

Chapter 4: Approaching Nothing

We made our way through the bite and mist of a chilly, late winter morn. I sat through it alone at mid ship contemplating a fate I somehow recognized. I felt as if I'd committed a crime, because God knows I had. The moment I saw Oceanus in my view, an ominous feeling hung with the figure itself. When it became evident where Gunderson was taking me, I pointed back toward my office building... and he headed off my concern. "Everything is on board... I'll bring you a hat and jacket once we're on." So again, my voice was redundant (useless/unneeded). This was the plan I'd worked for myself and I'd managed to draw in all manner of persons and resources in order to keep my pathetic life... and yet now I was just stowage (a basic sonar ping had more use and relevance than my mouth or my words) ... Gunderson sat me here (port side, mid ship) and told me to wait. "I'll be right back" was his full instruction. He returned with the right size coat, gloves and hat... and again said – "wait here/ I'll be up on the brig. I'll get you when it's time." So I sat in those old metal bleachers alone, talking to myself over whiffs of diesel and pride.

I'd never been on the RV Oceanus. My stints in field work were almost entirely relegated to Tioga (a smaller local marine research ship). And even at that it'd been some time (the better part of two years). I paid little attention as we left the slips. The clanging of the bell as we reversed into position for making way simply annoyed me more than anything else. More resoundingly, I was terrified—and I should've been. We left that morning at about 8:30 and if my guesses were correct, we were heading between the Islands and then roughly another 60 miles beyond to where debris fields 1 & 2 once lay—in the immediate wake of the tragedy (E.A Flight 990). I estimated we'd be on site some time mid to late afternoon. I wasn't *gonna* stay warm enough for that long and I didn't really care. I normally hate the cold, but I welcomed any numbness or added punishment. It gave my inner thoughts a sorely needed off topic complaint really. I knew there were roughly a dozen hands about somewhere, but I was alone. I couldn't even see the brig from my vantage—while I guessed a handful besides Gunderson were busy up there.

Late morning the sky became all pale and the whole experience was rather uninspired. I was on that old and venerable work horse Oceanus. Her hundred and seventy-seven feet were more ship than should ever have been launched on my account, and I should also have felt honored, or at least grateful—for her steady draft? I did not! I felt angry and tired and sick. TRAPPED! I wanted off. I wanted to shout. I wanted to tell Gunderson he could shove it (he and his whole bullshit world) ... But it was me who was full of shit! I was the stow away. I clawed into his world: not the other way. My thoughts were mangled (like a hissing ball of serpents) and my head was splitting. I couldn't focus. As time wore on, I wanted to scream... and I did! For 2 minutes I grabbed the rail and leaned into the coldest cut of wind I could reach... and I let loose. I didn't give a shit if anyone heard me—even while I guessed they couldn't. And I cursed *Her* most of all. I hated her for leaving me to this when all I wanted was just to be with her. Such lowly sights by her leafier standard! I'm supposed to want it all—just like them? Well, here I am. Scamming my way up and on deck with the

mighty doers (or I could use her language and say - “networking”)? And all I got to show is this stupid fucking grin I wear half the time. I painted it on long ago. I was smarter than most of the *climateers*, while I looked stupider than all of them. I knew I was nobody to be cursing or judging... but I was *gonna* do it **anyway**...

I must've tired out eventually before finding myself again amongst some grouching and semi-conscious thoughts (muttering/calling forever in that low brush, as I still do today). Now slumped and drawn in as sun woke me from my own head. I was surprised to see it was surely sometime after 12:00 noon and the ocean had just a stiff chop: all while it took more color for itself—along with the likewise bluing sky. I could look into both more deeply now and my curiosity began to return just a bit. I noticed then that a Remus 100 AUV case (autonomous underwater vehicle) was at the stern, near the crane. While I didn't imagine the crane would be necessary for a launch, it was becoming clear that Gunderson was intent on a direct look—unless all my assumptions about this venture were somehow mistaken? But of course, they were not. I saw a young man make his way back and forth there, clearly getting the necessary equipment and materials ready. He was a good-looking young guy (a wild, *sandy-blond* crash of thick hair, and fitter than the average personality at Woods Hole). This wasn't a jock culture (to understate) but he'd have been more fit for that part by the casual look. I didn't recognize him, but I was indoors most of the time and I reckoned he must be a field or student engineer. I was getting to be like the old stiff I might've laughed at when I was his age, except I didn't even have the requisite income to be that dignified. I didn't really care, since I never expected to be wealthy, but I did feel suddenly old.

