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Vision in the Sea

By RONALD CALDWELL

THE SHIP lay a mile out. We saw her masts first and did not speak for some time, focusing our eyes until she assumed form and depth. We were bewildered. Week after week we had watched for her and had seen nothing but water and sky. Al rubbed his eyes and I lighted a cigarette. Then we grinned at each other.

"Am I nuts?" said Al.

"We're both nuts."

We looked at the ship again. A wind blew and, even as we stared, a fog appeared from nowhere. Whitecaps sprang up on the surface of the sea. But the ship was still there.

"I must be seeing things," Al said.

"It's there, all right."

"Looks like a South Sea boat. Let's swim out and get a good look at her."

"It's too cold."

I knew Al could do it all right. He used to be a fighter and he swam a lot because he said it was better than running. I don't know how good he is now.

"How about a rowboat?" he said. "We could rent one cheap."

"We'd freeze."

He continued to stare at the ship, sitting with his hands clasped under his knees and his back arched. He had large bony hands with big red and white knuckles.

The fog grew denser. In a few minutes, the ship disappeared. Al tried to peer through the fog but it was too thick. We arose and walked up the beach until we came to a restaurant near the pier. It had grown cold, so we got coffee. Al kept talking about the ship: it sure as hell looked like a South Sea sailing vessel. He had a swell book about

Moorea. There were no motorcars or adding machines, or bills to pay there. The book cost him two dollars.

"I'm going out there in the morning," he said "Maybe they'll let us look it over."

"O. K. I'll go too, if it's still there."

"It'll be there all right," he replied grimly.

At that hour the restaurant was deserted and the waiter stood at the far end of the counter, staring out of the window. As soon as we were finished he moved to our end, wiping his hands on his apron.

"Anything else?" he said.

"Are there many boats here now?" I asked.

"There's some row boats, I guess."

"Any big boats out in the bay?" said Al.

The waiter's eyes brightened. He wiped his hands again.

"There might be a fishing barge. You fellows fish?"

"I mean a real ship. A four master."

The waiter scowled.

"Nope. Ain't seen a thing."

Al looked at me. We returned to the hotel without speaking. Al frowned all the way and smoked cigarettes incessantly. As soon as we got to our room he took off his coat and shoes and climbed on the bed.

"That guy's nuts," he said.

"Yeah. Those guys only see what's in front of their nose."

I picked up the paper and began turning the pages. There was little news: a plane crash, another strike. Finally I said: "Nice dance here tonight. What do you say we call up Peggy and her girl friend?"

"Dance?" he snorted. "Who the hell wants to dance?"

"It's only four bits."

"I don't care if they give you four bits. Hand me that South Sea book of mine, will you?"

The next morning she was still there. We went down early, after breakfast, and when we stood on the sands we

could see her lying there like a dream. The fog was still thick, hovering just over the sea, and even as we waited began to creep in, moving over the ship and curling about her masts like ghostly fingers. Al started quickly down the beach.

"I'm going to get a boat," he said.

"It looks pretty rough," I said, catching up with him.

"For Christ's sake, don't you think I ever rowed a boat before?"

"Yeah, but look at that fog."

"The hell with the fog."

He moved so fast I could hardly keep up with him. His mouth was set in grim, tight lines. When we reached the dock the fog had already obscured the ship and was rolling onto the beach. We stood there, unspeaking, until it reached us, gray and clammy wet, and then we started back. There wasn't anything we felt like saying. Al bummed a cigarette from me. His eyes were blank with despair.

"I guess that guy was right," he said. "I just dreamed I saw it. I've been thinking about it too much."

We stayed at the hotel all day, waiting for the fog to lift but at night it still clung to the sea and dock and land. It was so thick we could hardly see the beach. At ten o'clock we got on the street car. Al was silent and I tried to do a lot of talking but there didn't seem to be much to say.

The next Saturday we were out on the beach again. We got off work at twelve and by three o'clock had checked our suitcase at the hotel. We went down to the beach almost immediately. The fog was still in.

"Don't it ever go away?" Al said bitterly.

We walked out to the boat dock but it was just as bad there; we couldn't see the ship at all. There were two guys in blue dungarees swinging a rowboat up on a davit and we watched the water drip from the wet hull into the cold dark waters below.

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"Do you know when this fog'll clear up?" Al asked them.

"You got me, bud," one of them replied without looking up.

"Think it will clear up tonight?"

"You can't tell. Sometimes it only stays a couple of hours and sometimes it stays a couple of weeks."

"Is there a boat out there?" I asked.

"What kind of a boat? A fishing barge?"

"No," said Al. "A big four master."

The other guy dried his hands and swung around. "Yeah," he said. "I saw one anchored out there last week but the fog's been in every day since. I guess it's still there."

"What's it doing?" said Al.

"I don't know. It don't look like a fishing barge."

"It isn't."

"It's hard to say what it is. It might be a gambling boat."

"What?"

"It isn't a gambling boat," I said quickly.

"Your damn rights it's not a gambling boat," said Al.

"Well, I don't know what it is. It might be a gambling boat or it might belong to some rich guy. Chances are it belongs to a director or a movie star."

"Let's get going, Al," I said, pulling his arm. I dragged him up the gangway.

"That guy's lucky he didn't get his face smashed in," said Al, looking back over his shoulder. "He's Goddamn lucky."

