# Efendim

Mustafa was the one they chose to speak. The Interpreter said Mustafa was uneducated, his Arabic very poor, and he had only Coca-Cola English. Of course, all of them had been chewing khat for God knows how many days. Even after we'd waited through the night, the drug's brilliant grip had not completely loosened. But someone had bequeathed him a sense of dignity, or at least propriety, and it came through in that special tongue of their clan and place, a useless language, one spoken only along their barren coast. By morning, we thought they had finished their slide back to the world of real heat and real consequences. We called to them with the loud hailer, and they answered, as we suggested, on the boat's radio.

They had been in the water nearly thirty-six hours: three boys, one of them hurt, with their hostage, an older man who spoke no language other than his own. The youngest boy had been hurt badly, his hand crushed in a door as the tanker's crew fled into the engine room. We thought of calling him Rasul, but Mustafa told us to use Fouad. The Interpreter thought this revealing, the choice of "Heart" over "Messenger." We think it had no probable significance; it was simply a name he admired. There would never be any indication he knew what it meant or cared.

All this about their names is part of the way it always goes. They think it wise to make up an alias. They imagine it gives protection to their families or even themselves. But without names, they are called Skinny One, Two, and Three. Negotiation always demands more, and it is never wise to make one's adversary into an object. We had the Interpreter choose, and they agreed those names would be acceptable. The oldest one took Amir because he seemed older, not because he seemed to be the one with the most experience. Nor did he have the best manner to lead them. Clearly, the smoother one who took the radio had the best sense of events, and he accepted that name, Mustafa, "the one who was chosen." Of course, when we reach agreement about anything, even their names, the first step is past. That is the art of negotiation with those like Amir, Mustafa, and Fouad.

As happens, once they had been named, there were needs. There is food on such lifeboats, and water. But they wanted rice, more water. Fouad's pain came to the surface after the khat thinned away with sun, time, and boredom. We coaxed Fouad to leave for a bit, come to aid on board the

ship, stay only as long as it would take to be tended. We will give him back when they wish. They have the hostage yet. We will do as they wish. The Captain sent his gig panting across to them.

It was bad work for the gig at first. The wind shift chopped the sea surface enough to keep the boats too unsteady to bring together without damage. We had the gig's crew cleat a painter to the lifeboat's bow, pay it back to the frigate's stern where it was made fast. A gentle pull from the frigate's lightest forward bell steadied it. The gig married up, took away this boy, left water and something for their hunger, returned to the ship, and all was at rest. The lifeboat draws along behind us and we wait.

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The Negotiator sees this as a one of those opportune moments to assess our progress. The first thing he assays is that this Interpreter is exceptional. He doesn't ape language; he nurtures it into their tongue, gives it an aroma of veracity. As a result, when the Negotiator searches his mental library of all the possible actions and options, he makes his choice with confidence in this Interpreter and his skill. And time had given those in the lifeboat enough structure. They had shown an inclination toward cooperation after their transit from day to night then day again. The khat faded— it seems reasonable to him that everyone will be ready to start their journey to the end. Maybe even agree to go home. The Negotiator decides to coax them out with an honored and old benediction. It is a question. He tells the Interpreter, "I think that's enough. Say to them, *How do they think this is going to end?*"

The Interpreter has to think about this. This is far from his first negotiation. He had felt as though something like this would occur, this phrase, this trick he'd seen before. He considers whether or not he can explain to the Negotiator how those words would be heard by these killers, if that's what they are, *killers,* these boys. They have the guns, the threats, and the force of killers. The ravings. Even sober and worn from the drug, even with the young boy taken off the boat and aboard our ship, they are defiant. The Interpreter is not sure this is the time for that question.

The Negotiator is very skilled with many years in this trade. He speaks plausible Arabic, but this language is unlike any language he knows. He does not understand what the Interpreter says or hears, and doesn't care. Even if he understood these exchanges, he wouldn't think about the inflections. The sketchiest translation is difficult to do properly. Someone must consider what is to be said; another must determine how to say it. It only works when these two tasks are carried forward properly and in trust. And there is trust, even kinship in it; the two men squat comfortably on their heels next to each other.

