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### Listen As the Bells

Gusev doesn't remember them at all, not seeing them, not hearing them. The morning the ship pushed off, he only remembers being cold. They were leaving the wreckage behind—the war, the dry air, even the fat, whispering mosquitoes. A group of men stood ahead of him in line, and he heard one say the sky would be very blue at sea, that the wind would send the clouds tumbling east to west across the heavens like balls on a billiard's table. Smooth and blue, another agreed. So blank and empty that the night becomes enormous, an impossible void. Gusev remembers all of this and remembers not caring. But he doesn't remember any bells.

Now they are everywhere. He leans against a slick wood rail as the ship caroms and his body trembles. An inch of water covers the floor, runs left to right and back again, reeling lazily underfoot. The men sit cross-legged by the bunks, playing dice. They ignore the wetness and the ringing of the bells. Gusev tries to concentrate on the rattle of the cup but his head feels heavy, his thoughts an echo between his ears. He recalls viewing the enormous hull from the

shore the day they left, thick gray cloud in foreground, covering the horizon like a shroud. He sees the gulls in the air, arched as eyebrows, the engines that belch smoke, and the great bustle of soldiers on the dock, frantic to begin the voyage home. But the sky reminded him of nothing. He knew that he was afraid to sail, to live in the belly of a ship, and now he wants only to see land again, and to know the source of this steady sound of bells.

The going is hard and he keeps to himself. It must be night because the men are below, and he wraps himself tight in his bunk. He hasn't seen much—no stars, no clouds or setting sun. Instead he remains here, shivering from the chill and bartering for blankets. He traded his boots first. Then his cap and stockings. He is always cold and his bones rotate beneath his skin. The sound is irritating. They turn and turn, a song like crumpling paper, and he lays naked beneath a mound of blankets, staring at the porthole. It's impossible to see out—the pane is crusted over with salt and sea starch. But there's nothing to do but look, listen to the bells, and wonder about the invisible ocean tumbling on the other side.

The men talk. They are going home, but they've been going home for a very long time. There are no calendars on board, or clocks, and it's hard to tell how far they are, or how close. From the bunk below, Pere often says that the sky has begun to change color. The way to keep track is to watch for seams. They run across the sky, he says, holding it together. You can see them when the colors change—which means you're close to land. Gusev never asks, but Pere goes on and on, though he's been talking about the sky for a very long time.

The men, too, go on about the sky, and about their homes, but never the war they have left. They pass around a knife and cut apples into quarters until there are no more apples. They talk about wives, girls from home, about being young, drinking and chasing through town. They

talk until they are out of breath. The men wonder what the world will be like when they return. No one has an answer, but it's hard to imagine things won't be the same. Home is a gentle thought, a bird trapped in a glass, and they tell jokes without endings and fill the time with words, roaming the ship as the bells announce the hours. They go above and return, talking about houses and streets they remember. They follow the horizon, looking for seams, and tell Gusev he should join them. But he doesn't answer. What good is it to try and talk over the noise, he thinks.

They go on until there are no more stories. Most have left something behind in the fighting—toes, ears, or fingers. This sort of talk sobers them. Gusev is intact, but he worries that deep inside there is something wrong. His bones rotate and no one speaks about such a condition. The only family he can picture is his mother. She wore rags when she saw him off, and probably she is still in rags, burning a candle in the kitchen, filling the room with shine. These are Gusev's memories: her face in the light full of age branches, his rotating bones, and the silence that comes before the bells.

Someone calls supper. Gusev opens his eyes but doesn't move. Beneath him, he hears Pere as he stands to stretch. He has thin shoulders and wears a heavy bandage below his left elbow where he lost some of the arm.

“Gusev,” he says. “Do you want supper?” Pere touches his lip with his good hand. A few whiskers protrude from his cheeks. Otherwise he is a boy.

Gusev doesn't answer. His head aches, his tongue fills his mouth and threatens to pour from his lips.

“Then I'll bring you a roll.” Pere wears Gusev's trousers, but they're too large and he has twine wrapped around his hips to keep them up.

