THE SURFMAN

a short story

by

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THE SURFMAN

Gray Rinehart

Several hundred yards off Long Beach Island, New Jersey, the small freighter should have been slipping along the wavetops headed who-knows-where. Her captain must've been drunk or incompetent to have hit the shoals in broad daylight with a favorable tide, but that didn't matter to Silas Jacobs. It didn't so much matter that the ship had ten or twelve sailors on board, and most couldn't swim a lick; deep ocean sailors were like that. What mattered to Silas was that the ocean was trying to kill them.

The number four man of the Harvey Cedars lifesaving station, Silas pulled hard against the oars in steady time with the other five rowers. In the back of the surfboat, facing Silas and the rowers, stood Station Chief Nichols. As coxswain, he called out the cadence, warned the crew about approaching waves, and directed the boat with his steering oar. The cadence was quick: they would soon lose the precious January daylight. Silas strained against the wooden oar, forcing the blade through the water.

Not today, Neptune. Not while I have breath.

The surfboat nosed up until it sat on the crest of each wave for a sickening second, then it fell off the crest and Silas dug fast and hard with the others. They gained a few more yards of distance from Long Beach Island.

Cold salt spray stung his good eye; he'd lost the other one defending the earthworks around Petersburg. That seemed a lifetime ago. He closed his eye for a second and darkness engulfed him. Have to do more than that, you deep blue bastard; have to blind me for good to get me to stop. Silas shook his head to fling the salt and tears out of his eye.

As they passed the last of the breakers, the sea became choppy but a little less violent; the coxswain smoothed the cadence, but kept it urgent. Silas pulled stroke by stroke in unison with the other surfmen, until they reached the freighter—a bark named Lady Caroline—and pulled into her leeward side. The ship's wooden hull creaked like a rusty barn door; her back would break on the shoals before long. Out of the wind, Silas's side of the surfboat pulled in their oars and rigged lines loosely fore and aft while the Caroline's crew lowered a marine ladder. Silas knelt up on the seat and steadied one side of the ladder while the ship's crew began evacuating. He prayed silent thanks that this rescue was in daylight and low seas: precious few of their rescues were.

Silas greeted the first crewman off the freighter with a smile. The man started jibber jabbering some foreign language. After five years on a boat crew,

Silas wasn't surprised anymore at how many foreign sailors plied the Atlantic coast; he laughed and pointed out where the crewman should sit. The surfboat was deep and wide and nigh unsinkable—if it capsized, it was easily righted—and would hold two dozen big men with room to spare. The ride back wouldn't be cramped, even with all the ship's crew aboard.

When the eighth crewman was halfway down the ladder, the Lady Caroline suddenly shook as if she were a fish trying to flop back into the water. The sailor scurried down the ladder as fast as he could.

Three more crewmen peered down at Silas from behind the ship's railing; Silas motioned to them with his free hand and yelled, "Quick now!" Other surfmen were yelling, too. Silas wished he knew how to call out in the sailors' own language.

One of the three men started down the ladder. He'd only descended two steps when a violent combination of the ship's convulsion and a stray wave nearly pulled the ladder out of Silas's hands. Silas held on and was pulled up out of the surfboat for a second, then came back down and stood on the gunwale. Another Lady Caroline crewman jumped overboard off the ship's bow; a surfman threw him a line and started pulling him in. The third started down the ladder before the first was in the surfboat, when another wave slapped the two vessels and the ship began to crack apart.

Silas was pulled up again and smashed into the ship's hull.

No you don't, you blackguard.

As the ship rocked back toward the surfboat, both crewmen let go the ladder. One fell on top of one of his shipmates, the other into the water next to the surfboat.

That's it, time to go. Silas stepped into the surfboat.

But the surfboat wasn't where it had been. He came down with one foot inside and one outside. The Lady Caroline smashed into the smaller boat, cushioned only slightly by Silas's lower leg.

He couldn't tell right away if his leg was broken, if the snap he heard was his bones or the cracking of the ship next to him. Then pain moved up his leg like a tidal wave. The shock of it was like that day at Petersburg: he was working the cannon with Ralph Goins until Ralph's head and Silas's eye exploded; the blast sounded in Silas's ear before the pain hit him, and he didn't know at first that his eye was gone.