I wondered what time it was exactly. I never carried a watch and rarely even a phone—if I could help it. I always had a relatively precise sense of time. I could very often pinpoint it within minutes even if I hadn't seen the time in many hours. Nowadays nobody would notice, but as a kid, I was the one to ask—before the reign of the gadgets. I suspected it was shortly after 1:00 and I was right. It didn't take long for Gunderson to make his way to me. He put out a hand with a hot cup of coffee and simply said ... “It's regular all around.” I took it gladly, and he said to warm & ready up; for taking anchor and pictures. He again told me he had to return to the captain's deck: so they could plot a precise approach. I said – “no sweat! I'll see you when it's time.” And off again he went.

I was waking for the first time that day really. A mild excitement was growing. I guess half anxiety and half curiosity would fit by description, but it was better than how I'd been feeling all day. It suddenly felt surreal to say the least. That I'd gotten this far with a man who frankly I feared to even speak to outside of absolute necessity. And yet I'd pushed it to this point—successfully!? It's now so obvious in retrospect, just how desperate I'd been. There can be no doubt that fact was utterly transparent to Gunderson. And *now (within mental bookmark)* for the first time...? The next danger was suddenly expressing itself very loudly. What if after all this we find nothing? That'll be the end of me—almost certainly! Technically he never had to take it this far, and surely he wouldn't (not on my account) lest he harbored my same curiosity. But human nature dictates one thing well? If he bites it hard on this, it's not like I'm in his favor (to say the least). He'll be happy to hang all this waste on me... and I'm done! I had to quickly subdue those fears—no matter what. The day had been a mess of emotions and I had to resign myself to all outcomes... and I did (right then). I straightened up—at least on the outside. I was stomping my legs now... but not from any anxiety (or mostly not)? I was warming up and getting sharp for whatever results came in with the next

series of events. The Coffee helped—even if I was a little jacked up again. At least it wasn't all bad energy this time, even if a few nerves took the ride.

I made my way back a bit toward the stern and to the edge of the decking for a better all-around vantage. I could see movement among the figures up on the captain's brig, but I couldn't be certain who was who. I could also make out the arc of the Island in our starboard rear, though it didn't occupy a large swath of my field of vision (I hadn't seen the approach and we'd probably passed her well over an hour before). I didn't *wanna* stray too far. Gunderson told me he'd come and get me and I needed to be easy to find. Excitement was beginning to dictate. I wish I had something to do/ I wish I had some knowledge of AUV technology, so I could go pretend to help. I had to stay out of the way. It turned out to be a good day after all. I'm certain Gunderson picked this day carefully—even if with some haste. There was only so much predictability this time of year (multiply that when on the water) and I should say it was turning out well. The air warmed gradually throughout, reaching its peak with that influence of a mid-day sun—on mid March's darker split end before daylight savings. The Sea itself rolled easier then, even with a high tide nearing. The wind too was rapidly slowing as the warmth accumulated. What was left finally no longer had the power to produce so many little whitecaps, and we were all just spared that lash. This would be a blessing for the tech first, and it made all other fortunes feel better too—at least for the moment. It was easy to sense Oceanus was gradually both throttling down and circling.

Naturally Gunderson must have a precise GPS location for the anomaly, but I wondered how he'd proceed. We had no way of knowing if it had moved position, or even if it was still there at all. While I'm again no expert (and that *again* goes without saying) it was safe to say he'd have asked that the particular AUV be fitted with multi and hyperspectral radiometers. There were no such ship-borne systems. All were tied to satellite and surface readings. I was only guessing that we'd use line submersible radiometry to verify before deploying the Remus, and I was correct.

We did eventually come to a full stop and we weighed anchor relatively quickly. Two deck hands dropped the test lines once we were right—bow and stern (including the young tech who'd been readying the AUV). The devices themselves were then brought to the lab so the data could be quickly viewed. I suspect Gunderson himself oversaw that process directly, but I can't testify to the fact. I was outside & waiting, and I wasn't exactly privy. But I waited the requisite time necessary as was my sorry lot—being cargo... And then he found me. "It's still there" – he said... "So we'll have a look."

Gunderson was as straight and as all business as ever. His face flat in affect. He wasn't a bad looking guy for his age. Just slightly above average height and fit relatively. Not an inch of fat.