“We’re close,” he says. “I’ve seen them flying—birds with wings of feather.”

Gusev hears, but the bones squirm in his legs, and he concentrates on that. When Pere leaves, he looks at the tiny porthole. Behind the glass is gray, like the edge of a storm cloud, and if he puts his face close he can only see his reflection. Still, he wonders if Pere is right, about the birds overhead, about being close to home.

Soon the men talk only about women. In their stories there are hundreds of women, thousands: women with breasts like gallon jugs, legs long as trees, women who perspire morning mist. They talk of wives and mistresses, even widows, but never mothers. There is a world of impossible women—all shapes and sizes, women made of bronze. No one speaks of the war, and Gusev wonders if he made it up. The future makes him uncertain—how can anyone know? It’s better to be here, he thinks. He doesn’t believe in the seams in the sky and his mother is the only woman he knows. The candle burned beside her while she waited, eyes narrowed. Around him the men slice apples and talk, and when the apples are gone they eat cans of peaches, and when there are no more peaches they sit on the floor, talking still, about their bronze women, hunched over games of dice, their pockets full of rice for bartering.

It is mostly dark when Gusev wakes up coughing. The room feels empty and he coughs until he has to roll on his side and lean his head over the bunk. One of the blankets falls to the floor in the commotion. Below, Pere sits on his bunk, holding a candle. He stares at the porthole in silence.

After a bit Gusev stops coughing. His friend is shirtless.

“I suppose you want me to get that for you,” Pere says, but he doesn’t move. His bare

chest is also like a boy's, two or three black hairs across the neck.

"I could, you know." He smiles then, a quick smile. Just the edge of his lips. "I could," he says. "But I don't feel like it."

Gusev leans over the bunk. It's too much trouble to right himself—if he does, he'll be giving up the blanket. There will be no reason for Pere to retrieve it.

"Are you cold, Gusev? Without your extra cover?" Pere stares at him, the smile gone. His mouth is pursed, the expression sour.

"No," he answers, and it's true. The air in the room is thick and muggy.

Finally, Pere stands. He turns his back to the porthole, as if he can no longer stand to look. "I'm sorry," he says. "I had a dream."

Gusev watches the candle burn. "At first it was beautiful," Pere says. "It was night." Shadows dance around the room, but Pere looks straight ahead and begins to narrate. It is night, and a clean silver light comes over the horizon and the sea itself is glowing silver. The colors are terrific; Gusev can almost imagine himself on the deck. But then the sky goes black and fills with constellations. The men grope for each other in the dark as the wind dies suddenly and the ship runs aground. "At first we cheer," Pere says. "But something is wrong. There is only the sea, empty and crawling with movement. Then the seals began to call."

They begin to crawl aboard. *Fresh meat*, someone says. And laughter. "We laugh and slaughter a few, but they won't stop coming." He pauses between breathes.

"We cut their throats as fast as we can, one, two, again, again, toss them back. But we're stuck, run aground on a mountain of seals and the sea keeps vomiting them up. They're on the deck, in the halls, crying like mad children. The hull is full of blubber and blood and the ship rocks from the weight until water is rushing the portholes. And we are sinking. We are sinking."

He drops the candle and the flame snuffs out. The shadows stop dancing and Gusev can hear whimpering. “Pere,” he says. “Get in bed.” The boat moves then, a gentle push over a crest of wave. Gusev sighs.

“Leave the candle.” Pere obeys. He slides under his covers and cries, short sobs that shake the bunk. “Think of tomorrow, Pere.” Then he begins to sing, an old song about a man who lived in the mountains. The words are familiar, though he can’t remember learning them. While he sings, he thinks about the war. What was the name of the other side? He knows their faces—their light eyes and sharp features. But even this small understanding is hazy. He remembers when the orders came down and they were told to go home, to return to the ships. His men dropped rank and walked freely across the desert. Only a few kept guns. The world had become so quiet, and everything had grown heavy on their backs. They stripped off their sacks, their boots. After a while it was shirts, then pants. They were men by the hundreds, shedding clothes, walking slowly through the sand while stars twinkled overhead.

