

PEREGRINE

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FOREIGN OR WANDERING; OFTEN USED TO DESCRIBE A TRAVELER

PART TWO:



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HONORARY MENTIONS

*Miriam Hooper, Sam Tunan, Maggie Stearns, Matias
Travieso-Diaz, J.B. Polk*

Man O' War by Matias Travieso-Diaz

The only thing we have to fear is...fear itself – nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance. - FDR



^ actual image of a man-o-war. fun fact: they are from the phyla cnidaria and from the class hydrozoa!

In an outing at the seashore, young Carlitos (a dark boy from Mayagüez) ran away from his mother, got in the water, and went splashing on the surf. He then saw three blobs the size of dinner plates that resembled large soap bubbles. They were translucent, iridescent, in shades of pink, blue and mauve. They floated lazily on the water as they were carried by the current towards him. Carlitos neared the closest blob, reaching to touch it. Suddenly, he felt a piercing pain in his right leg that paralyzed him with surprise and fear. The pain was so intense that he retched and lost his breakfast.

His mother reached him in a few frantic strides, picked him up, and carried him to the shore. The boy's leg was covered by a bluish writhing rope that ran all the way down to his foot and up his swimming trunks.

Carlitos' mother was wringing her hands, not knowing what to do, when she heard a voice behind her: "Lady, let it be. Trying to dislodge it will only make the stingers on the tentacle discharge more venom."

She turned around and saw an old man bending over them. "What can I do, then?"

"The only thing that works is vinegar. Dabbing vinegar on the sting area and then dousing it with warm water."

"Should I take my boy to the hospital?" she asked anxiously.

"No need" replied the old man. "Wait here and I'll bring some vinegar." He turned around and walked away. He soon returned with a bottle of vinegar and a thermos. He emptied vinegar on a rag and carefully dabbed Carlitos' leg, which had turned red underneath the tentacle. The man then bathed the appendage in warm water. The tentacle detached itself little by little and fell to the ground.

An inventory of the damage revealed that the tentacle had left deep scars all over Carlitos' leg and on his buttocks. The scars faded after several weeks but never disappeared. Carlitos was left with faint red marks on his leg, foot, and backside.

Years passed. Carlitos became Carlos, migrated to mainland America, and started calling himself Chuck. For all appearances, Chuck was a normal Latino, reasonably talented and personable. He became a bookkeeper for a department store and was well regarded by all.

Yet Chuck had idiosyncrasies. He never went to the beach. He avoided disrobing, and became self-conscious if anyone stared at the marks on his leg. If questioned, he explained "I was stung by a jellyfish when I was little" but never dwelt on the matter.

Man O' War - Part Two

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He developed a distaste for colorful things. His apartment was decorated with abstract black and white paintings, featured off-white furniture, and lacked color accents except for a framed photo of his parents.

One evening, at a reception, he met Helen, an online shopper for the store for which he worked. They ran into each other at the buffet line and struck a conversation. Helen was not particularly pretty. She was a dark eyed black girl, slightly plump but shapely. She wore a conservative beige dress and few accessories, and had on little on the way of make-up. There was nothing striking about her looks or personality, yet Chuck was drawn to her. They sat together at a table with other strangers, but chatted mostly to each other. At the end of the evening, there was an exchange of telephone numbers and internet addresses. Soon they began dating, became engaged, and set their wedding for a year after their first encounter.

A few days before the wedding, Chuck had a nightmare in which he was seized by a nightmarish monster and dragged to the depths of the sea. He woke up, gasping for air, feeling doomed. When his despair did not abate after a shower and two cups of coffee, he made an emergency visit to his doctor, who prescribed tranquilizers and made an appointment for him with a psychiatrist with whom he traded referrals. She agreed to see him that very evening.

Chuck was shivering when he walked into Dr. Mahoney's office. He sat, still shaking, as she asked softly: "Dr. Khoury gave me a brief summary over the phone, but I'd like you to tell me, in your own words, what your problem is."

