

Ships at Sea

Short story by Allison Fine

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“Welcome to Fantasy Island.” Gillette rubbed his forehead and handed over the stub of a pencil to Carter. “If you violate any rules you’re violating parole and you damn well know what that means.”

Carter did not answer.

“Sign the register.”

Gillette shoved the sheet of printed rules Carter’s way.

The motel was home for a while, Carter figured. He signed the book, picked up the sheet of rules, and pushed the pencil back toward Gillette.

“Shared washroom down the hall.”

Gillette handed him the keys.

“Number 49. To your left.”

Carter picked up the small bag that held all his worldly-goods and went down the hallway. You could hear the sound of a dozen televisions from behind closed doors. The place stank of beer (not allowed) and sweat.

Carter opened the door to his home. One bed with a faded green bedspread and a painting of a ship at sea over the dresser. He took the painting off the wall and stuck it in the corner.

Fuck that, he thought, *I hate art*.

Truth was, he hated bad art. Good art made him hungry.

Carter didn't bother unpacking the bag. All he had was the prison issue: one shirt and a pair of pants someone had discarded.

Fucking pathetic, he thought.

Lying on the bed, looking out the one window, listening to the traffic on the highway outside the Alpine Lodge, he fell asleep.

Dreams came and went: ships at sea, sailors, drowning boys, mother's wielding machete knives—kinescoped imagery slamming and banging around his imagination invading his sleep. It was all he could dream about. It was not an effervescent mind he had, not at all. It did not bubble up with joy or ecstasy; it collided with nastiness and violence. He was used to it.

When he woke up the room was dark. Car doors slammed outside, traffic was even more insistent. He turned on the television just to keep himself company. It might be time to unpack the bag and go get himself something to eat.

The restaurant was a truck stop next door to the hotel: *Bob's*. Carter sat at the counter and a skinny little blond came over to set his glass of water and give him the menu.

"Salisbury Steak's on special with mashed potatoes and apple pie for dessert. Want some coffee?"

"Yeah."

“How do you like it?”

“Double cream and a half a pound of sugar.”

She laughed.

“I mean it.”

“Okay.”

She went over and whispered to the Hostess.

Carter looked around the place. It was going to be home for a while. He could tolerate the menu.

Isaac sat on a stool two stools down from Carter.

“Hi, brother.”

Carter did not answer.

“I said hi.”

Carter looked over through the slant of his eyes.

“I ain’t no brother.”

“Fine, my man, fine. I’m Isaac.”

Carter nodded and went on reading the menu. It read like every other shit menu in this universe.

“I’m the janitor round these parts. You be needing a job?”

Carter looked his way.

“Maybe.”

“I could use a little help now and again. Where you staying?”

Carter jerked his thumb in the direction of the motel.

“Sure. You one of them prison guys?”

Carter's look said *shut up*.

Isaac laughed.

“Don't be shy—one or another of us has goofed up a few times in life, ain't that right Meredith?”

Meredith brought Carter's coffee and a menu for a Isaac.

“No, stupid, I'm fucking perfect.”

“Yeah, right, I forget.” Isaac laughed again.

Isaac's laugh was getting on Carter's nerves. He needed a job. That got even more on his nerves.

“What do you need doing?”

“Oh fixing here and there; some cleaning—local high school, the gas station, that office over yonder. Really easy shit.”

Carter nodded.

“What room you in?”

Carter was silent.

“Well—you come see me if you interested. I live out back behind this place—Walnut Street.”

Meredith came back.

“What you having?”

“Steak sandwich, medium, mashed potatoes, apple pie.”

Carter slapped the menu back down on the counter.

“Hey—that sounds good. Think I'll be having that too,”

Isaac smiled broad at Carter. Carter ignored it.

Man's too friendly for a stranger.

Isaac looked at Carter and knew his type; knew it well. The kind of guy whose mind was bleak and nasty and filled with violence; just the sort of man ripe for redemption, Isaac figured. He considered it his personal ministry to redeem the prison guys and turn their lives around. He failed mostly, but success was just around the corner.

“Didn’t catch your name,” Isaac said as Meredith set the plates down in front of them.

“Didn’t give it,” Carter said tersely and set into his meal. It was hot and that was the most he could ask. *Better than prison shit.*

They ate in silence. Carter paid the cashier and lit out for the motel. It was dusk. Black rain-water lingered around the boundaries of the parking lot. Summer air hung heavy down to the ground, edging toward hot but not quite. Carter didn’t care. He was tired of men like Isaac and their glass jaw mentality. He wanted a bath.

