



## TCN/FRASER SHORT STORY COMPETITION 2020: Special Mention

### ANDREW KELLY : ALWAYS A HORIZON

The wavering masthead light of the trailing tanker winked out below the invisible line of the horizon.

He sat on the stern and folded paper stars.

She had always folded paper stars.

One for every day they were apart.

The jar she used to store them in sat at the foot of the small empty bunk back in his cabin. It would fill up one star a night forever now and he was getting worried the jar wasn't big enough to handle all those lost days.

The cabin was too small for sitting up and folding so he had retreated to the stern in a spot outside of the wind at the foot of the stairs. His pile of long strips of paper were safe sitting down on the deck next to him and he could absent mindedly fold layer over layer as he stared out at the wake flowing 4300 miles astern.

That tanker's masthead light had been the last light in the sky on this cloudy and moonless night 13 days out from Gibraltar. As it had disappeared, he had let his eyes unfocus, still staring blankly out over the chop. His hands carried on their work. A voice started in his ear. "Remember that night that the wake glowed with endless phosphorescence and we just sat back here and talked and talked and talked" she said, resting her head on his shoulder and her hand in his lap.

"yeah" he replied. His eyes still unfocused. Another star being added to the pile by his side. He didn't know how many strips of paper he had left to fold and he didn't want to know. Perhaps it would be better if it was a surprise.

"I hadn't believed you when you said it could happen, but I think it was the calmest and most beautiful time of my life sitting there watching it roll on with you." She said softly.



"Yeah" He replied. His head naturally dipped to rest on hers as they had those years ago, but she wasn't there. Nonetheless the smell of her perfumed hair lingered in his mind.

His unfocused eyes started to glaze more as they filled with tears.

He pulled his legs up to his chest and he let the latest unfinished star fall from his hands. The incessant hush of the ship ploughing through the water was suddenly muffled as he placed his headphones into his ears and pulled his phone from his pocket.

His thumb scrolled through the podcast app absentmindedly and chose one at random. He again picked up his unfinished star. The surrogate thoughts filled his ears as he set back to work.

The wake stretched an extra couple of miles and ten more stars went on to the pile. The world around him was at one remove as the hosts talked in his ear and bantered without any expectation of him joining in. The hosts made a few jokes back and forth and he laughed just a little through his nose. He looked down and reached out for a new sheet. "ooh that paper is my favourite one" she squealed sitting with her legs dangling down the stairs above him. "Remember? We found it at that tiny origami shop in Japantown when we went to visit your folks? That shop was amazing! Ah! And there was that ramen place next door that I wanted to try next time. It smelled so good!" Her energy pierced the cold night.

He closed his eyes and let his head drop back and he felt the warmth of the sun of that day on his face as she slid down the stairs to straddle him from behind. He went to reach for her hand on his shoulder and the ship changed course slightly. He could see the wake begin to bend as they set a new course and his hand hesitated.

The wind whipped around the corner, found his hiding place, and lashed at his cheek.

The stars scattered.

The loose papers caught the breeze and flew off into the night.

He bolted up and started to run after the papers as they skipped across the deck towards to railing. His feet stamped down after a few of them and he lurched across the deck to try and save some of his unfolded stars. He ran forward but his headphones caught on a railing and ripped his ear back and unplugged themselves from his phone.



By the time he had untangled himself the papers were all gone, washed into the endless sea, and the silent hum of the ship was back.

He stood staring.

His eyes unfocused.

A small pile of stars had survived where he had been sitting and he padded back to pick them up. They were scooped up and poured unceremoniously into his jacket pocket where they were zipped in place. Walking up the stairs he stepped slightly around where she had been sitting moments ago. He crested the next deck and saw her sitting at the bar. Her face turned to meet his and filled with joy just to see him.

"Hey babe" she said, her face turning back to pour over the paperwork she had laid out on the counter. He walked past her to head down the side of the boat towards the bow. He turned the corner to walk forward and the wind slammed into him anew and pushed him back. He turned his head down into the collar of his jacket and made his way forward. The sea spray was starting to be whipped up by the wind and it speckled him as he walked along. Chilling him in his thick clothing.

She was cleaning the inside of the window as he passed the first one. She was there in the second too. And the third. She never made eye contact but on the last window she scribed a heart with her finger absentmindedly on to the glass. He reached out to trace her finger with his but when his hand reached the glass all was black inside again and he slammed his fist against the bulkhead instead. He turned from the windows and kept heading up to the bow. His fists still clenched and his jaw tight against the cold and spray.

The wind carried on trying to push him back and back and finally he relented. Ducking into a passageway to get inside out of the elements and back to his cabin. He reached his rack and in one motion grabbed the jar from the foot of the bed and slammed the remaining stars home. The jar was perfectly full now. Any more stars and they would just overflow uselessly. He carefully and quietly placed the jar back and she stirred in his bed.

"There you are." She said half asleep. "How was watch? Hurry up and get in. I'm all cold" He turned on his heel and rushed out the door. The desire to keep her warm rising up. But there would never be anything he could do to warm her up again. How cold she must be without him there.



He rushed out the same passageway he himself had used to escape from the cold just a minute before and ran up to the bow. He made it all the way to the bullnose, looked behind him, and was surrounded.

She was learning to tie up the mooring lines.

She was leaning over the rail watching the dolphin dance in the bow wave. She was even sitting on a futon waiting for him so they could sit and decompress together after a long charter.

He spun around and leaned over the railing and stared down into the darkness. There were no dolphins in the here and now, just the cold rush of water invitingly close at hand. It would only be cold for a little while. Then maybe some warmth again. He saw her there too. In the faintest reflection cast by their own bow light. Standing by him and looking down into the water. But her reflection nudged his and pointed towards the horizon. Following her outstretched arm up he saw the gleam of a lighthouse breaking the horizon ahead. Shore lights winked into existence in the distance and a new constellation formed just out of reach. He looked down into the water again but it was only his own face staring back. Nonetheless, he felt her arms squeeze him tight from behind.

"I can't wait to find out what happens next. Thank you."

Her voice drifted away in the wind. She had and always would keep him warm and as he stepped back and sat on the windlass her arms were gone but the new constellation on the horizon was still there. The wind lulled and the wake stretched on.