ye become an outlaw...”

Arthur pondered for a minute, consulting every single one of the wrinkles and scars on his face.

“If I was yew boy, I would get meeself a pistol. It may be peacetime but ye never know when a spice ship like that might be assailed by cutthroats. It remind me of a time in the other indies... So there we was ocean clear as a polished diamond it was, 5 leagues out from Barbados when...”

Geoffrey tapped the bar and turned around.

“Thanks for the advice Arthur, even if ye don’t see me again, I’ll rest easy knowin ye still be here.”

Geoffrey sauntered home in thought, playing with the crown in his pocket. A pistol was something he always wanted. Geoffrey daydreamed about what he could do with it. He imagined himself fighting pirates in the Indian ocean. He would be the one brave enough to rally the men, brothers for life. He could save the captain from savages on the spice islands, then he would be made a full share officer on the ship! Or even better, he imagined himself staying on the island with a company of sailors. Like Cortez he could subjugate them and be made a king! Then he would send for his mother to live with him and there would never be any rent to pay again. With a pistol you can do anything!

He finally arrived back at the tall townhouse his mother lived in, pushing forward the cockeyed door that never quite closed all the way. On his left he passed a room filled with rubble, its roof caved in before Geoffrey and his mother even moved here, to his right, the shut door of the landlord. He was happy to ignore the boy now that the rent had been paid. Geoffrey climbed the creaky stairs onto a landing with 3 more doors, the farthest one being the room he and his mother rented. Inside his mother sat in the only chair, knitting various accessories to sell the next day. She was younger than she looked, but just old enough to realise it the few times she got to look in the mirror.

“Well Ma, I think I have it figured out. With me last crown I’ll be buyin a pistol. That way I come home to you for sure.”

Geoffrey sat on the bed across from his mother as she laid down her project. She smiled.

“Just like your father... and just as handsome you are... But why a pistol honey? There’s no war on?”

“Just because there’s no war on don’t mean theres no danger mummy. Theres pirates! And savages and who knows what else!”

“I know Jeffy... but it's just a trading ship, and the Master next door says the company is cleaning up the pirates. I just don’t want you to be a target.

“Oh I won’t be a target, I’ll be pickin thee targets”

“Are you sure this isn’t about your Father honey? I’ve told you before I don’t blame him for anything, he was a good man who worked hard. Anything can happen at sea, you need to understand that before you leave.”

Geoffrey stood up, feelings covered up by his fantasies walking home now boiling over.

“And why shouldn’t it be about him? If I am goin to leave for years like he done I at least want to come back with somethin to show ye for it! I will notta be the one with no gun just to be shot like he were! If he had a pistol we wouldn’t be here in this shitehole just now! Who knows what I coulda been!”

His mother remained silent but kept smiling at him. Smiling till even Geoffrey couldn’t remain angry anymore. He sat down defeated.

“Your father did come back honey. He came back and bought me flowers and a pie the first time we met down at the docks. He came back and gave us a proper wedding at St Thomas. He came back and stayed with me when I was giving birth to you, bought you a crib from the carpenter. He came back and taught you to read and write. No matter how long the trip, or how dire the vessel, he never got sick and always came back because he loved me and he especially loved you. A pistol doesn’t change any of that.”

Geoffrey pulled the crown from his pocket, staring into the eye of the sovereign.

“What would he spent this last crown on mummy?”

She picked back up her project and spoke confidently.

“Limes. He always bought a bag of limes before any trip. It was something some old spaniard told him”

Geoffrey stood up to leave.

“Before you go honey, this was your fathers journal. There’s still half of it empty for your own recountings. It will give me something to read when you come back to visit, stories a little less silly than what you hear from Arthur at the pub. I love you!”

“I love you too, Ma”

Geoffrey went to go buy a bag of limes.