The Negotiator waits in silence to let the Interpreter think it through. He is comfortable with waiting.

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The warship's Captain doesn't feel comfortable. He had tried to crouch with them, but he ached from hip to heels. He has to stand, stretch out, move to stay alert. His frigate is made to clip through the sea and does not keep well with its narrow beam and shallow draft, near dead in the water. He must let the screws sweep beneath the stern with their lightest pulse to touch the lifeboat's bow forward, move it slowly out. The trick is to keep it so smooth, they will never realize how far they are from shore. The Captain tries to think about the improvement of his position, well out past that grounding water where they'd caught a stroke of terrific good luck to intercept the lifeboat with its engine quit. Luck or not, he and his ship were not made for this uncertain roll in this sea, an apprehensive itch he can't relieve.

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The Interpreter does not show his discomfort like the uneasiness they can all feel from the Captain, but he doesn't think he can find a way to tell the Negotiator how ill-advised he finds the question, "How do they think this will end?" What answer could they give?

They are two boys.

Crouched under that canopy, they can't even see the sky, much less the future. What could they conceivably envision, as they lean out the doorway to take their furtive piss and see only the warship looming before them—the tanker they'd expected to take, gone? Now only the ocean around them, the empty sea. Inside, it is all white. Brilliant. The sun ever higher. They'd opened everything they could to let out the heat: the portholes, the doors, the hatches. They would be tired, worried.

The old man they'd taken certainly must suffer. They had demanded handcuffs from the ship to restrain him, obviously because he'd jumped out of the boat on the first day. Perhaps they had been fooled when they took him. Because he was old, they probably assumed he was the tanker's master. And they had probably assumed he would be submissive. In fact, he was the chief engineer, not even that old by our standards and certainly not submissive. As soon as they slept, all of them exhausted at once, he had tried to swim away. Amir woke in time to use his gun. Fortunately, he'd not hit the Chief Engineer, only the water. It took all of them to drag him up the steep sides of the lifeboat and back inside. It must have seemed a moment of terrible jeopardy for them. They had probably expected it, but they had not been shot.

The hours passed, the sea had calmed. The sea birds drifted by to see if there was anything to eat.

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The Captain and his frigate had been the perfect instruments for the start of all this, a thundering, all-engines-flank night passage to answer the tanker's alarm, all speed and purpose. His execution of that passage had been perfect, and he knew it. We had been able to get the talent on board without a flinch. This is complex, and it takes skill; the Interpreter, the Negotiator, the Fire Team, all had either parachuted in next to his ship or flown aboard, lowered down from one of the big, distance-eating helicopters. It takes poise to run hard in a mounting sea, pick the team out of the ocean where they drop with their parachute shrouds and equipment. And the luck of having the lifeboat's engine quit. That was the kind of fortune a naval officer finds will spin him into the stratosphere of notoriety.

The Captain knows he was lucky. But he'd been prepared for luck. He wishes he could make other calculations of time, speed, distance, but it would be of no consequence. He stands over these two strangers, a negotiator and a translator, never mind their names—he doesn't know their names. For some reason, he considers them as if they were irritating insects, both of them oblivious to his frigate's unnatural gait, hunched over as if they were in a souk.

The Captain does not usually think of people this way. He is tired. He forgives himself for his short temper. He congratulates himself; he hadn't said anything off, nor had he seemed unprofessional.

It doesn't help. He looks away from the Negotiator and Interpreter and their maddening patience, and lets his eye scan up from the deck to the superstructure with its flight deck and flurry of masts, the radar antennae circling. Signal flags and the brilliant ensign snap. All in order. This is a reassuring habit of inspection, to see his ship as it is, to call to mind the way it should be, correct any nonconformity. As the Negotiator had directed, two black balls hang mid-hoist on a halyard, the international signal for a ship not-under-command. It is a deception; his frigate still possesses the ability to steer a course, and its engines are still alive. But with those two spheres displayed, no ship will try to assert a right of way or even come near them unless requested. The appearance of debility, even as a ruse, irks him. Deception itself makes him uncomfortable. He concentrates on his inspection again, ignores the false signal. All else seems shipshape, his crew hidden but on watch, the top-decks silent but prepared.