Not built on or over in frame in the least, but just that (fit). He was in his mid 50's and he still had a perfect head of hair: with remarkable color coverage as well (barely hints of ash)? Maybe this was by treatment, but I know no tells. I hardly notice when my own girlfriends make a change. And it was cropped as you'd guess... and brown—with just a hint of red. If he *were* young enough that you couldn't so easily spy his vocation—after the ensuing years of scientific discipline...? You might rightly see him in a Military Beret—given his more straightly cut, combed and close quaffed noggin. And I'm sure discipline was always in his nature.

As we made our way toward the stern and our young tech, it was clear he was fixated in some unforeseen issue. The case was unloaded but for the AUV itself as he stood in some obvious and personal consternation. The control console had been fixed to a crude weighted stand and I could just make out some foggy reception on the drone's relatively small LCD screen. The camera must already be active—even if the open air doesn't lend to any clear result with the configuration out of water. “Are we ready Stanton?” Gunderson fired that right off as we neared. I think I was seeing the ‘*anxious*’ in the man at last. And Stanton? Yea, that placed the kid among the Yankee stable. I don't mean it in a negative way, but Polo might be the on-field play and off field wear. The response we heard then wasn't directed toward Gunderson at all. The young man was clearly talking to himself while scarcely even aware of our immediate approach. Such was his focus otherwise.

“*SHIT*” – we heard him say! Gunderson looked immediately stressed and told me to stay back, for the moment... We were already nearly on top of the kid, but I did as I was ordered... Even while, in all honesty, it felt humiliating; to have to stand just outside the scene—as if I were some unneeded gear or object? And I guess I was at *that*. “One of the damn battery cells is no good. It should be fully charged and it's almost dead” – came the impromptu update from the young man who was now aware Gunderson was there and surely already awaiting some explanation.

Gunderson appeared to be smoldering with stress and it was easy to hear the very thing in his voice. Frankly though, I thought him (Gunderson) understated, given the rare level of **observable** imbalance in his general look. He was biting his tongue more than not: that was clear. He said: “Can you fix it fast? We don't have a lot of time Stanton, and I committed a lot of resources here.” - Stanton replied... “Thank God I have a backup and I'll run down to the workshop and grab it... It's gonna take just a bit, but I'll get it done Philip.” - Now this surprised me more than anything/the young man's use of Gunderson's first name? It was the first time I'd heard anyone use it so directly, and the fact that it was such a young man doing so? I wasn't sure what to think, but it was clear the two had a closer relationship than I'd ever have expected. Maybe this was the reason Gunderson was half biting his tongue—contrary to that clearer portrait of his standing agitation (perhaps for this young man's sake)? – “Alright then” -came Gunderson's response. “I'm a bit surprised this happened Stanton. It's not like you/you should've been more prepared. But please hurry!” – Stanton: “I know Philip, and you're right. But this cell's pretty new/it should be good... But you're right. I took it for granted and I apologize. I will fix it!” – Gunderson: “O.K then... Get to it... We'll wait.”

So that was it for the moment. I asked Gunderson if I could run and grab a bite in the galley. I promised him I'd be back in a flash. The fact is, I hadn't eaten anything all day. Normally I

wouldn't have dared ask (not him/not at such a moment) but my stomach was full of coffee and acid. I really needed something/anything—in my stomach. Gunderson told me to go, and he was as *short* as I'd ever heard him be: and that's saying something. I took the unfeeling cue and I made haste. I found some coffee rolls and I mauled them, and I was back outside in less than 15 minutes. I **wound** up where I started (back in those old, outdoor, metal, *bleacher-like* seats). I could see Gunderson up ahead and waiting—as the clock ticked away at our short daylight window. I could feel the heat (the stress) even from *here...* or was it '*there?*' ... Time grows more and more unfixed for me, and you'll come to understand why. It's hard to always know: how to properly fence, or to apply participles—when I have no clear temporal anchor? But I can say I was happy after all: to be hanging back...