Isaac looked at Meredith with intent.

“So what do you think?”

“About what, fool?” Meredith loved teasing Isaac. He was old, he was fat, and no black dude was gunna get between her legs, but he was nice to her.

“That guy.”

“Oh shit, prison waste.”

“Nobody’s wasted unless they’re dead, and not even then.”

“Oh, don’t gimme your religion, Isaac, fool,” Opal shouted from the kitchen.

“You just go on and save it for church, Mister Preacher!”

Isaac laughed, left a ten on the counter and winked at Meredith.

Carter heard a squeak and a timid knock at the door.

Meredith stood outside his door in her stupid high-heeled shoes and waitress uniform.

“What do you want?”

Jail bait. I need to leave this shit alone. That’s what got me into trouble last time.

All they ever want is fucking money. Or fucking and money.

“I just—I dunno—“

“You sure as fuck don’t.”

“Can’t I come in?”

Carter stood in the doorway eyeing her hair the way it curled slightly around her ears. She was soft and fast—her pulse beating at the spot beneath her throat--fluttering. She was excited or scared.

“Why you here?”

“Not sure. I could use a drink, though.”

“Ain’t got nothing.”

“There’s a bar across the street.”

He saw the sign blinking: *Oasis*.

“I’m tired.”

She sighed. Her pulse slowed down.

“Me too. Been on my feet all day.”

“In those?”

“Naw. I saved these for after.”

For me, stupid?

He looked close at her. Blond hair, skinny body, some tits but not much. Her breathing quickened. He was worried she had too many expectations. He wished she'd calm down.

"I don't got any money. Hardly none. Just the twenty dollars they gave me when I got released."

"I know. I got tips." Carter watched her struggle to maintain control over herself and finally give up. He grabbed her to him and he could feel the tiny heart beating against him. She was a bird. He could snap her. She stayed against him panting, not moving. He pushed her suddenly, violently away. She fell back, one heel slipping on the sidewalk.

He grabbed her arm before she fell, pulled her close to him again, pressed her tiny lips, pushed his tongue into her hot mouth. She had her arm pinned behind her. He pushed his leg against her groin, pulling her hips into his hardened penis.

"Stop!" she gasped and pulled away from Carter.

"Isn't that what you wanted?"

"No! I just wanted a drink."

He heard her footsteps running along the dark, wet drive toward the street as he slammed the door.

Fucking women.

Carter turned on the television and went to take a shower.

Isaac saw his mother every Saturday night. They went to a prayer meeting and out for dessert at *Bob's*. Isaac's mother was from Georgia and didn't much like living up

north but she knew she'd never go back down south again. Once a year they had a family reunion. She had her southern ways.

“Mama, have some ice cream this time.”

“I like pie. You know that. I always have pie.”

The new girl, Roberta, was on duty this night. Meredith was off. Roberta was going to the community college and had ambitions.

Isaac eyed her.

“Get your eyes off white meat.”

“I ain't but just looking.”

“Well, folks has gone to jail for that and even less.”

“You mean, **us** folks.”

“Yeah, I mean us folks. You know what I mean. The good Lord done seen fit to spare you all that, now keep it that way.”

“I don't intend to live the life of a monk forever mama. I need a wife.”

“Then start looking in the right places.”

“Wherever I look, it seems not to turn up anything.”

“Then get you some god-fearing black woman with a good job. You know? And a good family.”

“They all three hundred pounds, mama.”

She eyed him.

“And I don't see you slimming down much yourself.”

Roberta came over with the water.

“You know what you want?”

“I’ll have the cherry pie, same as always.”

“What about you sir?”

“Isaac. My name’s Isaac.”

Roberta smiled. “Yes?”

“Triple ice cream—chocolate, vanilla and butter pecan in a large bowl with whipped cream.”

Roberta wrote on her pad.

“I’ll bring that to you. Anything to drink?”

“Water is fine,” said his mother.

“I want a large glass of milk,” Isaac said, looking at Roberta’s dark curly hair cascading down her back. Her legs were tanned, strong and lean.

His mother leaned over the table and slapped his arm.

“Look at me.”

“I am looking at you. What else there to look at?”

“You get your eyes off that girl, hear?”

“I hear.”

Isaac hated these outings with his mother. The Church prayer circle three times a week, the Willing Workers praising Jesus over the death of somebody they hardly knew, the skinny old men with suspenders. Why the hell was he born a nigger, anyway? he asked himself.