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Of course, from the beginning, we asked Mustafa what they wanted. This is vastly different than asking them how they think things will to turn out. What they wanted allowed them to envision a paradise of return; he said

three million and five hundred thousand dollars. A million for each of them. That seemed fair. Maybe they would give the spare half million to the youngest one because he was hurt. Maybe it was all for their masters. No matter. They had spoken their terms. They had grown more comfortable, and this comfort—perhaps only the lack of khat—had let them decide to give up Fouad to come aboard for treatment of his hand. This concession, their ease, all this had made us more optimistic about the outcome.

The boy Fouad was asked to consider a discussion with his brothers-at-arms, a moment of honesty to convince them that money was of no consequence whatsoever; there would never be any money, no millions, not even thousands, and they should quit that lifeboat, come to join him in safety and repose. He wouldn't do it.

He remained in sickbay on his back with his good hand cuffed to the gurney.

You propose every avenue, explore every path. That is the way to negotiate these things, put the discussion on solid ground. Fouad told us that when he rested enough, when the pain wore away, he would return to the lifeboat. He seemed in no hurry. Neither were we, and the other two did not demand him back. It was easiest to wait.

The Interpreter considers the Negotiator's question further. How can he inform those boy-pirates that the world now leaned in over their shoulders in shock and anger, that the silence of this ocean is an illusion? The Interpreter does not think they understand the indignation, its howling volume, the international cries for justice and demands for action, the hands wringing for the Chief Engineer's family and the threats, oaths, the *discourse,* blogged to the universe and thrashed to the air by CNN, and France 24, and RAI, and BBC, and Al Jazeera . . . all those minute-by-breathless-minute reports. The President Calls the Shots. The Prime Minister Is Alarmed. Legislative Bodies Pass Emergency Resolutions. How to tell Mustafa over this puny hand-held radio that there is no possible outcome other than give up— come aboard the warship as if invited? They will be guests. They will begin their path anew. How to tell them any other wish is of no consequence at all?

But he thinks, perhaps they *do* understand. These boys certainly know how to milk a cow, all in the timing. They can see themselves as celebrities in the minds and eyes of the world. Not just perhaps. They do understand.

The Interpreter does not believe they are ready to answer the question demanded by the Negotiator. Not yet. He knows it like he knows the touch of his own skin; they are not ready, sealed sightless with their fear and sweat in their brittle shell.

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The Negotiator notes that they have become careless about the portholes and doors. He feels the Interpreter's discomfort, but it does not worry him. He lets these things go their own course. Time allows it, and it stretches before him with such luxury. As long as the lifeboat remains tethered to them, as long as they are alone on this ocean, we know nothing can alter the outcome. They have had moments already when the Fire Team could have applied their kinetic option. But we are content to wait. When the lifeboat's engine quit, we gained all the time we needed. Luck. Never discount luck, we all know that.

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The warship's Captain lets himself go to the ship's railing. This is what he likes to see, a clear horizon like so many he has seen standing out to the deep ocean troughs they were meant to patrol. He feels the urge to slip this tether, put on a bell, move. It has become a brilliant day, late morning, the decks hot under his feet, but the breeze still cool. It looks like the weather will hold. Stack gas from the ship's propulsion, the same gas from the same turbines aircraft use with the same oily cut, flits past to catch the Captain's breath. Ordinarily, he would call up the pilot house, have the ship brought about for a breeze to sweep away the gas. But he can't. The Negotiator is the one who chooses the heading.

He is just the captain, an instrument; his discomfort is unreasonable. He rolls forward on his feet, feels the deck, concentrates on the slight vibration beneath him. He can take comfort from this vibration. Unnoticeable to the others, it reminds him of the ship's engines. These others do not know how the propeller spins unseen. Even when the ship seems at rest, the blades spin at one revolution per second. As long as their pitch is kept to zero, they will not bite the water to take the ship forward or back. But they are ready; they await only his word to churn into movement. He feels better with this slight mumble. He relaxes himself. He wishes he could sit. But it would be unseemly. Without control (especially without control) he must still appear in command, even if in service to the Negotiator, service he must perform, service he ought to welcome.