The surfboat came away from the Lady Caroline. Silas's hands slipped off the marine ladder, and he fell between the two hulls into the icy water.

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Three months later, Silas watched from the rescue station tower as a four-masted schooner disappeared out of sight to the south. Dusk had nearly turned to dark, and it was time to abandon the watch tower and start the beach patrols. Night passage was the most hazardous to ships, and without foot patrols a ship might run aground between two rescue stations and no one on land would know it.

Just as well; even with this spyglass I'm not the most qualified watchman. Still, I know a schooner from a brig, even if I never handled shrouds nor stays.

Silas put down the scope and logged the unknown ship's safe passage. The bookstand where the logbook and glass sat was the only furnishing in the tower, unless the ticking clock counted: the lifesaving service didn't encourage its watchmen to sleep when they were on duty.

He limped around the perimeter of the tower, almost in time with the pendulum. Big windows on each wall looked over the entire stretch of Long Beach Island the station commanded. Silas winced a little, since he was alone; he wouldn't let his fellow surfmen know how much his leg still hurt. It ached almost constantly but was near to full strength again; he'd been walking patrols for the past month already, and for a week now he could push the boat cart and he could row. It felt good to be back on rescue crew. The weeks he could do nothing but stand watch in the tower had nearly done him in.

Silas signed out of the log book. Carpenter—Surfman Number Six—would be in at daybreak to open the log back up. Silas trudged down the stairs and out into the April evening. Oscar Miller, the station's number two man, stood outside.

"Ready to go for a walk?" Silas said.

"Are you on patrol again? I thought I saw you in the tower."

"I relieved Carpenter early."

Miller shook his head. "Hope Nichols doesn't find out."

"He doesn't care, so long as the bell rings regular so he knows we're alert."

"Perhaps so, but you've been in there the last three times I've walked the night patrol. That's more than your share." Miller looked Silas in the eye; he was one of the few station men who would. "What does Pamela have to say about it?"

She's got nothing to say worth saying about it. Silas chided himself for the thought—husband, love your wife as Christ loved the church—and checked his tongue. He clapped Miller playfully on the shoulder. "She's just as happy to have me out from under foot."

Miller shook his head again, then picked up his lantern and bell and walked off toward the south.

Silas stood in front of the boathouse for a second, enjoying the deepening night. It was cool but comfortable, the stars just peeking out. He cut a bit off his tobacco plug and enjoyed its flavor. Then he adjusted his eye patch, picked up his own lantern and signal bell, and set off north at the best pace he could manage.

Long Beach Island was a twenty-mile barrier island off the mainland of New Jersey, dotted by rescue stations from Barnegat Lighthouse south to Beach Haven. Loveladies Station was the next station north from Harvey Cedars, about two and a half miles away; the next station south was Ship Bottom, a four-mile walk. Silas was glad Miller had taken the southern route.

He walked close to the waterline where he could, in the firmer sand. The ocean lapped the sand to his right, and even that gentle sound pounded great spikes into Silas's ears. Every advancing wave was the voice of some sailor or passenger lost and drowned; every retreating wave was the sigh of a child orphaned by that incessant menace.

He scanned the horizon as he walked, over the soft grey shimmer of the breakers and foam. He picked out a moving light, a ship's lantern, moving south but far enough out that it was in no danger from the shallows. "Godspeed and safe harbor," he said.

When Silas got to the rendezvous point, halfway between Harvey Cedars and Loveladies, the surfman from Loveladies was already there.

"You're late," the man said as Silas approached.

Silas didn't recognize his voice; he must be new. "Maybe you're early," Silas said. "All clear?"

"You didn't hear no bell, did you? Aye, all clear. Hurry up and get your token."

The sand was softer where the man stood; it exaggerated Silas's limp. The ache in his leg sharpened and he mumbled a curse. The Loveladies man cocked his head and looked at the way Silas was walking, then looked up at Silas's face as he got closer. He looked away as Silas came to tower over him.

"God, you're a big-un." He looked back, tentatively, into Silas's eye.

Silas was impressed; he was used to people looking away from his patch and scarred face. Few looked him in the eye so quickly. Tough little fellow.

"True enough," Silas said. He smiled, and hoped it made him look less menacing, but in the yellow lantern light who could tell?