“What you thinking about?”

“I ain’t.”

“You is. I can tell.”

“So what. They my thoughts. Lay off it.”

“Feel sorry for yourself and the Lord won’t do you no good. I swear. No good. Just pick yourself up and do something for somebody else.”

“I do. I got good works all over the place. I been reforming those men let loose.”

“The State Penitentiary is not your ministry—how many times I got to tell you?”

“You don’t what my ministry is, mama, so hush up.”

“Don’t tell me to hush up or I’ll slap you upside the head like you was a little boy.”

“Mama. I am a thirty-eight year old man and what am I doing sitting here listening to this shit out of your mouth? You can’t do nothing to me! I’m bigger than you.”

Her eyes flashed like fire sending hot, ignited flames straight into his heart.

“Don’t you ever—“ she began breathing heavily, “don’t you ever talk to me that way, son. Never.”

She sat in silence, panting, her eyes flashing a brilliant glowing ember.

“You gonna get a heart attack if you don’t calm down,” he said. *Bitch*, he thought, *I hope she does*.

“If I die admonishing you it will be a righteous death.”

Natalie slid the ice cream, pie and milk onto the table. The milk nearly toppled over but Isaac caught it.

“Hey. You new?”

“I’m sorry,” she stated, no remorse.

“S’okay. I caught it. You can bring us some napkins.”

Natalie stared at him full in the eyes.

“Please.”

“Fine.”

She turned on her heel and walked off, leaving the odor of indignation behind her.

“She’s cocky,” his mother said digging into her pie.

Isaac spooned some ice cream into his mouth and took a gulp of milk.

“So what? She probably hates this job.”

“She hates black folk.”

“That’s bullshit, mama.”

“Don’t swear at me.”

“Anyways, you don’t know what she hates.” He paused. “You feeling better?”

“I feel just fine.”

“You looked like you about to keel over a minute ago.”

“I will see you into your grave,” she said, her eyes shooting black photons into his brain.

“Fine. I’ll die first and you be all alone, with no one to take you around to the store, to your prayer circle, to funerals—“

“I’ll manage.”

Isaac took his mother home, made sure the house was safe and went back to the restaurant. Maybe he’d have a cup of coffee. *Maybe Roberta’s closing up.*

Opal was gone. Mike, the cook, was wiping out the microwave; Roberta was filling the ketchup and mustard when Isaac heaved himself back into the restaurant.

“Hi,” he said, walking over to the counter. “Got any coffee left?”

Roberta glanced his way with sovereign contempt. It was inappropriate for him to be here now. Her boyfriend called and said he was going bowling and to meet him at the Lucky Strike on Michigan Avenue.

“I can see,” she said and wiped the counter down on the other end.

“Please. I’d be much obliged.”

She set the coffee down and he reached for the cream.

“Sugar’s over there,” she pointed to the other end of the counter. Isaac reached over and slid it down.

“So, you studying at the college?”

“Yes, I’m getting my degree in Journalism.”

“Want to be a news lady?”

“Something like that,” she said, her back to him as she cleaned off the blender and the toaster and put the napkins down below in the basket where they were kept.

Isaac watched her body bend and rotate as she worked, the legs, the slim part of her back stretching out just right.

“You have a boyfriend?”

She turned, the curve of her breast showing through her uniform.

“Of course I do.”

Mike shut the curtain to the kitchen.

“I’m leaving Roberta—locking the back door. Be sure and lock the front!”

Roberta’s head whipped around a little too quickly. A sudden feeling came into her stomach.

“Sure. I’m almost done.”

The back door slammed and the sound of Mike's Toyota Tundra was heard roaring out of the parking lot.

"We're alone," Isaac said. "But don't you worry none—I'm as harmless as a ladybug."

Roberta did not turn around.

"I'm about ready to leave."

She put the rags in the sink, shut the cupboards and rinsed her hands at the little sink.

"Can I—can I have your coffee cup?"

"I'll take it back to the kitchen. Everybody knows me here—I practically live here." Isaac ambled his large body to the kitchen and placed the cup and saucer in the soapy water still in the sink.

"You leaving these dishes soaking?" he called from the kitchen. Roberta grabbed her purse from the door and slammed it shut, wanting more than anything to be out of here and into her car driving away. She could feel the car moving underneath her even as she stood stationary in the restaurant.

"They'll get it in the morning."

