

Keeping Things Fair

By Nicholas Stillman

A sample chapter

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The bright cone of Darren's diving light fell on a dead whale, half eaten, a quarter decayed. Jackpot. He holstered the two underwater pistols—the captain demanded that Darren take them on every dive—and began chunking the carcass with a razor-sharp bone saw. The crew had sharpened it as if in a contest, also captain's orders. After several minutes of sawing, the seawater around his arms started to feel like drying clay. It looked that way, too.

The cutting shoed away some finger-like gray fish nibbling on the feast. He saw no point in killing those. Hundreds more nestled in rows along the whale's opposite side. Their offspring might adapt to eating black muck, though they'd probably die out instead. Nonetheless, Professor Whitehead had said, “Don't eat your seed crop,” and these buggers might just refill the oceans. So Darren left them and cut faster to compete. The task burned almost an hour and most of his air. But the bow of the nuclear submarine loomed warmly behind him. After two years of this routine, the giant black hull looked welcoming.

The navigator always stopped just meters away from the find to lessen Darren's work. The harvesting still exhausted every muscle, though, no matter how close they positioned him. Darren swam up and down, in and out of the submarine's torpedo tube. He carried the whale chunks inside, taking the first armloads all the way to the breech door. Some of it turned to goop, wasting many trips. The mush left a foggy trail from the whale to the flooded torpedo tube and back. His hand simply passed through the more decayed flesh, ripping it to clouds. Often, the sawing alone would disintegrate the meat. But the captain said to take as much material as possible, even the bones.

By the end of it, Darren could hardly see in the silty gore. But he'd done this long enough to know that he filled most of the torpedo tube. Darren's diving experience, and a million or so paranoid looks at gear readings, taught him the dive times by rote and measurements by feel. Most likely, little remained of the whale now but liquefying sludge, and even that had spread across the seabed. The animal died small and starved to begin with. Sonar would scarcely detect the smear. Some bits of jiggly flesh drifted about, perhaps eatable. But the diver, the one diver on Earth, could always lie about it.

Besides, only ten minutes of dive time remained. Darren tied a guideline around the open muzzle door and double-checked that the line reel stayed firmly clipped to his belt. He ascended, judging by his depth gauge, 18 meters to nearly breach the waves.

Stopping there, Darren hoisted one gloved hand into the black sky. It didn't feel like air, more like a hurricane of wasps. Of course, no light got through. That much he could tell without these silly tests. The captain once poked the periscope up there, and it got spattered with tar rain.

Weeks ago, Darren surfaced all the way himself and saw the afternoon night. The atmosphere had a heavier pressure and felt the same as underwater. He had spun and witnessed an enormous

storm of light somewhere. How far away, he'd never know. Boys in their bunkers still warred, it seemed. They still hurled their phallic spears at the world with no one in it.

Darren lowered his arm, hoping the seawater protected him from radiation somehow. It probably did in the early days after the little incident, but not anymore. He descended, following the bright yellow guideline in the light beam, and untied it from the muzzle door. Darren's dive watch indicated four minutes remained until closing time.

He idled for one minute, picturing the black waves up there. They still panicked in the insane new jet streams man created in a day. Or maybe the waves simply jittered, as if giggling, pushed down by thickened air. Darren then imagined the Earth coated dark gray by a trillion children's paintbrushes. The color blue didn't exist anymore and probably never would.

But plenty of blue existed on board, if crew uniforms counted for anything. Darren crawled inside the torpedo tube and snuggled with the flaking whale pieces. Lying flat, he watched the last few seconds tick away on his barely-visible dive watch. The muzzle door closed with a boom right on schedule. The water pumped out, and precisely on time as always, the breech door to the torpedo room opened. The tube looked only half-stuffed with meat, now with everything settling. Darren's frogman gear, the parts visible to him through the smeared mask, appeared brown and cruddy in the new light.

“Yaaaaaaaay, we get to eat,” a woman's voice called at the other end.