They talked for a few minutes about the weather and the last ships they'd seen. They exchanged station tokens so there would be no doubt they'd completed their patrols.

As Silas turned back south, the other man said, "You've got a strange manner of speaking. Where are you from, Cedars man?"

Silas drew in a quick breath. It would be easy to claim to be from Boston, where his wife's family had gone when the war was about to break. A dozen years after the war, and so many people still held so much hatred. But he wouldn't deny his history. He half turned to look at the Loveladies man. "Virginia," he said.

The man stood silent for a moment. He bobbed a little as if he was flexing his knees; maybe he was considering Silas's size, and whether he could outrun him. He spat a fine spray into the sand in front of him and said, "Then I say you ought to get back there."

Peace, Silas. Love, joy, peace, something . . . . Self-control.

When Silas didn't respond, the Loveladies man continued, "That's right, get back where you came from, you rebel son of a bitch."

Silas turned his back on the man and started back toward Harvey Cedars station. Behind him the man's voice rose higher and coarser, until the wind thankfully blew his words away.

Not for the first time, Silas wondered if he'd been right to leave Virginia. If he were back home, he'd be sleeping right now, soon to be roused by the rooster and out to the barn, then back to a hearty breakfast with Pamela and Isaac and little Jacob. If not for the sea.

I'd work the fields and know nothing of the beach, except for you, you reckless wet demon.

Silas spat toward the crashing surf.

His heart still nearly broke when he thought of standing helpless in Norfolk, seven years before, when Pamela and six-year-old Isaac were at sea in a storm. Their ship had run aground off the northern Virginia shore, then freed itself and tried to make Norfolk harbor, only to founder off Cape Henry. Silas went to the cape with the shipping company man and watched until the frustration became too much and he did the only thing that came to mind: he swam out toward it. He didn't make it, but Pamela and Isaac were no longer on board anyway; and when a sputtering sailor begged him for help, Silas couldn't keep him afloat. Despondent and dead tired, Silas had clung to floating debris and cursed the ocean.

He was plucked from the water, and never felt dirtier than when the salt was drying on him. When he learned afterwards that his family was safe, rescued after all by a ship from Rhode Island, he should have been happy.

Pamela was happy. For her, every day after their landfall was a blessing directly from God. To Silas, each day mixed joy with torment: he thanked God for saving them, but hatred of the ocean festered in him. The thought haunted him that somewhere on the water men and women were dying—which meant others stood on shore and worried over them or mourned them, just as he'd done in Norfolk. The idea of saving men, saving families from the waves and tides, sang to Silas like a Siren. But on Tomlinson's farm he was so far from that possibility that he might as well have been off chasing Indians on the plains or scrabbling for what little gold still remained in the West.

Two full years he endured—no, not endured. He enjoyed the years: savored the time with Pamela and Isaac whom he thought he'd lost forever, rejoiced over Jacob's birth. But late most days he looked eastward and knew that over the hills lay the ocean, taunting him. So he came looking for it, to stop it from taking men and women to the depths, and his search led them to New Jersey.

If there'd been rescue houses in Virginia, Pamela and the boys would've been happier. They wouldn't have had to bear years of vicious talk from locals like that Loveladies man. Most of it had subsided among the people they knew, though there were always some whose bitterness worked its way to the surface. But when Silas joined, the USLSS was still new and its line of stations only ran from New Jersey to Massachusetts. Now stations were being installed up to Maine and down to the Carolinas, but he'd made his place at Harvey Cedars and here he would stay.

The service hadn't wanted to take Silas on, since he wasn't an experienced sailor—his single eye was no advantage, either—but they couldn't

turn down his size and his strength and his driving need to bring survivors back to shore. He'd sacrificed his family's contentment for the sake of strangers and hatred of the devilish sea.

Silas stopped a hundred yards shy of the station. He turned toward the water and stood just out of reach of the foam-trimmed blackness for several minutes.

Not worth it . . . should've stayed on the farm.

He took out his quid and flung it into the sea.

As if in answer, a wave surged forward and some of the foul water washed over his boots. Rage welled up in him until he shook, and the bell in his hand rang softly. He kicked at the foam, then turned and stomped away toward the station. Miller would be waiting. Silas would take the southern patrol this time.

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The next morning, his patrols over, Silas sat in the boathouse, splicing two ends of rope together.