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The Interpreter smells the gas also, but he does not note it because he is trying to imagine some way to show the senselessness of these artful questions to the Negotiator or even to the boys on the lifeboat. They have no concept of an ending. Why ask them? They have a concept of money and certainly the wives money would bring them. They may even have a concept

of cars and the Nike track suits they wear. He does not know what to say. Worse, he knows he will be reinterpreted later, all those errors of commission or omission recorded for us to flesh out and fill in, any lie will turn on him, any prevarication will be revealed. But he must try, even if he only appears to act as directed. It can't be this question the Negotiator wants of him, the one that will only baffle and confuse and panic.

The Interpreter says, "In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful." Unaware of any god these boys might have ever believed, he says, "I beseech you to give up your weapons and let them take you onto this ship. They will kill you otherwise. All praise is due to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds. The Beneficent, the Merciful." He says this invocation even though it seems false in any language except Arabic.

The radio is silent. We listen, but it is silent.

"You did not tell him what I wanted." The Negotiator puts his binoculars to the boat. They are very careless about the portholes. "Ask him the question. 'How does he expect this to end?'" He is used to this from interpreters. Even the best of them depart from the text. They cannot help but twist the tone of it; they always reveal their discomfort, their falsehood. It was a simple question, simply put, and this is the time for it, he is certain. He does not think his sense of timing comes from his years raising his two boys through their entitled adolescence. This question comes from *all* his experience, from his decades imagining the function of disparate minds, from his studies into terror's assessment, his many observations of the panic of acts, the impulse gone wrong, the intent misunderstood, the flinches of God—always those—and sometimes the illusions of faith. And, never forget, the visceral pump of the hostage's impulse. He has a good hostage—imagine the stones on that old man, a leap out of the boat to swim for it! The Negotiator admires him for that and does not want to let him die for it. But the jeopardy is extreme; they will kill him, even on a whim, a twitch.

At least he can count on this hostage to hate and fear his captors. He will never identify with them. Different age, race, no shared language. And the tension is good if it doesn't go too far. Anything to make that lifeboat worse for them is an advantage, even an unreliable hostage. They never expect heat and lassitude and boredom, teenagers. The Negotiator is certain the time is right to ask them the question he has so often brought to these moments of stasis, to splinter them open to their finish. How do you think this is going to end? They are at the point where any finish will do. All teenagers are the same.

He says to the Interpreter, "Well?"

"I did tell them." The Interpreter's experience does not allow him the comfort to believe in such ideas as all teenagers are the same. Perhaps some think all are equal in the eyes of God, perhaps it is true, but the Interpreter is the medium between differences. He considers this question,

this notion, this sly trick—it is naive, foolish, and therefore dangerous. He knows he will not be understood if he tries to explain to the Negotiator. He says, "I told them in a manner they would understand."

The Negotiator looks into his binoculars. The boys feel safer. As the day heats, they will stand more often. It is habit, now. "What did you tell them?"

"I told them, for the grace of God, they must surrender or they will be killed."

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The Captain hears this. It surprises him to realize that he had expected them killed already. Maybe he'd already thought of them as dead. Was that the source of his anxiousness, thinking it finished and time to leave? It is a dangerous distraction, thinking of these things. He wishes he could think of some detail he'd forgotten, some preparation he'd overlooked. What had he expected? No chance of a killing? What about the hostage? It all seems impossible to him that he could be stopped like this, the ship squatting in this water to wait. Only to wait. What can he do? There is nothing. Nothing he can do with this great engine spinning beneath him; potent, but useless.

