A Ship is a She

Sam Sample*
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"SLIVERS, when you was in the Navy, did you ever do any fighting?"

"Sure, Gary. I fought all over the Pacific. I remembers onct in a bar in Honolulu—"

"Naw — Not like that. I mean shootin'. You know, like with a gun."

"I shot a nigger onct. Saigon it was—"

"Geezt — Don't talk like that. I mean in the war. Who'd you shoot in the war?"

"That's what I'm telling you, dammit. I shot this nigger in Saigon."

"Aw, you was just a God-damned cook."

"S'all I was. A cook."

"A dough-bellied cook."

"Yeah. A dough-bellied cook."

The two men sat on the scaffold and kicked at steel channel stringers across the floor of the ship. Sunshine glinted through the round hole in the deck above. It shone yellow-orange through the specks of rust floating in the air. The same rust lay in thick orange masks across the faces of the two men, creased by rivulets of sweat that welled up and seeped down their faces until smeared by the back of a dusty sleeve. There were four men down the hole in all. The two on the scaffold and two more sitting between stringers with the bow of their backs resting against a steel bulkhead.

"Lay off Silvers," said one of the pair on the floor. "He ain't got education like you. He's got guts, though. How long you been on the wagon, Slivers?"

"Two weeks now, Hank. They told me all I had to do was be sober and they'd let me re-up. One more week and I'm back in Uncle Sugar's Sea Scouts. One more stinking dust-dry week."

[34]
“That takes guts, Slivers.”
“I got guts.”
“Yeah — you got guts. Hear that, Gary?”
“Yes, I hear that. Hear that, Slim? Silver’s got guts.”

The other man on the floor looked up from the patterns he was tracing in the loose rust on the floor and nodded. He held a cigarette between his thumb and forefinger in an exaggerated circle to keep the end from turning black with grime.

“Now what do you suppose Pappy Shantz meant by saying we was behind? He knows we got two more boats to scrape than last week. And two less guys. He’s asking for it, ain’t he?”

“Oh, damn, Slim. You worry ’bout everything Pappy says and you go nuts.”

The men picked themselves up and began work with steel wire brushes and scrapers at the loose mill scale on the boat’s interior. Slivers and Gary worked the scaffold across the length of the boat, scraping rust from the bottom of the deck above them. Slim had on a pair of goggles and was gripping a buffer, run by compressed air, that he ran down the bottom of the hull between stringers. Hank was working down one side with a brush, reaching high to get to the top of the bulkhead.

Gary stopped and spat several times. “Slivers, how come you call a boat a she?”

“They is, that’s all.”

“Whatcha mean they is? They is what?”

“She’s. Like you said. And the Navy calls ’em ships when they get big.”

“Yeah, I know about ships and all that. But what for do they call ’em a she?”

“Like I tell you. A ship’s always a she. That’s the way it is in the Navy.”

“Oh. D’ya see that new girl in the kitchen today, Slivers?”

“I seen her.”

“She acts like she wants to, don’t she?”

“Yeah. She does.”

“She’s big, ain’t she?”

“Yeah, she is.”
"You married?"
"Yeah, onct in Sidney I was."
"Oh, hell, Slivers."

They were on the floor moving the scaffold when the whole ship reverberated to a series of dozen different pieces of steel clanked in a quick succession of raps against bulkheads and decks the length of the ship's hull.

"It's lunch already. Save me a place, Slivers. I got to get my box from the car," Hank shouted to the disappearing feet lifted neatly through the hole.

Some time later men began to straggle up from the cafeteria shack that squatted beside the muddy flow of the river. They perched on scaffold boards and in the shade of steel hulls, taking form in half a dozen different spots across the yard. Steel tracks and overhead cranes presided over impossible welter of red and green hoses and thick electric cables that crawled over the partly finished tow boats and barges like a parasitic sea growth.

A sudden shrill screech from a dirty stack galvanized the yard. Arc welders picked up torches and men clambered over the side of boats dragging hoses and cables after them like life lines behind a deep-sea diver. Steam cranes began to build up banked fires and pneumatic hammers and steel presses and hammer shears added to the din. Hank came back down the hole with a puzzled look on his face. "Who's seen Slivers?"

Gary turned away for a moment and belched as though to throw up. Slim looked up at Hank on the steel ladder.

"You know, somethin funny's goin' on, Hank. I had the feelin' Slivers was after that hunk in the kitchen. But he wasn't. He acts queer, like he's off, ya know?"

"Yeah, I know. He's got his hands on some booze. Somewheres. An' he wasn't in the lunch room when I was there, and neither was Gary. How 'bout that, Gary?"

Gary gave up and slumped to his knees and heaved from the bottom up. Hank grabbed him by the hair and twisted back till the vomit ran down over his chin. Slim took him by the shirt front and threw him back against the bulkhead wall, where he leaned weakly with both hands closed in fists across his face.
"Out with it, Kid. Where's he at?" Hank slapped him twice across the face, and Gary leaned to one side and vomited again.

Slim grabbed both arms from behind, then suddenly stooped to pull a bottle half full of a yellow liquid from Gary's back pocket.

"Oh, God. Look at this, Hank. Lemon extract.'"

"Christ. Up, kid — where's he at?"

"Down the ba'k hol' inna federal job up on the skids. He tol' me not to tell. He's crazy, crazy ol' navy."