The wait wasn't very brief, relatively speaking (not with such a short daylight's window available to our purpose). It must've been an hour and ½ before I saw Gunderson waving me forward. The sun was already drooping in a concerning way toward the horizon: on a day that would come to its predictable close like all others do—even in late winter. Fortunately, we still had a manageable sea, but it was already as if the spot representing daylight and sun had flipped to a low shadow at sea and sky's edge: and darkness was already threatening to pull us in. We had light, but it was dour and precious/no longer striking down and penetrating. Now the boundary between sea and air had its own independent membrane owned by neither entirely (at least for the moment). I heard Stanton call out then ... "Come on up and I'll get her in the water." I was surprised it was still only we three there. Then I had an eerie feeling? How much control was Gunderson applying? What was he expecting to see exactly? I had wild thoughts, but now I sensed Gunderson had his own. **Anyway**... we were finally and more formally introduced (myself and Stanton) and then we went right to business.

It was with a gentleness that the young man teased the missile into the Water. He insisted he didn't require any help in doing so and it was obvious he did not. The console stand was close enough, and lowered now, so he could work the controls with his right hand as he soothed and steadied his robot with the gentle coaxing fingers of his left hand—ensuring she didn't make any contact with the birth area at the stern before being safely away.

There was a sense of true care however technocratic to my sensibilities. It was clear he knew every part of his avatar up close and personally. I couldn't help but be impressed and I was a bit jealous of the *all-in* gusto I was witnessing in this bond—to a chosen field and function. I had no such loyalties. I only gave that to people and it never worked out well (NOT EVER)! I knew I could learn something, but I also knew I never would.

PASSION! I hear it all the time and I just don't get it. What the fuck is so important? But *ev-ery-one* insists that real quality is measured by one's *PASSION* for their chosen work? I guess I could see it with a musician, or a sculptor. An artist of some variety. It feels closer to the love of a woman to me, but it's not (not quite). I guess I'm the laziest bastard in the world... *cus* my passion is to have a good dinner and then (hopefully) a good shit? And if that all works out? I *wanna* nibble on a beautiful girl. I *wanna* lick and suck and fuck every inch of her... *if she's my type?* That's the sum total of my *PASSION!* And it's not a good thing ultimately. But maybe I told you about that (*overinvestment*)? If not, never mind. Just know I'm the worst!! How fitting: I'll be destroyed by

pretending to serve *science!* I had no more disciple for it than I did for anything else that required it. And now all the cylinders were away and seeking... looking for that sweet spot in the possible realities where the most damage would be done. Terrible fate. It dove beneath us now with its own compound lens... perhaps only to spy back as if we were some haunted-hull.

Down she went... on course to emerge the roughly 100 feet beneath and then out approximately a quarter mile. Gunderson instructed that he wanted to begin at the right flank: slightly in front of the horizon of the fixture (*whatever it might be*) so we could perform a half circle round behind, then $\frac{1}{4}$ loop more to face it again—but directly this time (not from the outer edge where we'd begin). This was the plan.

There were two small screens on the console. One being a 4X6 inch LED with a rudimentary representation of the radiometry data in the aggregate—displayed with representative lines and colors. The other? A larger LCD (approx. 8 in.) with the live picture feed itself. The kid knew his business, clearly, and it wasn't like some video game. I had no idea how this navigation was being achieved—or by what method—and only the live picture afforded me any orientation. It was all numeric otherwise. A method of communication I didn't understand. He was clearly plotting with more precision than I could see in his numbers. Speed and attitude were the primary variables—I only suspected—but that was a guess. If there was any joystick-level adventure to be had, we'd have to wait till we were level and at depth: in proximity and in direct sight of whatever was there. It took time and care.

The AUV had a standard running speed of about 3 knots. Stanton chose to go it just below—carefully running the fall line so we'd level right where we needed to be and as Gunderson wanted. **There wasn't disposable time available for any exploratory actions after reaching projected target depth**—*cus* that could require more circling, and we might lose the last of our precious light. The approach would have to be precise. It didn't take long and I could already see the speed slowing in the active read: at the bottom of the little LED. Stanton announced we were nearing depth and would begin leveling in half a minute or so. It was very quiet and now all the representative heads were leaning forward more and more into the available space over the operator's shoulders. "We're level" – he says. "The event is to our left now and we might be able to make it out?" "CAN YOU...?" Gunderson didn't have time to finish. I'd never before heard him sound so captive and obedient to another oversight. He was almost apologetic. His mouth was still open when Stanton commandeered the realm of speech... as he simply said... "I got it... I'm panning the camera now!"

