

The Floating Box

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The waves woke Alain lapping against his body like the tongue of a curious pup. His shoes were gone. His toes were white and wrinkled so saturated by the ocean that the waves barely registered. The white shirt had gone see-through and the pants below his knees had ripped apart during the wreck. He looked at the sky. The sun pinched his eyes shut trapping coarse grains of sand behind the lids, the world too bright after a tumultuous night of darkness. Alain coughed once, then twice, and then harder until he threw up an excess of salt water purging his stomach of the remaining contents.

The beach was empty. It stretched along the coast like a golden plain traced by green dunes. Parts of the wooden ship floated in the shallows, a long plank still tucked under his arm. A wooden box drifted beyond the breakers. Alain's ankle swelled. Purple bruises from Gerard's hand and fingers wrapped above the foot from when the wave broke the hull and the two men got sucked into the depths. Alain remembered kicking away, of fighting off the grip to get back to the surface as the dark blue void beckoned them downward. It was possible that Gerard survived, that he was still out there drifting. Alain rolled to his knees and looked to the horizon. He saw nothing but the floating box rippling against a slight breeze.

Fools, he thought. *What made us think we could outrun the storm?*

Captain Gerard had been on the bow when Alain felt the shift in the wind. The hot air cooled as though they had passed through an invisible curtain between temperatures. His stomach clenched. If they had turned around then, they could have ported in time. Alain also knew that Gerard was too stubborn to delay the trade voyage, and would think less of him for suggesting they turn around. Still, he tried.

"A calm sea never made a skillful sailor," Gerard said. He disregarded the wind and sky and pushed forward into a series of whipping waterspouts. The gray cyclones rose up from the water and into the dark clouds like the tentacles of an ancient beast, no match for a seafaring vessel.

On the beach, Alain felt a sharp sting in his back. He reached behind and felt a piece of wood splintered into his skin along the back shoulder blades. He pulled. It came out in soft, broken pieces. The hole bled. Alain dipped into the ocean and let the cleansing sting of salt clean away whatever else had been seeping in.

The sky was blue without any hint of approaching storms. The sun beat down on Alain's skin prickling with tiny needles of sting, like a thousand small bugs chomping at the bit. He stood up and moved away from the edge of the water careful not to turn his back entirely. In his periphery, the floating box cut like a dorsal fin across the blue.

To his right, a small inlet broke apart the beach. He followed it inland with his eyes and noticed a large forest beyond, and mountains beyond that.

Fresh water, he thought, his tongue swollen and dry. But he couldn't bring himself to leave the shore. So he waited through the day as the sun grew hotter and hotter, so hot that the only respite was to jump back into the same ocean that nearly swallowed him. He waded to his

waist, ducked under the surface, and crawled out to dry until the sun began to dip behind the mountain. Night creatures sang filling the empty beach with textures of sound weaving through the dark like a tapestry.

When the sun rose again, Alain felt himself mad with thirst. He cursed the sun for rising, cursed the sand for being so coarse. He kicked at the water and shouted. More wreckage of the wooden ship had washed up in the night - a mast, part of the hull, a plank of wood stamped with an orange fruit, but there were no signs of Gerard. It didn't mean he was dead, it just meant he was elsewhere possibly adrift, and scared, and alone. So, Alain kept his eyes to the sea. The currents along the coast had pushed floating box closer inland, though still too far to swim to.

Around midday, Alain lumbered to the inlet in search of potable water. Gentle currents wrapped his ankles where the bruise had gone green and yellow at the edges cooling the burn with their delicate touch. He moved away from the beach toward the edge of a forest thick with green trees and lush undergrowth. He knew that plants couldn't survive on saltwater alone and took the ferns as the surest sign of salvation.

The first sip went down as easy as breathing. The next gulps were ferocious, feral. He filled his stomach so fast that he choked and sprayed excess water through his nose. It made him dizzy, but the cool water hit his stomach and spread throughout his body in tingling waves. He crawled to the base of a tree and leaned against it. The shade felt nice on his face, on the peeling skin beneath his eyes. He could still see the ocean from the trunk and promised himself to watch the tides, watch the surf, and watch the box. His eyelids grew heavy, the fresh water stripping his skin of salt, and Alain fell asleep in the shade at the edge of the forest.

When he woke up, it was raining. Alain felt panic. Whitecaps crashed against the sand in the distance as loud as thunder. The gentle stream now moved with anxious purpose. He ran from the stump of the tree back to the beach, his heart thumping. The sand was thick on his feet, heavy, and it slowed him until he reached the shoreline. He waded knee deep in the water looking for the box. The waves were no longer gentle. They pounded against his chest and sucked his legs out from under him. His body and head went beneath the surface. His mouth filled with warm salt water. He came up gasping for air and spitting, unwilling to leave the shore until he was certain.

