

Namesake

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Dive. If Pink had been granted another second he might have heard it, but he wasn't; his time was up. He had counted every second since he first jumped into the sea, because that was all time was: Seconds that were granted and seconds that were not. But he knew that. Part of him always knew that. But he never accepted that. The men, who signed his papers in hot ink and stamped them with blood red wax, red like the old, dead sun that now floated bare, a cadaver over dead black waves that moved still because the winds told them to, and blood like his, cold now but still pumping because time was not his to grant, forced him to accept that. So here he drifted in a purgatory too far below heaven and too far above hell, wishing that he had stolen a few seconds more.

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Brison Pink was a kid. Stewart Edwards too. Mud Corporal was a year older than Pink and two years older than Stew, but even he was a kid. When they first met on the dreadnought, none of them wanted to talk, so they sat in silence and ate hard-to-chew ration bars out of stretchy rubber planters. Nothing of this place reminded them of home. From the septic stink of the ocean that drained itself and crashed onto the gray bow to the black smog rising from the ship's funnels, like a swarm of shadow locusts sent by their brood mother to deflower the wheat-colored sky, everything led back to the unutterable fact that the world did not know they were there. There were other kids too, each huddled in their own groups on the deck, each trying to read the features of their friends— from the pores on their skin to the grease in their hair— as if they were curious, foreign bugs proven yet to be human. Pink did the same too: Stew was chubby and round with perfectly clean blonde hair, whereas Mud Corporal was

skinny and tall with an eye that seemed to wander. Pink, grown bored of their looks, was the first to say anything.

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Home? Stew and Mud Corporal looked at each other, then at Pink, unsure of whether it was a test or if Pink really was just a kid like they were. Either way, it was hard for them to think about home, as if their memories were turned and twisted by the changing waves. Stew was from a small town without a name, a few miles outside of another nameless town and a long way away from nowhere. His mother had red hair and his brother did too; an older man would always be in the kitchen every morning and gone in the afternoon, but his hair was never the same. Still, nobody in the house had hair like Stew's. Mud Corporal grew up without a name in a place without rain and without labels, where the ground was cracked and the sky was nude and the air was thick with the stench of sweaty hides and droppings and ivory. An older herder with no name showed him the ways of work, how to plow through the crust of the earth so that mud could flow and with it eddies of brown water and how to drink his own urine so that something else wouldn't need to. When the herder grew old, sick, and tired, he named the tall boy two words, one from a language no one knew and one from a poster he had seen for a movie from a place where there was rain and men who were tall and blonde and called each other names like 'Corporal.' Home was nowhere. So was this ship, in a sea too far from home, and yet here these boys were with names that were granted to them, telling stories while their memories still lived. For a few seconds, as they sat, side-by-side, in silence, home did not seem too far as long as their names persisted in time.

The sun was half-set when Serge Varden drew his fourteenth cigarette of the day and had emptied his canteen of whiskey. He coughed up a clot of murky phlegm into a tin can and put on his tattered gray uniform which was missing both cufflinks and all its buttons, all before bringing a warm, rusty razor to his cheeks and shaving off patches of cloudy white stubble. When he had cleaned and dressed himself,

It was sundown when Pink would return to the other three, when the sea would make the night colder than any night they've known before. The boys would not sleep for hours with their joints grown stiff and sore from laying on moist hardwood and their skin grown scalded with scabs of frost and salt water and their stomachs grown frail and shrivelled from hunger. It was when Stew would refuse to breathe as he did before and Mud Corporal had wrapped the boy in his blanket and Varden had drawn from his fifteenth cigarette of the day that Pink would leave the three again. Pink would not return until midnight, another blanket wrapped around his waist and his trousers stuffed with four ration bars. While Stew and Varden would eat, Mud Corporal would refuse his share. When the older boy would ask Pink about whom or where he stole the goods from, the boy would only chew his bar and stare into the sea. In the morning, a few of the smaller boys that camped beside the four refused to wake, asleep in a breathless sleep, their stomachs empty and skin scabbed, dreaming too of a nameless home. When the grey-pupilled soldier came and prodded at the bodies, Pink would refuse to look Mud Corporal in the eye, even when the man came and grabbed him thinking he was the thief, beating him bloody with butt of his shotgun so that his tan skin was pigmented with blood and so the hardwood would be too. The boy who learned to drink urine did not raise a hand nor surrender a noise during the whole ordeal, but when he stood once more there was nothing in his eyes but a great disappointment in the boy who thought the world was his.

The soldiers then began standing all the boys up, lining them up in columns by the edge of the ship, and giving them each a small tank of oxygen, a breather, and a pair of rubber flippers. The gray pupilled soldier handed Varden a set of pliers the size of his torso which he could barely hold upright and a gridded board, saluting the older man, before announcing to the crowds of boys that soon they would do their homes a great service. They would look for mines, release them from their anchors, and they would not return until the dreadnought had a safe way through the sea. Then, they were told to jump. When many would not, and instead choose to run, the lucky ones were thrown overboard. Some were shot, some were thrown off and in trying to climb back up the hull were also shot, their small bodies making such quiet splashes in the sea that it was almost as if they were never there. Mud Corporal and Pink were to go,

but when Stew wouldn't budge, Varden offered his hand to the boy before the four had all descended below the black waves.