We had all stopped breathing: fixated in that moment. Searching with our eyes as the yaw of the Camera took over. And there it was. The first glimpse of something that we'd truly give wholly to the word, "*curious.*" It was off a bit more than I'd expected, or perhaps there was a compression of the picture with this lens that put the whole iconographic scene into a particular sphere of reference? Maybe it's the only way we could at first see it? My head tells me the two things are right. There was the light (the back scatter). And within this *telescopic-like* extension of sight, which condensed our query to a seemingly measurable system? we peered into that *somehow* both

near and far *galaxial* ball of light before us. We spied both lone and wheeling groups of fish—all with different patterns and shapes... And perhaps they could be likened to giant stars just outside a looming nursery, or cloud nebula? Most moved quite slowly. Some together and some in stoic fish form. They didn't feel like captives in some lonely algorithm—as I might have imagined. I felt as if these familiar animals had a much better sense of it all than I—with my headier disadvantage. As I strained to know and could not—and while they bore no such burden.

Stanton spoke out that he was *moving forward now*, and would circle the drone: all while he'd simultaneously keep a relative fix with the camera eye. He was masterful and both me and Gunderson fully submitted: silently and utterly/still hunched forward (we two) with open mouths. We were at last as one—me and Gunderson. Both now beyond our element, or even our capacity. It was a strange communion, and it was absolute. Whole hearted submission and mutual reverence to powerlessness. And then and there? It all disappeared? The light? Gone?

The water was all the same color with no illumination now (uniform dark)? The milling fish could no longer be differentiated or even seen? What in God's name? ... THIS...! THIS is what I saw that day on the dock with Sally! And now I was literally seeing it! Or precisely? NOT SEEING IT! ... I credit Gunderson for keeping his relative restraint... looking for the light hole to appear again/ looking for any logical refuge without yelling out... “what in the hell!” - This was unprecedented/unbelievable! Stanton held that level arc—circling behind NOTHING! Keeping the camera locked on its anticipated epicenter as the missile did its search-run round... And as we crossed the meridian horizon again (now 180 degrees on the other side of that one-way screen)? There it suddenly was – AGAIN? The light? Like a switch threw! And the waiting fish reappeared; as if in some tank we might place in our own living-room. Normally it would be we... with our inaccessible mammalian minds? By the wiles of our genius and with all due vanities... bringing the hidden, fishy figures in and out of being: with the flick of some invisible switch, and by our mastery? But it wasn't us this time—flipping unseen switches? ... And we're in the dark as much as they—on the same side of this stupid *fish-eyed* stare and lens. This was what real disadvantage looks and feels like. Utter unknowing! ... And it was alarming.

We continued in the pre-set pattern watching toward the center of the reacquired blur: till we nearly completed the circle—now dead-center in front of the anomaly. The drone needed to be righted so that the shaft aligned straight to the center of the light. Stanton performed the maneuver... and that gave us useable access to a better and truer camera at the nose. The young operator switched feed to the front cone. The LCD took on a less distorted view, but it all then looked even smaller somehow. The cause being that the resolution hadn't yet changed, but the relative/comparative screen size only. He said – “hold on! I'm pulling out the laptop!” - - In the nearby AUV case, he pulled up a panel and inside was a 15-inch field sturdy Lenovo. The case and its contents must all have been fitted and pre-wired, because I saw him unplug a charger. Thus, it must have included universal ports. The whole kit was clearly uniform and continually charged (or it should've been). He booted the laptop and we waited for him—dumbfounded as ever. I and Gunderson briefly met eyes... and neither of us could bear the helpless look in the other. It

probably looked calm on the outside (Gunderson at least did) but it was anything and everything other than. Maybe an eyebrow just out of place (enough for him)?

The kid pulled the primary console away and sat beside us—to our right. He slid the laptop a bit toward the middle—where Gunderson sat. I to the left. He said – “it’s all configured to run a Remus by keys.” There was an obvious AUV control template fixed over the high-end keyboard. There was little to be done now but go forward, so I guess he felt it right: to afford everyone a good view while he sat now at just a slight reach. He hit one key, and camera access was instant. There it was in large screen, with right geometry (very little noticeable distortion). Everything appeared to jump forward into view... and depth too was increased considerably. It was no longer a compressed ball (a strained look to a galaxy not *yet* in our reference). The ball had erupted into our immediate and local reference. We were in it (in that much improved picture). And yet? It was simply the same scene with better framing. The whirling fish... and the blur of light emanating from an oblong nothingness? A roughly 3-meter square space total of epicenter and light. Or backlight? Whatever? However? It was madness because it had no depth at all really/not the light space itself (we saw that painfully by circling). Could it be some strange membrane reflecting light on one side while filtering light on the other? Could something of the like remain so fixed and stable for the ensuing months—between that first glimpse and now? Is this a trick? There were no line buoys at the surface—nor anchors on the Sea floor? We’d have detected something—even if such artifacts *were* well camouflaged.