One soldier had walked behind, naked, shitting himself without care. “What is death?” he asked aloud. Someone came back to see after a while, embarrassed for him. “What is it,” he implored again. Shit stained his thighs and his legs. Sand stuck to him in clumps, and as he stood he began to urinate. “Death,” said the helper. “Is an anecdote for beggars.” There was a rifle shot, but no one looked back.

When the song is finished, Pere slips out of his bunk and retrieves the blanket. He stands for a moment, in offering, as if to say something. Gusev takes it greedily, wraps it tight around his legs. The memories are more than he wants, even if he has to admit that he is one of the lucky ones.

The first day aboard, men found clothes and blankets and retreated to their bunks, slumbering like dead things. But Gusev stayed awake, head full of visions, his bones aching beneath his skin. He could still see the empty uniforms pressed into the sand, torn socks, boots, articles of clothing left behind that the earth was already beginning to claim. Ahead he saw endless footprints, and the silhouettes of his fellow soldiers against the horizon. Gusev walked behind, looking over the dunes. He wanted time to collect his thoughts. There were peasants crossing the plateau as well, and as he passed they said, “God bless you,” and he answered them back: “Bless you, bless you,” because he didn’t know what to say. By a clump of reedy bushes and small mounds that weren’t hills he found a soldier in the dirt whose face he remembered. He’d been a prankster, setting his order at ease—Gusev had admired him. But here he was, alive, and hideously so. His arms were torn away at the shoulder. Legs mangled. He’d been crawling, an inch at a time, through a patch of wildflowers, leaving a trail of blood thick as sunset in the dirt. There were flowers in his mouth, sticking to his chin, and he continued to nibble at the petals. The color had left his eyes. He made animal sounds and Gusev, stepping carefully around him, fled, unable to stop his grunting with a bullet.

Once, it seemed only possible to think of the future. But since the first day on the ship, Gusev can only consider what lies behind. The others snore while the bells sound, and he wonders how they can stand it. “Pere,” he says. He feels dizzy behind the eyes, cold all over. “How do you sleep through the bells?” “Oh, my friend,” he answers. “This is a bad sign.” Pere shakes his head and asks about dinner but Gusev grows quiet. He wraps up in his blankets and ignores the commotion and the sound of the bells as well.

At first, a man in stiff uniform came into the sleeping quarters every day, rattling a cup

against the wall. “Come boys,” he said. “The rosy morning calls you up!” Gusev would raise his head, disorientated. He felt as if there was no sleep—only periods of time when he hid behind his eye lids. It was only the rattling of the cup that reminded him days were turning into nights, that the ship was moving through time as easily as a fish cutting through water.

Gusev would wake in a sweat, startled, and pull the blankets tight against his face. The bells would sound overhead through he couldn’t remember any bell towers on the deck of the ship, no bells hanging from the masts or side walls. There was no chapel—he knew that—and they remained a stubborn mystery.

But now a crisp line of sunlight pours in through the porthole and he realizes that there is no sound. No men rise grumpily from their bunks; no bells ring overhead. The man in uniform and his rattling cup are nowhere to be found. When he leans over the rail he finds Pere’s bed made, the sheets tight against the metal as if they’ve never been slept in. He pulls himself into a sitting position, his legs dangling off the top bunk. He worries that he doesn’t have shoes or pants, that he’ll catch cold. But the room is warm and the sun so bright through the porthole that he can’t sit still.

He drops to the floor. It feels solid—no rowing back and forth, no water. His legs feel strong. He lifts his arms over his head as the joints make noises like sticks breaking, but there is no pain. He stifles a yawn and leaves the room in the nude.

The hall is long and narrow, more so than he remembers. The metal walls are warm beneath his palms and he wonders if there’s a fire somewhere. It doesn’t make sense, the quiet. No one seems to be around and he continues.