The inland doors opened and the rest of the station's eight surfmen came in. Only Miller, Baxter and the chief had been with the station longer than Silas; young Pinckney was brand new. Four of the men pushed a good-sized cart, and behind them came Station Chief Nichols and a US Army officer. Silas put down his rope and walked over.

Two spars were centered on the long axis of the cart. Inside the cart was a large hawser, coiled up; a smaller cable coiled on top of it; a life ring atop a tarp; some block and tackle; and a miniature cannon.

Silas froze. He blinked out the vision of the little cannon, but when he opened his eye the dull brass still reflected the sunlight coming through the open doors.

It's only a toy. A noisemaker, for signaling or something.

It looked so familiar. He would know its smooth skin as if it were a part of his own. He could hear its report as clearly as he heard the men's chattering, and it was as loud as the gun he'd manned on the Petersburg earthworks. He closed his eye for a long second, and Ralph Goins grinned at him out of history.

"Hey, Silas, we brought you something to play with." His fellow surfmen laughed.

Not me. I'm not touching that thing.

Silas fought to stay expressionless as he joined the men around the cart. He tried to sound indifferent as he said, "Thanks, Oscar. It looks precious."

The officer, a captain, did not look away from Silas's face. He said, "You're Jacobs, aren't you."

"Yes, sir." No sense in not being polite.

"Clarence Douglas." He held out his hand.

Silas shook it. Since he'd mustered out, and all through Reconstruction, he'd seen plenty of officers in blue uniforms, but this was his first time to

shake one's hand. Silas tensed, down in his gut, and reminded himself that the war was long over.

Douglas said, "I understand you were an artillerist in the war."

"If you mean I know how to fire a big gun, yes, sir."

Captain Douglas walked to the cart and put his hand on the cannon's barrel. The barrel was about two feet long; the bore couldn't be more than three inches. "This is a rescue gun, a Lyle Gun, and I'm going to train you and the rest of the men to use it."

The captain really looked nothing like Ralph Goins—he was younger, fairer, smaller, and had all his teeth—yet standing with his hand on that baby cannon was all the resemblance Silas needed. His memory of Ralph crowded in on him again, with noise and smoke and confusion and sudden darkness.

Silas shook his head. "I can't see as I've ever seen a cannon rescue anybody—just the opposite. I'd as soon not."

"This is different." Douglas walked to the side of the cart and lifted the life ring and the tarpaulin to reveal a pile of shells and a small watertight chest. He opened the chest; it held pre-made black powder charges for the little cannon.

Douglas picked up one of the shells. The captain muffled a grunt and Silas laughed inside. The shells were less than a foot long.

Captain Douglas said, "I've spent the past four months delivering these guns to stations from Providence south. These aren't ordinary shells: see the hole there? It's for a trailing line. Fire it toward a stranded ship, the crew snags the little line and pulls out a hawser."

Oscar Miller laughed. "What're you gonna do, pull the ship in to the beach so the crew can just step off?"

Douglas shook his head.

"No, the idea is to get people off the ship before it breaks up, not to tear it up around them. When the hawser pays out, this block and tackle is rigged to it, along with the breeches buoy." He held up the life ring, which had a pair of ridiculous-looking oversize canvas pants attached to it. "So, when they tie off their end to the ship's mast, and you tie your end to this mast"—he tapped the spars that lay atop the cart—"you can literally pull people off the ship. Back and forth it goes, and one at a time you pull them in."

The men passed the breeches buoy around for a few minutes before Douglas said, "Some of the other stations have tried rockets to carry ropes, but they're not accurate enough. This system," he patted the cannon, "works very well, and every man in the service is learning to fire this gun."

Silas considered the prospect—it might work—and rejected it. As satisfying as it might be to fire a cannon toward the ocean, it would be an empty gesture; and he'd had his fill of cannons, miniature or not. "I'd just as soon not," Silas repeated. "I'll stick to the boats."

Oscar Miller said, "Hear, hear."

Captain Douglas set his jaw. He nodded his head and looked around at each of the men in turn. When he looked back at Silas he asked, "How many of your rescues are complete successes?"

"A lot," Silas said.

"Really? Complete successes? All the stranded people brought in alive, with no boatmen harmed?"