This was some giant aquatic card trick. It had to be! But how could the very light seem to disappear depending upon the vantage? As if some secret particle imbued with some new iridescent awareness was jumped into our terminal (our reality) the instant our spatial attitude, or our mental will, conveyed desire to spy it within certain parameters? It existed, or didn’t exist at all: depending on its own set of rules? And most amazing! Many of these rules were comprehensible. The wildest truth of all/How ironic that this was always my favorite Einstein quote. You know the one? About what is most incomprehensible about the world (nature)? I’d often pondered just how accessible that truth was—in parallel with the quote itself. That “the most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible.” It was the most beautiful truth I ever heard spoken—I think. But now? We could observe and so define the margins and rules by which this light could be perceived? But it was inconsistent (to say the absolute least). This didn’t feel beautiful in accordance with Einstein’s comments on nature? But perhaps I was using the wrong words? The rules were quantifiable—but not comprehensible at all/ Not one bit...! I guess that’s a better distinction. So we are outside nature after all... or half way to hell?

“This is it” – Stanton warned... “Here we go.” - - We all instinctively huddled, knowing we three were hanging on the same strand on the same hidden web. Afraid and still committed to follow that line suspended into the deepening abyssopelagic space: where the hook had been set well into a species of game (reality) that might, any moment, sound and run—till our very minds were unspooled. Or could that be the choicer fate? For the first time we realized we were sitting in the waning moments of daylight. This fact didn’t increase our ease—to say the least. At least not in my case—if I can speak to that. We moved ahead: toward circling fish and the blur behind. Slowly/inexorably... inching. Those fish mulling there and about barely noticed and reacted only at

the minimum; to avoid contact. And then it loomed right before us? The membrane? The screen? Whatever the hell one might call it! We came full stop just then/the drone (the proxy to our 3 sets of eyes)! We stood still... hanging there... where we should not be... We all sensed it...

WHAT IN HELL?!!! ... Leaping back as one (all in compliance to a startling dark vision spied with the 1 eye we three shared)! ... A nightmare in real? – groping toward with some demon appendage... Or like some Prawn... preening there above us... hovering energetic before the strike (like a wasp from that wicked water) ... Now grasping eagerly at us out of the light cloud... A great and terrible shrimp determined to find, beset upon, and sting our flesh: surely even where we hid away and above in a feeble craft (I felt sure of this) ... It was so sudden in fact, I forgot I was watching through that *plexi* eye... Startled to near death—without exaggeration! And then another! God help us... Another length of segmented and articulated shell (*RED AND WRITHING*) with blue veins standing out in the softer white underside seen clearly now: as spools of its length curled... then pulled upward and away (about 1 & 1/2 meters to the right of the 1st vile apparition).

More of their length revealed now, they were sickeningly fast and efficient... The two covered their immediate space like rolling tongues tasting every micron of a morsel and salty delight. Like licking for flesh with ghastly ropes! I only saw gizzard hunger in the softer white places (I saw no vulnerability in the veins or the wet coils) ... They writhed with immeasurable excitement and with their prickling nervous reflex ... for peeling skin and flesh (I was sure) ... deboning like 2 machine night crawlers. There were catch spines of some sort on each shelled link in the terrible chains... They clearly wanted us (or something tasty and afraid/alive—just like us)? The two begged independent and together somehow—like deadly lassos with a secret master—while I imagined them individually aware of our presence and of the rare succulence of this frail tender fare (my species).

I don't know if we all even realized we were standing: really huddled in that last light (not figuratively speaking in the least). And then it thrashed there... naked/revealed *utterly*—in its last malicious length—to be the horror I expected. My mind sure of that final and full disclosure... But WAIT...? WAIT!! ... My God! ... NO! ... I'd been betrayed by my fear... I could see it now...? All of it! ... And it was ... BEAUTIFUL... (having been assembled at last—I saw the grandeur in the sum of those incomprehensible parts). A creature I somehow knew...? Now a round and toothed mouth? Excitedly opening and closing (starving for some treat) ... Like an aperture of a boundless appetite... And still: how wrong I'd been... Then it shook its bulky head with its curling and searching whiskers—sliding their way over every inch of space before it... And then it came about right in our view as we looked on with true wonder that outmatched even our initial terror... And it flew away then: showing the wings staged all along its trunk—as it kicked easily—till the last part was in view (its tail made of a stiffer set of protrusions, that made it fly right).

