

Bully

“PAH-MAH, can ya heah me? PAH-MAH!”

“Palmer?” I asked.

“Yeah,” the old man nodded, “Pahmah. Bully Pahmah.”

“Not Billy?”

“No dammit, B-U-L-L-Y space P-A-L-M-E-R. Damn ah hate tryin' ta tahk ta outsiders.”

Outside the Christmas decorated window, with it's fake snow, real snow slanted ahead of a norther down Washington Ave. The toddys and crumpets I bought kept him relatively civil, but it was the hard cold outside that kept him here.

Occasionally his outbursts drew a look from one of the other tables, but for the most part people ignored us. It was a small diner, only five tables and a four seat bar, but decorated with warmth and care. A middle-aged waitress kept the coffee cups full, addressing everyone as “hon” in turn. Occasionally a customer would ask for something and she'd clip an order onto the cook's ring over the serving shelf behind the counter. Coffee and spice scents dominated the outer area, but yeasty bread odors sometimes wafted through the swinging door. Once the sharp scent of bacon drifted lazily through and I saw at least three other heads turn as it wafted through the room.

“Why would you name a boat Bully?” I asked.

The old man shrugged, “’Twere theah when ah boahded. sonny. Ah din't have any say in the namin' of her.”

He went on and my mind adjusted to his dialect, automatically translating.

“She weren't a pretty boat, but I liked that. Maybe sixty feet and broad abeam, worn but well cared for gear laid careful on deck. Sharp upslope to her bow, with a sturdy wheelhouse and cabin aback. She looked a lot like a sea-going tug. The only thing that gave me a moment's pause was the captain. The captain was a woman.”

“Do you dislike women?” I asked.

“Nah, boy, ya don't understand. I ain't superstitious, but a woman on a boat normally distracts a man from doing what he's supposed to be doing, whether she's useful or not. But this one was different. Captain Meg owned the boat. She was a scientist ya see, and she'd studied the sea for more than twenty years. Smart as a whip, knew more about the sea and the weather than most seamen I've known, including meself.”

“Was this in Boston?” I asked.

“No, boy, 'twere here in Portland. Moored on Widgery wharf if memory serves. I was younger then and heartier. I boarded and she met me at the gangway.

'Brian?' she says, and I say 'Yes'm.'

'I'm Captain Meg. Come over here.'

“...then she walks over to the side of the boat where there's another man and introduces me to him.

'Brian, this is Peter. Drop your gear and grab that line,' she points me to a half-inch line

over the side, puts Peter on one the other side of her then she grabs a third line in between us.

'When I say go, haul for all you're worth,' she says, then says 'go' and we each haul like mad at our lines. About half a minute later she hauls a crab pot over the edge and drops it on the deck while Peter and me are still hauling line. Our pots break the surface and land on the deck more than a few seconds after hers, my hands are raw and dripping, Peter's rubbing his on his trousers, and she's leaning against the rail as relaxed as can be, waiting for us to finish our dance.

“Now Captain Meg is maybe fifty years old, clean, just normal, not slim, not fat, just a plain person, except of course she's just showed us she's more capable than either one of us.

'I'm the owner and Captain of this vessel,' she says, 'And I've been more than twenty years at sea and studied it a lot longer than that. If you want this job you have to understand that I am the absolute boss of this boat. If I tell you to jump your feet better be off the deck before you look around to see why. And if you've got a problem with that, leave now.'

“We was both intimidated. Peter just nodded, but I had the good sense to say: These here crab would look nice alongside some Spanish rice with maybe Asparagus for dinner, Ma'am.

She grins and says: 'Find a bunk, don't mess with the instruments until after I show you how to use them, the galley's amidships and the pot's already on. If you need anything else get it now, we sail on the evening tide, roughly 1800 hours. I'll be in the wheelhouse.'

We made for the outer banks, dunno where exactly. She was studying bottom damage done by factory draggers, building a data base, she said. The weather were fair, the seas easy and we made good time. Started running her machines after about a day and a half and set in a pattern to run on the GPS in a rectangular grid. She showed us how to set the GPS, find waypoints and

such, and make sure the instruments were working to record what she wanted. We made a habit of dragging along a couple of fishing lines and picked up an occasional hungry cod fer dinner.