Isaac came out of the kitchen as she headed for the light switch.

"Turning out the lights," she warned and hit the switch. She was right next to the door, it was a foot away, she was easy out of here and to the bowling alley. But she had to let him out first.

"Come on, I got to go—meeting my boyfriend at the Lucky Strike."

Isaac walked to the door. He could smell her body smell as he came near. Her shoulders were hunched. He reached a hand out to her neck. She whipped around.

“Stop it! Don’t touch me!”

He threw his body up against her and flattened her against the door. She couldn’t move, she couldn’t breathe. Putting his hand on her neck to hold her still, he pulled her skirt up and felt for the underpants. Inside her panties he could feel the soft peach fuzz of her hair—he plunged three fingers into her and ignored the screams.

“Stop it!” she yelled. He grabbed a towel from the counter, winding it awkwardly around her mouth to shut her up.

“I am going to have something sweet tonight and you gunna give it,” he breathed into her contorted face. Shoving her body up against the door with one of his huge hands, he undid his pants with the other. She looked down and saw his huge, black dick sticking out into the air. He took that dick and put it inside her soft peach fuzz, she all the while crying, sobbing, panting and writhing. He plunged inside her over and over until the explosion inside of his heart and lungs collapsed him on top of her. She put one arm around his neck and sobbed. He removed the rag from her mouth.

“You are a sad man,” was all she said. “I feel sorry for you, but I won’t tell anybody. They all say you’re such a nice man to take care of your mother.”

“I’m sorry,” was all Isaac could say. He wiped his penis with paper towel and pulled his pants back up. “Better clean up before you leave.”

“I guess so.”

“You ain’t mad?”

“No. Just go now. Please. Go.” She was afraid he would kill her. She had to be as nice as she could be until she told her boyfriend and they went to the police. *I have to survive this.*

“You better go,” she said softly.

Isaac went out the door and ambled over to his Chevy parked in the far corner of the lot. He hoped she’d come after and say something to him, hold him, make plans to go to a movie or something. He waited in his car for a minute, but she didn’t come. Roberta watched out the window hardly breathing waiting for his car to leave. Once he drove off she lay her head on the counter and cried—her breath dragging out of her, sobbing for the loss of her sweet innocence and the ugliness of that man. When she finished crying she took off her panties and threw them into the garbage out back, tossing her apron out along with them. Then she smoothed down her skirt and drove to the bowling alley.

Next day Carter saw Isaac at the counter slopping eggs into his fat yap.

He moved into a seat down the other end.

“Okay,” Carter said as he fingered the laminated menu. “I need some work I guess.”

Isaac looked over sideways at Carter.

“Opal—what happened to that new girl?”

“She quit, dunno why,” Opal said. “You wanting the mashed potatoes?”

“Yeah, and plenty of gravy,” Isaac smiled at Carter as he told her.

“We got plenty places to clean up. Fourth July coming up and everybody wants their shit done.”

“Fine,” Carter said. He didn’t like this man but a job’s a job.

After they ate Carter walked out with Isaac.

“When do I start?”

“You can start today if you like. Got a car?”

“Not yet.”

“Well, you can ride along with me if you like.”

“Fine.”

“You know, I like to help you folks, you know I do,” Isaac panted as he heaved his fat body with its overhanging stomach through the parking lot. “My place—it ain’t big but—“

“Motel’s fine for now.”

“Suit yourself.”

They walked over to the locked shed where Isaac kept all the cleaning supplies and equipment.

“We got to clean the office behind here. They particular.”

“Don’t matter.”

“You know—we all got to stick together.”

Carter curled his lip with contempt.

“Why is that?”

“Well, you folks just coming out—you’re adrift and then there’s me—well, we’re all like ships at sea, don’t you think? If somebody throw you a life raft you not likely to turn it down, now, are you?”

“Look Isaac, I’m not meaning to stay here long. Looking to get to the city after I earn a bit, so let’s cut the crap.”

“Fine. Just trying to be friendly,” Isaac said. *Someday this man will die.*

Isaac pushed the industrial vacuum out of the shed. Carter took the handle and looked at his surroundings with utter contempt. Life sure handed out some kind of misery index, he figured, but this time he was bound to get out from the lower-class lunatic fringe and make himself known. This time, he was sure, he would find some kind of place for himself. Isaac loaded the vacuum and supplies into the truck and Carter got into the passenger seat. It was turning into a hot day and he sure prayed for the night. Hot July days were just prayers for the night.