

Blood Dimmed Tide

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Scene: Sausalito House Boat - Early Morning

A sickly smell of death dragged me from my dreaming.

Waking from the unmistakable sick-sweet smell, I sniffed at the carpet under my nose. Negative.

The girl? Her remarkably beautiful nude body lay still on the rug, partially wrapped in a blanket kept near for such doings. Her parted lips dared me to take one last kiss as I pondered snipping a lock of her perfect blonde hair.

Would my kiss bring her to life? Prince Charming at your service. I bent closer to her face.

"Christ," she cried as her eyes popped open. "What are you doing? Are you some kind of perv?"

"No." She stood, leaving me squatting naked; a perfect portrayal of a pervert. "Really."

Tiffany checked her watch, from Tiffany and Company, of course. "Jesus,

what's that smell?"

The Blood-Dimmed Tide/Chapter 1

"Coffee?" I offered.

"No." She jumped in her jeans, stuffing her panties in the rear pocket.

"Shit, I'm gonna be late for my shoot."

"Can I call you later?"

"No," she smiled. "I had a great time." She jiggled into her knit top.

"But I'm not into relationships."

"Me neither," I said. "But, maybe we could do the take-out and cognac thing again?"

"The sex was good, Digby." She arched her back, stretching, jutting her pelvis within nibbling distance. Perv.

"So?"

"So if we did it again, that would be a relationship, wouldn't it?" She rooted in the sofa cushions, fished out a purse and slung it over her shoulder. "Ta."

"Once more wouldn't have to count if we . . ." Pitiful, Phelps.

"Hey, you got lucky. Count your blessings." Bending, she awarded me a kiss on the crown of my head and made for the door. "And, good Lord, do something about that smell, willya?"

She bounced up the gangway and was gone.

Plugging in the coffee pot, I found a pair of shorts hanging from the fridge handle and turned the telephone machine on.

The odor was invading the boat through the sliding doors leading to the aft deck. It was not going to go away on its own.

The tide was completely out--what time was it?--the sun hanging high over the hills of the East Bay. A single redtail hawk lazed above in a loose

circle in the early Spring sky, unaware of the world below.

The Blood-Dimmed Tide/Chapter 1

Three of Sausalito's small fleet of party boats had already returned from the morning's fishing trips and tied up to the neighboring dock. Good God, it stank and no wonder.

The dead cat's name was--used to be--Salty, and so he was.

He was the unofficial mascot of our marina and the fat faker never met a handout he didn't like. The black Persian's carcass lay in the gardening mud beyond the aft deck, clotted blood dimming the tide's final trickle with a burgundy vein.

Moving closer, I surveyed the matted fur on the feline's bloated corpse and decided there was only one thing to do.

Barf.

Hanging as far as I dared over the worn rope-railing, I dredged up mementos of the previous evenings entertainment.

Egg Drop Soup. Gaa-gaa. Lord Have Mercy.

Moo-Shu Pork. Gaaaa. Christ Have Mercy.

Sweet and Sour Sauce. Ga-ga-ga-gaa. Lord Have Mercy.

Four bottles of Beijing beer, a fifth of V.S.O.P., and a dead cat as an eye-opener.

Breathing deep, I straightened so that I might properly petition all the angels and saints to intercede. Now. In the hour of my death . . .

"Tough night?"

"God?"

"You look a little peaked," a manly voice from the dock on the starboard side said.

"Huh?" Turning, I was blinded by my dripping sweat and the sun shining in an aura around the stranger.

"That your cat? What happened to it?"

"I, gaa, don't know. Just, gaa-gaa, that he appears to be, gaa . . ."

"Dead? You live here?"

"Who are you?" I was going to live. "We like to mind our own business around here."

"Yeah, well." He flipped some sort of wallet thing open to display something I was supposed to be impressed by but could not see for the sunrays frying my eyeballs. "Detective Tufts. I'm paid to mind everybody's business."

"I didn't kill the cat," I said.

"Never said you did," Detective Tufts said.

A warmed aroma of rotting cat blew my way. I bent to gag again as the telephone rang inside and the man got the last word in before marching down the wooden pier.