It was *magnificent*—if I can even find a word to express that I was enthralled utterly? No better word has yet come, but I was still paralyzed at that moment (I was outside of words altogether... and with the beast) ... And then??!! ANOTHER!! Slowly revealing in the same sequence, but turning left now by our view??? GOD IN HEAVEN! There are more! ... Presenting one then another from out of this weird din of light, before wheeling at the last and in view—as if

we were looking into some great magic 8-ball whose eye alone we could see. They were within and not without (relegated to the nether we could only see and not touch: in some other reality or time). It was incredible/almost indescribable... in its elusive beauty (my words are and were inadequate).

I was breathless because I was full of air—having pulled in more than I was consciously aware in my wild surprise ... “Is that? Is that an arthropod (I said standing only feet from Gunderson, who looked the least composed I’d ever seen him look)?” - The same crush of thoughts was surely going through his head... and more I suppose in retrospect (since it was for him to calculate the response: and I don’t mean the response to me). Stanton was staring and sputtering in his disbelief... “It’s impossible... It’s Incredible!” ... I asked Gunderson then... as he stared back without a word and with a very intense, fixed look that might have unnerved me more; but for my already suspended circuit ... “are we looking back in time somehow? Did we just see a species from the Cambrian Sea?” Gunderson just shook his head... not revealing his mind as yet, but demonstrating in his own way—that the world had just indeed changed. He said... “we need to do one more thing now” - as he turned to Stanton. “Go ahead” he said with a fateful look of calm. “Go through it Stanton... or into it? We need to confirm what we’re seeing, or not seeing.” - “You want me to drive the Remus in? Do you think we’re gonna see anything? Do you think we can cross?” – “Just do it (Gunderson interrupted)! Don’t worry Stanton... We just need to be sure, and now’s as good a time as any.” -He smiled a bit with a conciliatory and understanding grin... knowing that Stanton was responsible for any loss or any implication should there be some unknown reaction... And it was one of his babies. – “Ok Philip... It’s your show... Let’s do it then – like you say.” It was again strange to hear such a young man use the professor’s first name and it was apparent these two had an understanding and bond outside my knowledge. It afforded me a small privileged insight and a more human view of this man who I clearly had not known in the least.

I watched with the same anticipation and resignation we all shared. When Stanton keyed ahead, there were still figures wheeling in the light and fog, and they seemed not to notice or react as the missile bore down... And then...? NOTHING? Again nothing (dark)? **The instant the nose camera penetrated the boundary line we faced from our side and vantage;** where all these apparitions seemed to exist? It was gone? Even the light? - “keep going about another 5 meters Stanton, and we’ll rotate back for a look!” Gunderson spoke so plainly to this young man again, and the volleys were easy and natural—if short. “Ok” was the full reply ... still with a reservation in the voice as if he were saying “here we go again/is this real?” - - And I understood his sentiments exactly (we all did). The young man moved the AUV a bit more forward into the dark and then turned her round to face back... and there was nothing. The fish must still have been there... but they were cloaked in the depth.

“Turn the light on Stanton” -Gunderson hard *suggested*/there didn’t appear to be orders between these two really. The free discourse of two kindred souls of a sort I could see. And again – “ok” was the easy reply. The LED floodlight lit the water ahead and fish scattered. How extraordinary! They were already in the face of that wash of light we’d see also—if we were on the other side of the horizon before us... And yet they reacted to our light as if they weren’t in any light at all—until Stanton had keyed in his introduction of our LED? Even while we might naturally have increased the total luminescence, these acted more as they might if light were only just introduced?

But **anyway**, clearly the 2 things were true. They were both in that light, and not in that light! They were reacting instinctively to our introduction of light either by some unconscious response? Or they didn't see the light we'd seen there on the other side at all? But of course, that couldn't be. Because clearly, they were drawn to it in the first place. It seems they're experiencing two simultaneous and independent reactions to two light stimuli, and one is a quantum value. Clearly beyond our understanding—at least for the time being. Truly incredible. And then Gunderson turns to me.