Hank dropped the half-conscious form and let it slump down the bulkhead in gap-mouthed misery. He and Slim looked at each other and Slim spoke first.

"Don't run, Hank. Walk slow. We don't want no one but us in on this. If he's got a gut full we might get real trouble."

"Yeah. Hurry up and walk slow."

The two men went up and over the side of the boat. As they came to a huge cargo barge at the top of the skid logs, a welder threw back his hood and motioned to them. Hank went on, but Slim edged over and put his hand on the welder's scaffold.

"Hi, Preacher, what's on your mind?"

"He got it from that fat one. I seen 'em back in the commissary. She slipped him almost half a dozen bottles. He gave one to the kid to shut him up."

"Where's he at?"

"Last I seen he was toppin' her off down the back hole of this job. You better hurry. He's half out of it already."

"Who else seen 'em?"

"Just me. I didn't know what to do — the Lord moves in mysterious ways. You better hurry."

"Yeah." Slim turned and took one big leap before he gained control and started on in a jerky walk. He caught Hank half-way down the hole to the back bulkhead, with a chalky look on his face, visible below the mask of grime.

"He's down here?"

"Yeah. I'll give you some room."

Slim squeezed down the hole and squatted on a cross member next to Hank.

Several feet below, the errant Slivers danced along the
checker-plated hull bottom, bawling out a sea ballad of virgins and whores, while twirling a wicked-looking knife blade in and out amongst the cross braces and gusset plates, all the while leaping across the naked white body of the kitchen slut.

"He's cut her throat."
"But good. Does Preacher know?"
"Yeah. He got them bottles from her, he says."
"It figgers. You got any ideas?"
"Shut him up first. We got to hide that mess. He sure fell off good, didn't he?"
"Yeah. Hand me that jack handle."
"Right. I'll get him under you."
Slim dropped to the floor below and called to the naked Slivers who pranced across the plates while he waved the bloody knife around his head. "Closer, Slim. I can't reach him yet."

"Slivers! The Navy stinks!"
"'Oh, the Navy squats in Tyler town and Dirty Bess in style...'
"He ain't close enough yet."
"Slivers, you're a dough-bellied cook."
"'Lines 'em up before her door...'
"That's got it.
"'Six gobs wide by forty miles!'
Hank swung the pipe in the dim light and a hollow ringing sound echoed down the bulkhead. The startled Slivers dropped the knife and threw back his head to look up in amazement. Hank swung again and twacked him square across the forehead. Slivers stalked stiff-legged back and sat on the floor and then flopped all the way down. Flat, naked, and dead to the world.

Slim stepped over him and Hank dropped to the floor and came up beside him. "He sure cut her good."
"Yeah. You said Preacher knew?"
"Yeah. He knows. What are we going to do?"
"Hide her here maybe, huh?"
"How?"
"Up under the checker plate. We weld both ends up tight between them plate girders, who's gonna know?"
"Yeah."
"Go get Preacher and two good quarter-inch plates. And go slow, huh?"
"Yeah."

Slim started up the ladder and Hank grabbed one leg of the woman's body and pulled it sideways on the walk. He lifted up one edge of a plate and shoved the body with one foot into the gap between girders below the plate. Slim dropped two large steel plates down the hole to crash on the floor. He swung a cutting torch down next, followed by Preacher's arc, and some push-pull jacks.

Slim pulled a tape and laid out the plates while Hank cut. Everything went smoothly till Preacher started to gripe about welding with both feet in water. Hank told him it wasn't water, and Preacher paused a minute and then said the Lord moves in mysterious ways, and everything went smooth again.

Just about the time Hank finished putting Sliver's clothes on and they were starting back up the hole, someone stuck his head down the hole and said, "What's going on down there?"
"We was just grabbing a quick smoke, Pappy," Hank said.

"Well, for Chris' sake don't go dragging that dumb Preacher with his arc behind you. It looks like you got half the yard down there. And who's got that torch for what?"
"We just thought we'd look busy, Pop. You can't tell whose gonna nose you out."
"Well, I don't care about that, but this boat's already stood inspection, and I don't want no rust-cruds burning up the plates."
"We don't do no more work than we got to, Pappy."
"That's God's truth. But you better start right now."

Slivers was on his feet by now but way gone. They all trooped up like nothing was wrong, and Slim and Hank half carried Slivers between them.

After that, it was quite a struggle to keep Slivers sober. He had lemon extract scattered from one end of the yard
to the other. He was glowing like a rose when they took him down to the Navy recruiting station, but they did some fast talking and the Chief at the desk took pity on them. So Slivers floated into the Navy like a blimp into a home hangar.

It was almost two weeks later when Gary and Slim stood on the aft deck of the tow they were working on and watched the big cargo barge for Federal slide down the skid logs and push a great wave sideways across the river.

“There she goes, Gary.”

“Yeah. Kinda pretty, ain’t she?”

“Yeah. Slivers would of liked that.”

“Yeah. She sure looked nice slidin’ down them logs, didn’t she?”

“Yeah. Like a ship she was. Slivers would of liked that.”

Sam Sample, Arch. Sr.

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Ode To Critics

What you cannot understand
you damn;
What you might understand
you sham
with the curse “I like it!”
“Damn it!”
This I say, “What I write I feel
is no less real
than life,
and love and death as well.
Go to hell!”

James Wickliff, Sc. & H. Grad.

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