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The Tattooed Harpooner

Call me Ishmael. Teaching school is my profession. But from time to time I feel a great need for more adventure. When that yearning comes over me, I leave my classroom and go to sea. There is something about the open seas that lifts up my spirits when I am feeling down.

I had never gone to sea as an officer or even as a cook, but as a common sailor. Some years ago I gained some experience in the merchant service. But this time I hungered for even more adventure: I wanted to become a whale hunter.

I knew there was good money in the trade. But that was not the only reason I wanted to go whaling. I must confess that I was interested in the whales themselves. They were

such fascinating brutes. They seemed both mysterious and magnificent.

Once I made up my mind to go, I stuffed a couple of shirts into my knapsack. And although I had only a handful of coins in my pocket, I started off.

It was on a stormy Saturday night in December when I arrived in the coastal town of New Bedford. An icy wind chased me up and down the narrow streets as I searched for a place to stay. I shivered, as much from the silence as from the chill. The town seemed as cold and lonely as a tomb. My dark mood was no way to begin an adventure, but I could not shake myself free of it. Still, here I was. One way or another I had to find a room for the night.

The first lodging houses I passed seemed much too fancy and costly. I fingered the few coins in my pocket and hurried on down the street. At last I reached the docks. A strong smell of fish was in the air. I could hear the cold, dark water slapping the sides of ships and lapping at the wooden docks.

This was a poorer part of town. There were

no street lamps to light my way. Shivering again, I pulled my coat closer around me. Then ahead I saw a dim light in the window of an old building. The sign over the door read *The Spouter Inn—Peter Coffin, proprietor*. What a name for a landlord in this dark place! Still, I had nowhere else to go, and it looked as if I could afford to stay here.

The door was open, so I walked right in. Just beyond the entry hall was the common room. In the dim light I could make out a few tables and chairs. Across the room a weak fire burned in the fireplace, sending out more smoke than heat or light. On the wall over the fireplace hung a painting of a whale attacking a ship. Years of smoke from the fire had darkened the painting. But I could still make out the gigantic monster of the deep looming out of the water over the ship. I thought about my business in that town and shivered a little.

Another wall in the common room was decorated with a collection of whalers' tools. I saw harpoons, clubs, and spears. It wasn't a very cheerful room, but at least I was out of the cold and gloomy weather.

A few men sat about, talking and drinking. I found the landlord, Peter Coffin, and asked him for a room.

“Sorry, we’re full up,” he said. Then, as I started to turn away, he called me back. “Wait! You don’t mind sharing a bed with a harpooner, do you?”

“I’d rather sleep alone,” I said, “but if that’s all you’ve got, I’ll take it.”

When the landlord asked if I wanted a meal, I was quick to answer yes. Before long, Mr. Coffin called out, “Grub, ho!” and all the men crowded around a long table in the dining room. Having no fireplace, this room was as cold as a North Atlantic iceberg. But when the food was served, we all found it good and hot.

After dinner, I asked the landlord if the harpooner had come in yet. Oddly enough, all the other men at the table stopped talking. They looked from me to the landlord with keen interest.

Peter Coffin grinned and shook his head. “No, he’s not come in just yet. Perhaps he’s having some trouble selling his head.”

“His *what?*” I cried out. “Did you say he