Silas lifted his hurt leg, just a little; the ache seemed more pronounced for a moment. He thought back to previous minor injuries: a few dislocated fingers, sprained ankles, lots of bruises and splinters. They were part of the job. Each man had been hurt at one time or another, and they'd lost Big David in a squall in early March. Damn vindictive killer water. Silas himself had replaced an Irishman lost on a rescue.

Douglas continued, "None of you know? Chief Nichols knows. I bet you do, too, but you won't admit it. Boat rescues work very well—when the alternative is nothing. But each of you has been injured at least once, and this station's lost an average of a man a year.

"It's the same thing at every other station. 'You have to go out, but you don't have to come back,' that's your motto, isn't it? But this system"—he slapped the side of the cart—"will change all that. For ships in trouble within six hundred yards of shore, this system will be the standard."

Silas took a deep breath. "That's fine, sir, but I'll stick to the boats."

"Why?"

Chief Nichols stepped between them. "Jacobs, you're the most fearless man on all of Long Beach Island—first in the boat, every time," he said. Miller nodded his head and a few of the others murmured agreement. "I've never known you to back down from a rescue, no matter the seas or the winds. Why refuse this? It'll make our rescues better."

Silas looked around the station chief, at the Army officer. "Captain Douglas, were you in the war?"

"Barely. I received my commission, but the war ended too soon for me to see any action."

"And too late for me to miss seeing it." Silas tapped his eye patch.

Chief Nichols stepped back. The captain nodded. "Where did that happen?"

Silas wasn't used to the question. Most people pretended not to see his patch, and even those who saw wouldn't ask about it. Chief Nichols had never asked, not once in five years; nor Miller, nor the rest of them.

Silas took a breath. "At Petersburg, summer of '64. I was in the only cannon squad on the defenses, but we held off the Yankees—no offense, sir, to you or my boatmates—until reinforcements came. We were just about the only regulars in the city. Most of the line was old men and young boys, with 1812-style muskets, but we held firm. I don't know how many we killed."

Captain Douglas nodded, and was silent for a second. "I see. Please accept my apology. I understand your reluctance."

No you don't, bluecoat, and don't pretend that you do.

Silas kept his voice quiet and, as best he could, respectful, as he said, "No, sir, I don't think you do. You think maybe I'm ashamed of what I've done. Well, maybe I am, but that's between me and God, and I hope He don't call me home until I've saved more men than I ever killed.

"Or maybe you think it's my eye, that I'm bitter about what I can't see, but that's not it. It's what I do see, what I still see.

"My eye wasn't shot out, y'see. If it was, I'd likely be dead and not care at all about boats or your little toy gun. I was working our big Napoleon with Ralph Goins, a good fellow if ever there was one. Ralph and I could load and fire quicker than thunder, and we were firing hot as fever when Ralph got hit. I watched him get hit. Then I was hit in the eye.

"Found out later I was hit with a piece of Ralph's skull. Not shrapnel, not a bullet: bone. Surgeon said a lot of the wounds they treated were like that: a guy gets killed and takes a part of his bunkmate with him. Ralph took my eye. And not a day goes by that I don't see Ralph getting hit, and it seems I only see it with the eye that ain't there."

The surfmen stepped back, away from the cart, when Silas was done. Chief Nichols shook his head and turned away; the others followed one by one. Silas felt dirty, bloody, forever tainted—as much by the blood he had spilled as by what had spilled on him when he lost his eye.

Silas left Captain Douglas standing alone, next to his rescue gun, and went back to splicing the lines.

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"Papa?"

Silas opened his eye. Isaac stood over him, holding a lantern a little too close to Silas's face.

Damn few nights I get to spend at home, now what?

Silas grunted and yawned.

"Mister Nichols is out front. Said the schooner Endurance ran aground about a mile south of here."

Of course; what else would it be? "Tell him I'll be to the boat shed quick as I can."

Isaac hesitated. "Can I go, too, Pa?"

Silas considered. Isaac was thirteen, growing up fine; he might not grow as big as Silas but he was already strong, and contracted to apprentice to a brickmaker on the mainland. Two more months, and then he'd be gone.

Silas turned to look at Pamela. She was awake, but she looked skeptical.

"He's just going to watch," Silas said.

Pamela took a deep breath, as if she might argue, then she nodded.