“Anyways, we spend three or four days working an East-West pattern, then squared back to start the North-South runs when Peter spotted a sail on the horizon. He let me glass it and I couldn't see much but a kind of dark looking patch above the sea. He said it were hanging slack, he thought, like it was dead in the water. 'Twas closing on sundown but it was east of us and we could see the sail above the horizon.

“Well, if it'r dead in the water how come we can still see it? I asked him. We ain't dead in the water, we're moving, and he's keeping pace with us.”

“Peter, he goes and tells Captain Meg and she marks the position and comes about to run over and investigate. We're all three up in the wheelhouse expecting to close on the boat, but now it doesn't seem like we're making much headway toward it.

'That's peculiar,' Captain Meg says, 'it seems to be moving away from us, but there's no wind in that sail.'

“So I takes the glass from Peter one more time and watch until we get a peak that comes to both vessels at the same time. When it happens a chill runs down my spine, cause I see a black hull below that sail.

“Now I ain't no sissy, sonny,” the old man says, “but I've heard tales of a burnt boat before, and ain't any of 'em come to any good end. I tells the Captain and Peter what I'd seen and what I'd heard. Peter don't pay me no mind, but the Captain goes kinda ashy and she says:

'Brian, I've heard tales too, and seein' as that vessel isn't letting us catch up, maybe we'd be better off tending to our own knitting.'

“Well, she swings Bully around again and heads back toward our last position, but all of a sudden we get a turn to starboard that we didn't plan.

'Run back and see what's caught us, Brian,' the Captain says and I do. Well our starboard line has hooked up with something really big, bending that heavy rod almost double and dragging the boat something fierce. I'm feelin' a little spooked and cut the line rather than try to land whatever it is hauling on us. Bully eases back to the right heading and I takes an easy breath, then I slip over to port to draw up that line and damn if something big doesn't snatch it up and start dragging us on the port side now. The Captain's hollering up in the wheelhouse and I cut that line too. Bully eases back to course again and I wonder what else will happen next, but I feel a lot better until I look aft and see that damn black sail growing bigger on the horizon. It's still hanging straight down and I still can't see the boat under it yet, but the sail's bigger'n ever.

“Cap'n,” I holler up to the wheelhouse, “She's coming after us!

“Immediately Captain Meg sets Bully's RPMs a little higher and we start making near our top speed, somewhere around 18 knots. Now Bully ain't no racing boat that's for sure, but you'd think 18 knots would put a sailboat with no wind behind you, even if its running on engine. But the best we could do was hold kind of even. I say “kind of”, because we all knew that black boat were gaining on us.”

'Why is it after us?' Peter asked. He was starting to get a look in his eyes like a trapped animal, eyes shifting from side to side watching for threats, you know?”

'Cause somebody did something powerful bad, Peter,' Captain Meg said, 'Powerful bad...'

“The sky grew darker and threatening ahead of us and waves began to build higher. Ten

hours from land if we hold this pace, I'm thinking to myself.”

'Well, what kind of bad?' Peter asked, he was showing his fear now, or maybe it was my own worries coming back at me that I felt.”

'Somethin' against God,' Captain Meg said. How she knew that I didn't know but I started trying to think what I'd done to piss off God.

“No...,” I said, remembering something I'd heard, “...not particularly against God, but something that could let the devil claim your soul.

“Eight foot waves grew to sixteen, then twenty foot. Captain Meg quartered each and surfed hard down the backside. Bully sometimes wallowed but Captain Meg got her back on speed quicker'n anyone I've ever seen. But that damn black sail kept growing.

“The wind changed and we started taking beam seas. Captain Meg veered us onto a stable course across them and the black sail veered behind us.

'Damn her, damn her, damn her.' Captain Meg hollered, 'Brian take the helm, keep her quarter to the rise,' then she tore back to her cabin. Bully felt the change in hand and wallowed slightly as I tried to do what the Captain had been doing. In less than a long minute Captain Meg was back with something grasped tight in her hand. It looked like a gold locket and chain. She whipped back the wheelhouse window and threw whatever it was into the storm with all her might, all the while wailing 'damn her, damn her, damn her.' I got the feeling she wasn't cursing the boat behind us.