Chuck described the nightmare and the unshakeable feeling of doom that the monster's attack left in his spirit. At the end, she asked: "Have you had this nightmare before?"

"I'm not sure. I have the feeling I have already experienced this dream."

"I'd like to hypnotize you and see if we can learn something about what's driving this nightmare. Do you consent?"

"Yes" answered Chuck, resigned.

Dr. Mahoney put Chuck in a hypnotic trance and was able to elicit the cause of Chuck's nightmares, for the man o' war incident came to the fore almost immediately. She went on to suggest responses that could put Chuck's mind at rest, but her efforts were met with an unconscious resistance. Chuck's fear was too deep-seated to respond to hypnotic influence.

Dr. Mahoney related to Chuck the unlikelihood of achieving a quick cure and the need for further treatment. He demurred: "Doctor, I'm getting married soon. Can this treatment be put off?"

Man O' War - Part Three

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“It can” responded the therapist. “However, your married life could be impacted if you have more instances like today’s crisis. It is hard to predict how a newly wedded couple would function in that situation.”

“Do you recommend postponing the wedding?”

“That’s your decision. Perhaps it would be safer to postpone the wedding until we have a better handle on how to deal with the problem.”

After a long pause, Chuck conceded: “I guess it will be fair to Helen not to go through with a wedding while I’m in this condition.”

Helen did not take the wedding postponement well. She accepted a short delay as a necessary evil, but as weeks went by her tolerance wore thin. Finally, she confronted her fiancé: “Chuck, it has been three months since our wedding was put on ice. How much longer is this to go on?”

Chuck replied sheepishly: “I don’t know. Dr. Maloney thinks we are making progress, but we haven’t been able to determine why that jellyfish attack had such a big impact on me.”

“Well, I’m not willing to go through this indefinitely. If you aren’t cured in another month, our wedding is off for good.”

After much agonizing, Chuck concluded that facing his fears was the only way of overcoming them, and went to Long Island on a short beach vacation.

He arrived on a wintry day in March. He found the beach empty, the seas roiling, and a cutting wind blowing from the southwest. “It’s too nasty today. I’ll try tomorrow morning,” he decided.

He spent the night drinking scotch and fretting. By the time he went to bed he was drunk and tired and had a mounting feeling of dread. He hardly slept.

The sea was leaden and the sky overcast when he ventured out the following morning. He considered going back to the city, but remembering his mission he put on his swimming trunks and approached the shore taking clumsy, half woken steps.

As he entered the water, he saw an indistinct form some distance away, drifting in the wind. His target.

Chuck was terrified but he forced himself to go back to the cottage, and re-emerged holding a fireplace poker. He ran into the water, paying no attention to the icy shock from immersion in the surf. He swam quickly towards the man o’ war and, when he was within striking distance, hit the flimsy membrane savagely with the poker, time and again, until it burst and collapsed with a puff. He started swimming back but a strong current impeded his progress.

Man O' War - Part Four

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They found him lying on the sand: he had collapsed as he made his way back to land. In the hospital they introduced humidified air into his lungs and rewarmed his blood with a hemodialysis machine.

The second day of his hospital stay, Helen drove in to bring him home. She found him staring fixedly at a vase holding a bouquet flowers that the office had sent him.

“Those are beautiful” she observed.

Chuck replied: “I hate them,” despair in his voice.

“Why?”

“Part of my sickness is that I don’t like colorful things.”

“So, destroying a jellyfish didn’t cure you?”

“No. I faced one of the monsters of my dreams and destroyed him, but others linger, ready to pounce. I remain afraid and despondent.”

Helen sighed. “So, you may never get cured?”

“Maybe not. The monsters pursuing me appear to be too powerful. Let’s end our engagement.”

Helen stared for a long time at him. “I’m sorry. I was impatient, but never really meant to break up with you.”

“Are you really willing to live with my condition?”

Helen smiled. “Women have put up with far worse failings in their husbands.”