This is what he learns at that instant: desperate to occupy himself, surprised that he somehow has let this be a surprise, his eagerness, his shame at being so unprofessional, so weak—he learns in that instant to imagine the rosary. He would practice this again many times as he aged and found himself in more and more positions where he was no longer the officer who conducts the operation, no longer the one who orders the rudder or the sweep of a ship's screw, merely the one who watches, guides, and judges as his subordinates exercise their functions and complete their missions. He would carry a rosary in his pocket ever after, track it with his fingers, just as the Interpreter touches the beads he keeps in his pocket to praise Allah, and the Negotiator rubs a pink cancer bracelet to let the memory of his wife calm him. Just as the Chief Engineer in the white interior of the orange lifeboat twists his wedding ring to think of his children, their pictures far away on the ship that had left him, and just as Amir flicks the safety of his derelict gun on and off, watching.

This makes the Chief Engineer think, Fuck them. They *will* kill him—or some fucking commando will kill him by mistake, but fuck them. Fuck them all. Especially fuck them with their fucked-up Kalashnikov with the stock half the fuck apart.

He'd been astounded that the gun had actually worked. The water ripped open so near to him. But the rusty pistol surely didn't work. If it had, he knew Mustafa would have killed him two days before. On his knees with the barrel against his head, the skin over his kneecaps had

ground into the deck as he watched the watery, trembling eyes of the ship's master. And *he'd* trembled, a grown man, literally shook, his fingers trembled. Mustafa garbled something, a crazed child not able to utter a syllable of use as the master of the tanker begged, his hands up, "Don't shoot him. Yes, yes, we'll do what you need, but what is it?" The Chief Engineer had crushed every wish he could have ever wished into one blind word of panic, to beg for his own life, but he had been too frightened to speak. He thought he could feel Mustafa trying to make the trigger work, to kill him. The boy raged like a lethal marionette. The gun barrel drilled against his head. His whole lower body loosened, hopeless. He sensed the strike from the steel barrel against his head, the bullet's puncture into his skull. He was an engineer, he trusted cold fact and physics, and it came over him like the last spit from a spigot gone dry; it made no difference—he was dead.

He knew it.

It was a moment of surprise, then regret, then there was no word for it. Something opened in him, flowed away, cleared him, and washed him clean. A breath, a heartbeat, a closure of his eyes to open them again, a blink, and he was calm.

Calm.

He *was* to die; he knew it. He had prepared; he was well-insured, and his children were grown and happily distant, his wife accustomed to solitude while he cruised in his engine rooms, and now he was almost sixty, still not sick but getting there, never any real success, just chief engineer of a half dozen ships doing a job, paid for one day after the next, one ship after another, and he was going to have to give it up, too old with nothing to leave behind, the only thing he could do, he could try to be like that security guard they'd beheaded on YouTube, the one who said, "Now I'll show you little pricks how to die."

It would go easier for him, no sawing at the neck. Only the bullet would happen so fast; that was the physics of it, a flash, a blinding light too quick for pain, or fear, or anything and — that would be it, except for the unknown, the after; that's what he feared? Why?

He was calm.

From his knees, he looked up at the ship's master. They were friends. He hoped his friend could see the calm moment in his eyes. Perhaps that's why the master had been able to scramble away while the boy struggled to make the gun work. Perhaps their eyes touched enough to let the master leave him, disappear out the escape hatch, the boy unable to shoot him, the others too late with the Kalashnikov, and the Chief Engineer felt glad he was the only one left.

They'd dragged him to the lifeboat, forced it into the water, made him start the engine, and it quit. They drifted, slept as the drug oozed its way out of them. He'd seen their exhaustion as a chance and sprang from that

calm moment over the side. He'd kicked and pumped, the blood fired through him, his clothes gripped him, his shoes like stone. He wished he could take time to untie them, let his feet kick them free. He would be able to stretch out, scissor his legs into the crawl he remembered he had once been able to do. He wished he could shed all of it; naked, he would angle away through this water like some brilliant perch. But his feet clubbed the water. Amir shot the gun. All the nerve spilled out of him. He floundered back to the boat, flailed the last yard, his arms useless, clumsy, and even grasped by the two boys, he almost failed to climb his way back up the boat's steep freeboard. Exhausted, all of them, they had lain between each other on the bottom of the boat, waiting for the assault that did not come.