The heat is intense and he can make out what seems to be bird song. At the top of the stairs the sun shines down and he follows the warmth. Each step is grated for water to pass over

and the sharp metal hurts his feet. As he progresses, the bird noise grows louder. He shields his eyes against the light.

It's the sky he notices first—a perfect, endless pale blue that halts him. The sun hangs high to his left, steep and glowing over the mast. He is right about the birds—they tear across the air, circling through the sails as he stands half submerged. The deck appears empty. It seems bigger, expansive and deep to the rails, but empty. He can hear men's voices in the distance. There is a clanging that sounds like tools, and more voices, but only the sky and the sun and the birds are visible. Gusev takes it all in for a moment before pulling himself fully from the hull.

The deck burns his feet. A layer of dust covers everything, but the wood burns with each step. He takes refuge in the shade of a landing and waits for the pain to dull. It's then that he hears laughter and more voices from the edge of the railing, and then finally, the bells.

It has been forever, he thinks. But wasn't it just yesterday? Or this morning? The ringing echoes over the deck and the wood quivers with vibration. He moves out of the shade and notices the dust is moving—vibrating—and that the dust isn't dust. It's sand. The deck is covered in sand, a thin shore of sorts, a splintered surface that moves as the bells roll over it and the sand shifts a grain at a time as everything shakes. He sees the ship is in tatters, everything a state of dry disrepair. The sun has bleached the wooden hull, the white paint on the masts. The sheds are scorched and blistered; his mouth feels dry. The air is heavy and he covers his eyes from the sun. Then the ship goes still, as if time has stopped. There are no vibrations and no rocking, no bells. Nothing but bird noise and the voices in the background.

Gusev hobbles to the edge, feet burning with each step. The deck stretches out and his progress is slow. It would be wonderful to glide instead, he thinks. To swim through the air without touching anything. He's about to run out of steps when he remembers his nakedness and

has another thought: he could glide on a bicycle. “Yes,” he says. “A bicycle.” As a child he used to ride. He remembers the rubber wheels bouncing over the cobblestones, how the women shouted from the shop fronts as he zipped by, scolding him for stirring up dust. Invariably, the chain would come loose. Sooner or later he’d be hunched in the dirt, his hands slick with grease, working the chain back into place. No matter how he tried to keep it tight against the teeth, it would pop off again and send him to his knees while the old women nodded in approval.

The noise of men springs over the rail, and Gusev, without bothering to cover himself, puts both hands on the piping and leans over. Below, the drop seems to go forever, as if he were peering over a great cliff. At the bottom, men scurry in waves, moving like ants. The ship is but a skeleton, held up by enormous poles the size of trees, and there are ladders leaning against the wood ribs. Men climb up and down, shouldering cuts of tin, passing them along with outstretched arms. Beneath the poles and the ladders there is only sand. As far as he can see, just sand.

Gusev opens his mouth to shout, but no sound comes, and when he gestures, no one notices. Instead they labor on, pulling slats from the ship’s frame, exposing more and more of the inside, as if skinning a whale. They shout in unison with each new chunk, yanking with hammers and chisels as nails pop and the hull groans and gives way to their efforts. Gusev takes it all in, the waves of men and the disassembling, the ribs of the ship exposed for all to see. Beyond that, there is no ocean to speak of, no horizon line, just miles of sand and sand dune, sun light and clear day, and more sand. Behind him, the bells sound again, and though he can’t find the source, he claps his hands together and closes his eyes as the sun beats down on his face. He leans out over the rail, wondering how long it would take for the sand to swallow him, or if he might glide instead, glide through the miles of empty desert until he reaches the ocean or the place where the sky begins.

Then he's riding, pumping his short legs against the cobblestones and the cold air, fighting the slope of the hills, riding home as his mother calls his name, over and over, riding as fast as he can past the women in the shop fronts, past the empty chairs where their husbands once sat, smoking pipes and playing dice as the moon rises over the mountains, riding while his mother clangs the bronze bell and stands like a statue in the evening light.