By the time Silas and Isaac got there, the watchmen had already hitched one horse to the boat cart and another to the gun cart. They set off toward Ship Bottom at a good pace. A light mist hung in the air, obscuring everything enough that they couldn't make good time. Captain Douglas followed close behind, along with two volunteers he'd found to pull the breeches buoy back

and forth; this was the first grounded ship in the eight days Douglas had been at Harvey Cedars.

The Endurance lay some five hundred yards out. At first Silas knew she was there only because of her lanterns. The ship's hull creaked with the retreat of every wave; she must've shoaled when the tide was higher, but from the angle Silas couldn't tell if she was listing or not.

Silas told Isaac to watch from the dunes, then he, Miller, and Baxter unhitched the boat cart and rolled it toward the water. They were ready to launch five minutes later, but back up the beach Chief Nichols and their other three rowers were still working with Captain Douglas's gear.

Silas's companions went back up the beach to help, but Silas maintained his distance. He cut a plug of tobacco and watched through the mist. The mast was assembled and the pulley system rigged; the gun was positioned. Silas began to make out the shape of the Endurance.

Minutes passed; the mist grew steadily brighter with diffused dawn light, but the cannon didn't fire.

Little gun like that, should only take five minutes to set it and fire. Mist shouldn't affect the primer. Probably arguing over the aim—

The gun fired. The trailing line arced out over the water, far ahead of the ship's bow: a clean miss, from half a thousand yards.

That's why Douglas is an engineer and not an artillery officer. Wish all their gunners had been so accurate. We'd never have lost the war.

"Forget the gun," Silas said to no one, and started up the beach to try to muster the men to the boat. That's when he noticed the screaming.

He ran to the others, his leg throbbing with every step. Pinckney, the youngster, stopped screaming and began to whimper, trying to hold in his pain like a man, as he held onto his leg where the gun mount had smashed it.

Fools didn't ground the gun well enough. A week's worth of practice and they didn't account for the fact that their little gun's too light to sit still when it fires.

Blood from Pinckney's leg started spreading into the sand. It would be a miracle if he didn't lose that leg.

Silas closed his eye and Ralph Goins winked at him. When he opened his eye the mist was smoke, and the Pinckney boy's whimpering was a hundred boys wounded and dying all around him. He blinked again and the mist returned; the Endurance creaked on the shoal and he remembered where he was and what he was about.

He was about saving people from that blue monster licking the beach. What did it matter how? If he didn't get people moving, they'd stand around senseless, Pinckney would bleed out into the sand and that ship's crew would be done for.

Lord, help me do what I have to do.

Charge. Shell. Every move was automatic; they flowed from Silas's muscles like water from a spring. Azimuth; he wrestled the little gun into place and staked it better. Elevation, set with the judgment of decade-old rehearsals.

Aimed at the black heart of the Atlantic, just beyond the stranded ship. Friction primer. Fire.

The shell flew between the main and mizzen masts of the schooner, and the trailing line fell onto the deck rails. The deck crew swarmed it. Silas turned; Miller was already tying the line to the hawser coiled in the gun cart. Moments later the thick hawser was paying out yard by yard toward the Endurance. The ship creaked loudly.

"You surprise me, Mr. Jacobs," said Captain Douglas.

Silas looked past the captain and motioned to Isaac, who started down the dunes. "Get that boy's leg taken care of," he said to Douglass, "and make sure your buoy contraption works." He turned and started walking toward the surfboat. He limped, but only slightly, as the sand shifted under his feet.

"Where are you going, Mr. Jacobs?"

Silas turned around. "That ship may break in two before you pull the last man to shore, and we can't hook your line to the water. I'm going to the boat, sir."

Silas turned his head and spat toward the sea. Isaac joined them, and Silas clapped a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Your ma will likely kill me for it, and I don't know if Chief Nichols will agree, but we need a rower, son. Are you up to it?" Isaac grinned and nodded, and took off running for the surfboat.

Silas turned to Douglas, still standing next to his little gun, wiping the film of salt spray off the barrel.

"I'm a surfman, Captain," Silas said. He turned back around and walked into the lightening mist.

THE END

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Gray wrote the first draft of this story in June 2004 as a student in Orson Scott Card's "Literary Boot Camp."

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