So little time had passed in truth since Stanton first released the AUV into the water, and yet the whole world had changed. A century might have passed for all my grasp of the current world. And Gunderson then comments from the half-hidden lines and corners of a face and mouth stained in the last low light of our computer screen, and maybe one shoddy deck bulb barely in range... “That was a very educated reference Lonnie. When you placed those animals among Cambrian fauna. Very close indeed, and I'm almost surprised you didn't say ‘anomalocaris?’ In fact, you've surprised me more and more—especially as I've come to recognize that you don't even have a 4yr High School Diploma!” - - My heart was beating immediately. My biggest, most terrible shock in a day full from a series of earthquakes... “NO” – I said forcefully... “I graduated...” (but Gunderson stopped me by talking over me) ... “You say in your cover letter that you 1st studied at Northeastern—with Professor Stafford. You say your primary focus was Earth Geology—before transferring to Eckerd: supposedly where your studies broadened; to include both marine geology and chemistry? And then you studied your first two semesters there with Sonjen?” - - “Yes - I moved my whole life there and nobody really knew me. Me and my girlfriend moved there together because I couldn't afford to live in Boston anymore.” - - “Oh, I know you moved there and when. I took my time (he continued). You and a girl named Constance did move to St. Petersburg, and you both lived there for just under a year. But you didn't attend Eckerd, and I know professor Sonjen.” - - “No” – I insisted! “My classes with Sonjen were big and he never knew me... I was just a kid...” - - “You were just a kid is right Lonnie, and you didn't even finish High School till you got your GED at Northeastern. That's the only thing that's true about your education.”

Right then and there I hung my head and I cried (my face was in my hands as I reached for pity I hadn't known from others). I was tired and defeated. My mind was rushing with sorrows. I had no kind voice in my life to offer love, or even absolution—for all my desperation. Or from the dizzy heights of my fraudulence once motivated by abject poverty and fear of being nothing in this world. And then I felt it (a gentle hand from the dark—now on my shoulder). I had instinctively flinched when it first found me, and I was embarrassed for that as well. Could this really be? I'd always known him—or thought him I suppose—to be a Man of pure reserve and restraint; at best? My own Father was such a hard Man (Gunderson couldn't compete there). But there had been no expectation of any give, and yet there it was. And I cried even harder then—spasmodically/instinctively—as I had no reference for this kindness: even while it touched me... He said – “it's ok Lonnie. You're a very bright young man. Particularly for a guy who never finished the 10th grade. It was you who saw this when everyone else missed it... And you brought it to me. We all missed this and you're a good guy to have around. Maybe you'll see something else we miss. This is a cover project now; and **anyway**... There can't be any leaks!” - I heard the smile in his voice when he finished by saying – “I can't have you out there on your own talking about this.” And then he lent me one more kindness. He said... “Lonnie – look at me!” – I obeyed, if not immediately/ I

forced my red, streaked face and eyes to meet his look (the one finally close enough to give all its meaning to the light there).

I was profoundly touched then, and embarrassed. I faced this new man/a man I had not known—right then and as-I-was (my first real introduction). He said... “You should know Lonnie! I knew all this a full week ago—before I even guessed what we’d be looking at here. And I brought you along **anyway**. I’m not even entirely sure why myself, but that might tell you that I’ve always known you were very intelligent. Take the Summer. There’s *gonna* be a-lot that needs to be done. It’s *gonna* take a couple months till everything’s in place. We’re *gonna* have to be ready by Fall, to fully study this; and find out just what we’re really looking at here. So take another leave of absence and get some rest. You look like you could use a bit more. I’m not blind Lonnie. I know you really loved that girl. It was hard for all of us to see you so broken up. Just take some time and I’ll contact you when we’re ready, and don’t worry. Nobody but me and Stanton are ever *gonna* know about your past.”

I hadn’t even thought about Stanton while my emotions were oozing out of their shell (my bladder having failed: releasing all that old water). I turned to see he was standing in the same semi-circle. He smiled tentatively (a bit awkward). He wasn’t being unkind. He was simply showing what I’d have shown too had I been looking on from his vantage? That we were all now in waters so deep we were all likewise drowning in contemplation of this new world. And that was that (it would be as this surprising and kind new Gunderson had outlined). I was overwhelmed, but washed clean now... and profoundly tired.