Handcuffed, subdued, his skin chaffed and hair stiffened from the dried salt, the heat stinging his eyes, he hears the Interpreter's question. He does not understand a word, neither the question nor Mustafa's answer. But he knows the meaning when Mustafa looks across at Amir who shakes his head *no* as he jacks the safety off and on and Mustafa answers, spitting the words out, bitter, frightened. The Chief Engineer does *not* know them, those on the ship. What is he to them? What is he to Mustafa, angry and impatient? They will finally kill him. Since the pistol failed to work, every scent and sense has been a gift, he knows it, and he finds himself even calmer as the true moment nears. All the bravado leaves him, trying to swim for it. All the famous last words, all of it gone; all the wishes depart and his mind forms no words at all as he looks away to feel the water column beneath them, the vast, insentient depth of the ocean, and he is cupped in its unseen palm. It is more than a mere thought. It is the sensation he'd had so many times over the years in his engine rooms as he conducted the machinery to feel the screws drive. He imagines himself, as he has so often, above an unknowable, quiet, welcoming depth, loosed from it. He is grateful for it.

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The Interpreter turns to look at the Negotiator and the Captain so they can see his eyes as he tells them, "He says, as long as they have a single bullet left and the ability to lift their last finger, the hostage will be killed—unless we pay."

Sometimes the Negotiator has wished he could pay a ransom. He has often lied. He has told others he would pay, a ruse-of-war to bring them out in the open or let hostages free. He has sometimes said no ransom would ever be paid. But there have been times when it would have been useful to actually give them a ransom, give them a moment's illusion before the true ending snaps shut. Or even let them go. He has sometimes wished he was empowered like other negotiators from other nations where they

retain an option to negotiate a lower price. But he considers this only an emotional reaction, a sign of the burnout negotiators are told to expect. He considers the alternatives and the reality, as he believes any professional ought. He believes in his core that criminals such as these pirates must never be given any opportunity of having their hopes realized. And this is true, as we all know, so no one would ever fault him for the words, "Now. Now will you ask it? Ask him to tell us how he thinks this will turn out."

The Interpreter closes his eyes to the sun ever higher and hotter, the froth and sparkle behind the warship's stern, the painter's spank on the cool water as it tugs and slackens the serene bow of the lifeboat. He does not want to do as the Negotiator tells him. He breathes in the air warmed over the ship's decks. To be truthful, he really doesn't know why he resists. It is God's will, he knows, but he wonders if God has some role for him to play at this moment, and he wonders what it may be. He lets it go.

He opens his eyes to speak into the radio when he sees a path. He says, "It is the wrong time to ask this of them." He has not been told the Negotiator's name or rank so he uses an address from his deepest sense of respect, a word those of the Negotiator's faith might think a comic-book term; but a student of Arabic like the Negotiator, even if not a believer, might understand its deep connotation of respect. "*Efendim*, give him something for hope."

The Negotiator had not realized the Interpreter was Turkish until he heard that usage. *Efendim,* "My Master," he had said. As always, this had been a pickup team. He didn't know any of these people except the Fire Team he always brings. And it makes no difference to him, ever. It is always enough to know what they are, *Interpreter, Captain, Hostage, Pirate, Criminal . . .* he knows what they are and what they are supposed to do and can judge them as useful or not. The warship's Captain, no hindrance: solid enough, calm and direct as opposed to those other captains, the ones preoccupied with book deals, promotion, and CNN. Or the hostage, one of the fighters, a good hostage, that's all he wanted—anything but that Stockholm syndrome nonsense: the vaguely obscene, but understandable, kinship between the taken and the takers. Now that he recognized the Interpreter as Turkish and now that he believes the Interpreter's deference, his concern, his respect for men as well as God, the Negotiator decides he might as well use him. He looks back at the boat through his binoculars and says, "What do you have in mind?"

Both boys had stood, their heads visible at the same time in separate portholes.

The tiny speaker curls into his ear, our question, *Now?* But he remains silent.

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The Interpreter says, "Let me talk to the one who wants to be called Fouad. He has had time to think, to see us. He will assure them. He will tell them to come aboard. He will convince them of our promises, our glamour."