When we returned to the hotel, we listened in the lobby to a football game over the radio but Al couldn't sit still so we went up to the room. It was dark and cold outside and we tried to read some magazines but there didn't seem to be anything good in them, so Al picked up his book again and began looking at the pictures. We knew them by heart. Last summer we had read a lot of folders about Tahiti and we looked up steamship fares but were afraid to quit our

jobs. We kept books all day and got damn tired of it. On Saturdays and Sundays we went out with Peggy and her girl friend. This summer we wanted to do something different. We wanted to get some fun out of life, somehow. We weren't sure what we wanted to do, but the South Seas sounded like a swell place.

At five o'clock the phone rang and I answered it.

"It's Peggy," I shouted to Al. "Want to go to a show?"

"Hell no."

"She's got tickets to the *Chinese*."

"You go."

I told her we couldn't go, and hung up. I tried to read again but Al ran out of cigarettes and said: "Let's go for a walk."

"Where'll we go?"

"Anyplace. Anyplace."

I laid my magazine aside and put on my coat. I felt like screaming, but I guess men don't scream. The room was blue with cigarette smoke.

It was cold outside. We walked briskly.

"Peggy's a nice girl," I said.

"What of it?"

"I mean we're getting pretty old."

He glared at me.

"Listen. I punched a bag for five years and now I'm punching an adding machine. If you think I'm going to do that the rest of my life, you're crazy."

"Maybe you're right," I said glumly.

We walked about three blocks up the street. It was five o'clock now. Stores and offices were closing and there were a lot of people going home from work.

"Look at 'em," Al said. "Look at the damn fools. Do we want to get like that? Why the hell don't they get away?"

"Where would they go?"

We crossed to the other side and waited on the corner for the signal to change.

"Looks like the fog's lifting," I said.

Al looked up.

"You're crazy. It's worse."

Half-way up the block we stopped at a movie theatre and looked thoughtfully at the posters. We didn't know what to do. To tell the truth we were tired, although we hadn't walked far. Al jingled some loose coins in his pocket.

"Feel like going in?" he said finally.

"It's O.K. by me. The picture can't be as bad as it looks out here."

I didn't really give a damn whether we went in or not and I knew he didn't either. But there was nothing else to do except go back to the room or call up Peggy and her girl friend. My legs felt tired, and my head ached.

We got seats near the middle. The show was lousy. One picture was about a rich play boy and a big city; the other was about a newspaper reporter and a big city. We couldn't seem to sit still. After the first picture we wanted to leave, but somehow we didn't. The people around us kept giving us dirty looks.

When the newsreel came on we got up and walked swiftly up the aisle. We stopped in the lobby to light cigarettes.

"We ought to ask for our money back," said Al.

"They don't make good pictures anymore."

"They make them just for money. That's all the lousy bastards think of—not beauty."

We stepped out. Then we stopped. We looked at the sky and we couldn't believe it. The sky was clear. Stars were shining, and the street lights blazed like suns, far on down the avenue.

"Jesus. Al," I cried.

"We're crazy. You can't see good when you've been in a show that long."

"No. It's clear. I can see the stars."

"We can't see good," he insisted. He shook his head, like a groggy boxer.

We began walking as fast as we could. Al stared intently ahead. His arms and legs swung like pistons. As soon as we reached the boat dock we could see the ship as plain as day. She was silhouetted in a faint outline of fog. A string of burning lights encircled her; she was glowing like an opalescent jewel.

"Let's hurry up," I said. "We'll get a water taxi."

"We'll go down to the float."

"We haven't got time."

"Let's go down to the float first."

"Jesus Christ."

There was a large motor boat there, put-putting, half-filled with passengers in evening dress shouting and laughing and very drunk. The name *Daisy* was painted in bright new letters on the stern of the boat. Inside a square, uncovered booth, above the float, a fat, red-faced man was shouting through a megaphone. I could feel my heart beating. We caught some of his words: "All aboard. All aboard. Dining . . . Dancing . . . The Joy Boat."

"What boat's he talking about?" I said.

"Shut up, Goddammit."

A man in evening dress lurched drunkenly down the gangway, hanging onto a washed-out looking blond, and Al grabbed his arm.

"Where's that boat going?" he shouted in his ear.

"What's shat?"

"I said, where's that boat going?"

"Oh." The man lurched backward, hiccoughing. "You mean *that* boat?"

"Yes," Al yelled. "That boat."

"Out to shee." He waved his hand in a great semi-circle. "Way, way, way out to shee."

Al dropped his arm and walked slowly away.

"Come on," I said. "Let's get going."

"Maybe we ought to get a rowboat."

"It's too cold now."

"I guess you're right."

He seemed suddenly like an old man.

We moved up the gangway and started toward our hotel. We heard the little fat man say: "There she goes! There she goes! The *Daisy*. Isn't she a daisy though! All aboard folks for the next trip to the Joy Boat. The newest and finest pleasure palace on the seas. No-O-O-o-o, you won't get wet."

We looked back at the ship just once. The fog had nearly vanished now but a few soft tendrils of gray mist remained, curled around her masts. Her lights shone with a strange and startling brilliance against the deep sky. I thought I could hear faint strains of music, a jazz number by a dance orchestra, but I wasn't sure. Our ship was pretty far out. I didn't know whether music could reach us from there or not.

When we got on the street car Al kept looking out of the window. There was still nothing to see: only those swift passing lights we had seen so many times.

"They weren't going out to our ship," I heard him say, finally.

"There must have been another boat there. We didn't look very close."

"That's right."

We both stared out of the window, trying to see something, but it was very dark.

"We'll go out with the girls next Saturday," he said. "There ought to be a dance or a good show."

"They're nice girls."

"Yeah, next Saturday will be all right,"

His voice sounded very tired.

The red car was picking up speed now. The street lights, passing by outside, began to blurr.