

THE CLEANSING

Suzanne Vincent

TOM HEAVED HAROLD TUELLER'S BODY OVERBOARD and gave it to the sea.

He listened as Harold thudded against *Nautica's* side then splashed into the waves below. *Nautica* creaked and groaned a eulogy. Tom bowed his head and let her speak, then said his Amens.

The first of the crew had died not two days out of Havana. A horrible death, with everyone looking on solemnly while the man gagged and choked on the smallpox pustules filling his throat. That had been Maggot—a West Indian native whose true name no one could pronounce. By then nearly half the crew swung in their hammocks looking like white barnacled creatures spewed from the sea, moaning, sighing, begging to be thrown back in.

Tom had been among them. In fact, he had been the first to fall sick, because it had been he who brought it to the ship. He never told anyone. Didn't tell them about Santa Cruz and the opium and the rum and being so out of his mind he had let himself be robbed and whored by a fevered woman whose skin must have once been dark as ebony before the pox began to blister it.

Thin as a seahorse, his skin pitted and pale, Tom alone survived. He lived to see the Captain order the plague flag raised. He lived to empty buckets of bloody vomit and to watch one hundred thirty-seven godless men succumb to their maker, calling His name, begging His forgiveness. Tom lived to shove them all overboard; some days one or two, sometimes ten or twelve, tossed over, fed to the sea, their bodies sinking into the dark water, their souls sinking into *Nautica's* timbers, impregnating her round belly with them, until she came alive with them, singing Tom to sleep at night, murmuring welcomes to those who would join her by morning, singing her own dirge for them.

During the night *Nautica's* song had keened hungrily for Harold's soul, calling and coaxing as Tom listened to her from his hammock, until sometime in the middle of the night her song changed, mellowed, cooed. Tom knew Harold Tueller was dead.



*In the morning
her song changed again.
Tom listened, nodded,
rose from his bed,
and slung Harold over the side.*

In the morning her song changed again. Tom listened, nodded, rose from his bed, and slung Harold over the side.

He looked out at the sea now, at hungry white crests falling into grave dark troughs, then up at the empty sails bunched against the yardarms, hanging there like corpses in huge tattered hammocks. The plague flag still snapped high above them. With Harold dead he supposed he could take it down, but it made no difference now. Not with all of them gone, over the side, like Harold, dead white pocked bodies scrubbed from *Nautica's* decks and thrown like soft and swollen barnacles to the waiting scavengers.

Tom could hear them. Sharks thrashing for a chance to tear at Harold, gulls shrieking and diving for scraps. They had been following the ship for almost a month, and beneath the water a hundred other hungry, slimy, finned creatures would be waiting for bits to sink below the melee at the surface.

Tom pitied them a little. Dumb animals. They would likely follow the ship for days more, waiting, hoping. But Tom had little more to give them. No more Harolds. Only himself left now.

The ship groaned again.

"Aye. I know it, Milady. I'll get to it," he told her. "Patience, lass. Patience."

He slipped out of his shirt, letting the sun warm his skin.

The ship crested a wave and shuddered restlessly as she heaved down the other side.

"I'm coming," he said. He tossed the shirt over the rail, stripped off his trousers, tossed them after. Then he went below, far below, into *Nautica's* belly. He lit a lantern and found the pick-ax, just where she had told him it would be. She groaned and creaked some more, leading him to the place she wanted him to work. Right down in the bottom, among the crates of tainted cargo and empty barrels bobbing in salty stinking bilge water.

"Here?"

She answered with a sigh.

Tom nodded and raised the pick high over his head, quaking with the weakness in his back and knees, then brought it down to sink into the flesh of the ship with a grunt of his own.

*He lit a lantern and found the pick-ax,
just where she had told him it would be.*

Nautica shuddered. Again, she said.

“Yes, Milady.” He lifted and swung the pick and brought it down with a heavy thunk.

Again and again she bid him sink the ax into her side, to excise the festering sickness, to free the souls trapped inside her, to cleanse her of them.

There. There. Cut it out. Cut them out.

Again and again until finally Tom punched his way through to fresh seawater. A fountain of it shot up into the hold.

The ship fell silent. Enough.

Tom nodded, patted one of her exposed ribs. “God go with you, lass,” he said. “God go with us all.” Then climbed from the hold to the sailor’s quarters, lay down in his hammock, and listened as *Nautica* sang him to sleep. ☺

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Suzanne Vincent—an old fat lady from the heart of Mormondom—ekes out a little spare time to crank out the occasional interesting story, usually with a somewhat deranged bent, but softened by an undercurrent of spirituality. She writes about her interests, which range far and wide: history, "low" fantasy, really good psychological horror, tattoos, Indonesian puppets, fortune cookies, mirrors, and a particular soft spot for old and/or unfamiliar fairy tales, myths, and legends. A 2005 graduate of Orson Scott Card's Literary Boot Camp, she regrets not having begun her study of the writing craft while in her youth. Her story "I Speak the Master's Will" was featured in the first issue of Flash Fiction Online in December 2007. She has also been featured in Drabblecast and at anotherealm.com.