The water was cold. For the first few seconds, the boys felt as if they were being burned alive: their joints frozen, their knees buckled, and when they wanted to scream their breathers would prevent them from making a noise. Pink did not know the sea. None of them did. They did not know its silence, where neither the sound of waves nor the groans of the dreadnought nor the splashing of brittle bodies through the surface could ring through the sound of their own breathing. The sea did not care that they were Pink, Stew, Mudcorporal and Varden, that one was a boy who thought the world was his and another who had blonde hair like nobody else and another who had learned to drink urine, that one was an old man who smelled of liquor and tobacco with scars that didn't heal and memories that wouldn't come back. Here, they were simply bodies that had yet to fail, but still they swam onwards. When they saw their first mine and when none of the four would approach it, it was Varden who would go first and Mud Corporal who would offer, but fail, to take his place. Pink would stare into the abyss until there was the sound of a pop and rumble and a small burst of light in the distance, and like the stars the boy would see at night the spectacle was there, then gone in the blink of an eye. Stew would see it too, but he could not see any star, but a mine being set off by three other boys who were too trusting of a world that did not even know their names, a world that decided that their curiosity and frailty was not good enough in its great game, a world too tired to change the rules and make exceptions. When Varden would cut the chain flawlessly, the mine would go loose and he would say to the boys:

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And so the boys would dive, and for seconds nothing would be said, as they held their breath and watched the bulb rise towards the skin of abyss where the sunlight would break through the dark surface, where they would reach out to, and until it was safe Varden would then mark an x on his board.

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x . . x And another.

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And another.

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x . . . X X . X . .

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X . . . X X . X . X

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Until the mile was cleaned out.

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So they swam further, and for hours this would repeat until their miles were marked and their breaths were shallow. Varden would cut the last mine, and the four would begin their swim back to the dreadnought. With their breathers worn and tanks in attrition, they would dive once more when Varden

urged them to, but when two went down one would not. Stew, his tank hollow, would begin to swim towards the surface, and Mud Corporal would chase him. As the bulb rose towards the boys, the older one would pull the one with blonde hair under him, using his feet to push him towards Pink. When the boy, who came from a place where sun-dried mud was cracked to stir streams of sweet water, whose hands were calloused still as reminders of his namesake and suffering, would reach from the abyss to touch where the sun met the salted sea, the old man would watch, and when nothing came to him once again, not of his namesake, not of the love of his life nor his scars, but only the realization that it should have been him, he would cry out for the first time in his life, a cry that even the sea could not drown away. Pink would hear it and Stew would too, but as the primer of the mine unclicked from its base there was a muffling explosion. Then there was the pop of their ears and the crinkling of their tanks. Then there was only the dark of the sea. Then there was nothing at all.

When the three would once again wake upon the dreadnought, the sea smelt empty and the air was clear. There were clouds in the sky and droplets of gray rain on the quiet funnels, as the dreadnought drifted idly as its barbets fired on the mines, now naked on the surface, as Pink's ears popped as the sound of shrapnel tearing through the sea ringed beyond the deck. Varden sat with his legs hanging over the hull drawing from his first cigarette of the day with a new canteen of whiskey clutched between his thighs. For days and nights the three would sit and eat in silence: Pink would not chase the sun, Stew would go to sleep hungry and cold, and Varden would begin to run out of cigarettes and canteens. One morning when the two woke, the boy with blonde hair had left, perhaps to his home in nowhere to see if his mother would bring home a man with hair like his. As they stood lined against the edge of the deck, the boy and old man would overhear the soldier who was once just a boy who'd swim a creek with his brother telling a story to his comrades, laughing despite the fact that that they had found a boy in the storerooms the night before with his trousers filled with ration bars, that they threw him overboard, that they drew their shotguns and took turns firing on him until he'd swim no more, that after he sunk under the waves they would have a drink until they forgot the boy they killed, the boy with hair they couldn't

remember. Pink would draw his gaze away from the grey pupilled soldier and stare down towards the place where the sea met the hull and wonder how far Stew had made it, but when he could look no more he'd turn to Varden and speak.

what /... home /... .

And for the first time in years something came back to Varden.

.. /... cold .. snow. Nice.

then why ... /... leave?

And it was painful.

because - ... /... loved ... no longer there.

Pink was a skinny boy.

what color ... her hair?

A boy with brown tinted hair in a buzz cut.

white.

I don't want to die sir. I want to live. I want to find someone like her for myself.

A boy who hadn't worked a day in his life.

Why?

A boy who did not know heartbreak nor hardship.

Because the world doesn't want me to.

But a boy who knew the world.

They're making us go again sir.

The boy and the old man would jump together once more into the sea. They'd swim far out. Varden would cut the chains as Pink would dive and watch. Perhaps the old man found comfort knowing that maybe one of the three boys could find their way home. Perhaps not the boy who had blonde hair like nobody else and not even his family. Perhaps not the boy who learned to drink his own urine. But perhaps the boy who had learned that the world was not his, that only his name was, and perhaps that was enough for both of them. They'd swim for miles together, forgetting the sounds of distant explosions, forgetting all but their names, Brison Pink and Serge Varden, and their homes in nowhere which they were determined to return to after the dreadnoughts sailed once more and after the war was over. But there would come the first time where Varden would call out to Pink for the last time.

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