The Negotiator watches the boat. "He won't do it. We tried. You tried. He says he won't."

"Bring him to me. Let me talk to him again. Let them see him on the ship. Perhaps he is related to one or the other. He could be too ashamed to speak. If they see him, perhaps they will give up."

The Negotiator stands, stretches his arms. Why not? He'd considered another try at it, but he'd given up hope, really. He had to admit this. It didn't help that in his ear ever more frequently the Fire Team let him know they had the targets grouped. If he said the right word, he would be able to count silently down, and it would be all over except the instant when they would be taken together at the mental digit zero. It had begun to seem mechanical to him. The right moment, the right instances, the right rule of engagement, the right word, and the right people, *fini*. Everybody go home. "Only say the word and I shall be healed" is an old-time Fire Team joke.

He looks at the warship's Captain, raises his eyebrows, but before he can speak, the Captain says, "I'm on it—I'll get him," and relieved to be able to do something, anything, the Captain gives a sailor the command.

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The Negotiator watches Fouad come slowly to him between the two sailors on guard. He is freed of manacles. His guards are unarmed. It is all part of the subterfuge, this appearance of freedom. Yet it is not; what can he do in any case?

He squints in the light. The Interpreter says something. Fouad nods, and the Interpreter hands the radio to him. The boy has no difficulty with its use. He is obviously accustomed to such equipment, and at his trial, we would cite this to indicate that he had probably pirated other ships in order to offset the advantage he had before the jury with his age. He would continue to insist he was sixteen, but we thought him older. It's hard to tell, and who knows the truth about them, anything at all, age included?

The Interpreter confirms Fouad's message, and the tapes later confirmed the Interpreter. He was not related to the others, but they were closely associated, and Fouad obviously wished them to give up, come aboard the warship. They had been left by others, only three of them, abandoned on the tanker without real hope. It seems probable Foaud felt ashamed his

injury had forced them to quit their assault. But he said even with the injury, they might have stayed aboard if Mustafa hadn't decided this crew was too aggressive, too *impolitic,* no . . . too rude to control with just the three of them, one hurt.

Fouad stands at the frigate's transom. He waves across to the others; we watch them wave back, now in complete trust of the circumstances and their control; they have come this far so the Negotiator is prodded again. But he does not speak, and silence in itself is an order. The Interpreter says, "They will consider it. They will think about your proposal to bring them aboard."

The Interpreter then decides to say something he knows to be true but does not wish to say. He only speaks, in the end, because he knows the Negotiator thinks the same thing. "They will pay for time, now."

The Negotiator says, "I think so, too. They think they'll get reinforcements."

"That's not good," says the warship's Captain. "Does that happen? Do they get reinforcements?"

Neither the Negotiator nor the Interpreter says anything. The Captain is about to press the question; he is *not* usually ignored. But he does not speak. It makes no difference whether or not he knows their habits. Habits are no longer of consequence.

Fouad turns his back on the others, shrugs. This needs no interpretation, no other words, this shrug. The Interpreter says, "He wants to go back to the hospital."

"He doesn't want to talk to his friends anymore?" says the Captain.

"No. They have said farewell."

This is the moment we realize they don't expect to live, and now, the rules change.

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The Interpreter squats again to consider his words, what he has done and what he has failed to do. The Negotiator lowers himself next to him to consider the options left with the lifeboat. The Captain leans over to be close. None of them see Fouad walk away, eyes on his own feet, guards on watch over him. In the Negotiator's ear, there is a conversation about reinforcements enroute. There is a discussion of imminent danger, threat, and risk. The Negotiator listens, but he does not have to say anything, and the discussion stops until the Fire Team pricks his ear with the opportunity. Amir and Mustafa look very comfortable near the windows.

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They *are* more comfortable. The Chief Engineer can see it. He is handcuffed to a rung of a ladder step on the lifeboat's bulkhead. They were careful to

place him where he could lean back, lie down on the seat. He does not understand why the handcuffs were given to them. He thinks they should have been refused and does not know how important it is to have him fixed in place. But even if he had known, the shackles would have bothered him. The gun was one thing, but dragged down by a boat or ship—that was a nightmare from a lifetime's imagination nurtured deep in his ships' engine rooms. Death he could manage, but irony, no matter how elegant, he could do without.