“Peter was pale and cowered in a corner of the wheelhouse. Bully shifted back and forth and took her head proudly when Captain Meg took the helm back. Tears ran down her face but she wasn't frightened, her jaw was set as firm as ever I'd seen.

“Now, I'd never been an angel, but I never shorted any man nor woman in my life. I didn't have anything to sacrifice back to the sea, but I got down on my knees, braced on a cabinet against the rocking of the boat and prayed to a God I never paid much attention to before.

“Peter is crying in the corner and all of a sudden he jumps up and runs back to the bunkroom. He comes back with his hand tightly clasped around something that gleams like gold, flings open the wheelhouse window and heaves it straight out into the sea just like Captain Meg done.

"Take it back, take it back,' he hollers aft toward the black sail, but it just keeps on growing closer.

“We ran ahead of that damn black sail nearly three hours until the sea calmed slightly and Captain Meg turned us back toward Portland.

'He'll have to run us down, but we'll never quit.' she said. She gritted her teeth and found another couple of revs on the diesels.

“The black sail closed faster now that the waves had eased, but in the fading light I couldn't see it well. Captain Meg set Bully on autopilot and we all watched the sail grow. It was improbably big, near a hundred feet tall, and now we could see the hull below it, low and black.

“Then her lights came on. We could see a second hull, black, but not burnt. Both flying over the water with only a small slice of wake from the front and back. What the hell?

“She drew alongside us and we watched as shadows flitted back and forth between the hulls on empty space, then settled on its starboard side. They lumped together and a helmsman at the rear waved as they sailed past. In the twilight we could read only one thing on the side:

“Oracle,” it read in dayglo orange.

Captain Meg started laughing like a maniac. Peter still whimpered in his corner, I don't even think he looked at the other boat. I stood staring in ignorance as it seemed to lift out of the water and zoom away from us on a starboard tack.

“What the hell was that?” I asked.

Captain Meg continued to laugh or cry, I couldn't quite tell which.

'It's a racing catamaran, Brian, an America's Cup racing sailboat. She planes on hydrofoils and in the right winds can run up to 50 knots. And there's no damn reason in the world she should be way out here, but I'm damn glad it was her.’

“Oh. Fifty knots...” I was stuck between the improbable and the unlikely. I have yet to fathom a sailboat running at fifty knots.

“Peter sat on the floor of the cabin, silent now. I didn't feel like saying much either. I felt damn foolish. Captain Meg was didn't say much either, just an occasional snort that could have been either a chuckle or a sob.

“I made up an easy dinner and let Peter and Captain Meg know it was there, then went to my bunk. We made straight for Portland and docked in the middle of the night. Captain Meg wrote us out checks for our full two-week schedule, even though we'd only been out one. Nobody said anything about going out again, and I don't think either Peter or me wanted to be back on the sea anytime soon.

“I went straight to the first church I saw, a Catholic cathedral, I forget which. I told the young priest there I thought I'd just had a brush with the devil, but I wasn't sure. He suggested some novenas, whatever those are, and wandered off to something more interesting.

“I sat for awhile and had a conversation with God, even though it felt like I was talking

with myself. I made some promises, and I've kept them ever since.”

“But I thought you said it was a racing boat you mistook for your black sail,” I said.

“Mebbe t'were or mebbe t'weren't,” the old man said, “But I was in the galley after that cat sailed by. Captain Meg was in the wheelhouse and Peter was in his bunk. I saw the black sail veer away behind us, and the burnt boat beneath. It may yet be my destiny, but I sure'n hell won't meet it on the sea.”

The old man slurped up the last of his toddy, took the last scone and wolfed it down, then with a wink at me, got up and wandered out the door into the cold snowy night.

I wrote down a few more notes, then signaled the waitress for my bill. Time to get home. She brought it and asked:

“Do you do that often?”

“What?” I asked her as I handed her my credit card.

“Talk to yourself? No offense meant, but some of the other customers was askin'!”

She ran my card and brought it back promptly, like she was in a hurry to get me out of there.

“Miss, I was talking with the old gent sitting across from me. You remember the toddy you brought?”

“Hon, you might want to see somebody. There wasn't anybody here but just you. Take care of yourself, hon, it's a cold night out.”