But the storm only worsened, and Alain began to shiver. The wound on his shoulder pulsed. He ran back to the inlet and up to the edge of the forest. Under the canopy of leaves and palm, he removed his shirt and wrung the water out. He stripped his pants and did the same. Naked in the forest, Alain waded into the inlet and washed himself again. Layers of burnt, dried skin peeled off and floated down the current back into the ocean.

Alain built a fire that night. It had stopped raining, but the clouds remained. The air was cool. He had gathered dried twigs and leaves from the forest floor untouched by the passing storm and clicked two rocks together until a spark ignited the edge of a hooked leaf. Orange embers spread until thick smoke billowed from the center of the sticks. Alain got on all fours blowing oxygen from his cracked lips to feed the heat. A yellow flame sprang to life jumping for the sky, and then another. The twigs crackled like drops of rain upon a palm leaf. Alain tossed a larger stick on the pile. It caught, the center glowing orange. He repeated until the fire burned so hot that he could step away and gather more wood without fear that he would lose the progress.

In the faint blue light of dawn the next morning, the fire all but ashes, his naked body near fist-sized rocks emitting heat, Alain startled awake as a wolf nosed through the bloody stain on the white shirt left to dry on a boulder. He watched the creature move. It had a muscular, furry frame and powerful jaws. Curious eyes scanned the fabric. A pink tongue lapped the pink blotch. When it found the source wasn't edible, it looked at Alain startled. It growled once, and then trotted through the brush and into the trees en route to the base of the mountain. Something in Alain wanted to follow the beast, but instead looked to the ocean and watched the box.

The sun came out. It was hot. The wet weather from the day before brought bugs, thousands upon thousands of them. Alain redressed to hide his flesh from the thirsty mosquitoes and flies. They buzzed past his ear like the creaking wood of a ship. He walked back to the shore. The floating box was closer inland ducking under collapsing waves and popping up behind them. He eyed it while gathering pieces of the broken ship. They had dried in the sun making them light, so he carried them back to his small camp to burn later. Salt made the flames turn green and blue – a reminder that there were little bits of magic if a person knew how look. Then, he returned and watched the floating box dance with the current. Alain briefly considered swimming into the waves to retrieve it, but his shoulder wasn't right and he feared what would happen if the ocean opened up for a second time.

When he went back to camp, he started another fire and sat against the glow looking at the base of the mountain.

The next morning, a man with a long white beard woke Alain up by poking him with a stick. He looked rugged and unshaven, his hair sun bleached against leather skin.

“You part of that wreck?” the man asked.

“Oui, monsieur,” Alain said.

“Here, eat some berries.”

The man took Alain's hand and cupped the fingers. He reached into a satchel and palmed a handful of blue and red spheres into Alain's hand. Alain popped one in his mouth, the sweetness of it making his eyes squint. He shoved the rest in noshing the pile and swallowing before he was done chewing. The sustenance made him dizzy.

“Any others?” Alain asked. The man shook his head.

“Just you, far as I can tell. Let's get you to shelter.”

“Wait,” Alain said. The floating box had washed up on shore. He pointed with a trembling finger. The man put two fingers on Alain's wrist and lowered the hand.

“Ain't nothing in there you need, son,” the man said.

Alain stood up and looked into the mountain. He saw smoke stacks billowing out from between the trees in the distance. He wondered how he had missed them. He heard the crash of the waves behind him and the obligation to suffer returned.

“No,” Alain said, and looked at the box half wedged in the sand. A seagull circled and landed on it clumsily stepping across the lip.

“We press on,” the man said. He squat down and shoved his shoulders beneath Alain’s armpit and wrapped an arm around his waist.

Alain watched the seagull on the box. Another gull flew by squawking, the two of them trading caws. Watching it happen, Alain felt his sides go weightless with the help of the kind stranger.

As he took a step, he felt the wound on his shoulder open and trickle with warm blood. It seeped into his shirt making the spot grow, like an opening iris, until the shade of the forest made shadows bleeding past into and present.

Author Bio:

W. T. Paterson is the author of the novels "Dark Satellites" and "WOTNA". A two-time Pushcart Prize nominee and graduate of Second City Chicago, his work has appeared in over 70 publications worldwide include *Fiction Magazine*, *The Gateway Review*, and *Tell Tale Press*. A number of stories have been anthologized by *Lycan Valley*, *North 2 South Press*, and *Thuggish Itch*. He spends most nights yelling for his cat to "Get down from there!"