And he can't breathe, caught like this in the fierce heat of the lifeboat's bow where they had put him far enough away so he could no longer spit on them, for glory, balls, or even entertainment. They had been very cagey. When they'd gotten water and food, they'd had the Chief Engineer try it first. He refused, but they forced him to do it. One of them pinched his ear with pliers from the boat's tool kit until he tasted it, then spewed it on them. They'd used the pliers again to make him swallow. They waited a half hour. He thought he might feign loss of consciousness, but he knew they would use the pliers to test him. Nothing happened. They ate, drank, and shared with him.

Now the two are relaxed, and it irritates him. He can't even stand. As long as he is to die, why couldn't they give him some air? They can see he is breathing poorly. Why couldn't they move him closer to the window? It had been a mistake to taunt them. He closes his eyes. He smells one of them, a weedy, sour smell, and opens his eyes to see him use the key on the handcuffs. He is brought to a high seat where he can get his head above the windowsill, take in a breath. They fasten him to a stanchion, "Thank you," he says in his language. He tries to remember it in Arabic, "*Shukran*," he says and nods. Supposedly, they nod back.

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What makes them lie? "*Shukran*." How would he know it, that word? Even if he knew it, would he say it? But they all lie, and it makes no difference, none at all. We pull apart these reports, pick them over for some nugget of fact, listen to all the bleating after-action denials, and confessions, and reconstructions. We don't even wonder anymore why some of them give up and others die. What fable do they hear, what story whispers itself to lull them, then beckon them across? The ones in the markets with the chest wrapped in C-4. The car full of fertilizer, gas, and crazed adrenalin. These are instants in a chain of instances, real movement. Belief, always belief—but this? We never really know about this sort, these boys the Chief Engineer says were as relaxed as the air wandering through the porthole, and lie or not, the Chief Engineer will say it enough times that he will come to believe he said it, *Shukran,* even if we never really will.

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But they do bring him to the open hatch where he tastes the salt and sun-cleansed sea breeze. He breathes out, lets go again, and sees Amir and Mustafa watch him with their brown eyes and thin collar bones, every ligament on their necks visible. Amir's heart speeds, his pulse, so quick and close to the skin. They are intent, these two. This is the way of it. The ship's transom seems both near and far, and he knows firearms focus with precision on the porthole where his vague silhouette is a shadow. He notes, like the observance of the weather, or a time of day, or the color of water— incidental and not really important—that this will be his execution.

The Chief Engineer no longer measures his past and no longer follows any literal memory. His every sense is opened, aware of the sea breeze, the stares of his murderers, of the gentle shove of this boat, its brilliance and heat, those who will kill him, those who will mourn him, but he is no longer of it. He is not surprised. He is not grateful. He is something other than mere sense, swept on without time, beyond depth, past any expectation.

The radio speaks to Mustafa and Amir.

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The Negotiator had prodded the Interpreter, "Now we should ask him."

"Yes." He clears his throat, lifts the radio, and he envisions his own sons. "God is great. In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful. You must answer this—how is it you foresee the end of this moment?" He stands. Soon the midday prayer will turn them to the sun's decline. It will be done by then, he knows. "You must answer, what do you believe will become of you?" He cannot find the right words, but he can think of no other means to ask. "What do you believe God's plan divines for you, now?"

The Interpreter looks to the horizon where he knows other warships wait to converge on this quiet piece of the ocean when it is done. The Captain raises his face to the sky and the sun's high heat, and the Negotiator can feel it as well. The breeze had veered again to sweep the stack gas away over the side and from under the loom of the superstructure where the Fire Team speaks and counts heads, and we watch every miniscule shadow.

Mustafa and Amir are more careless about the portholes.

The Fire Team is not careless. We call them Skinny One and Two, with Skinny Three already in the bag and the Hostage at Risk. We have not changed the names because we do not like to change anything unnecessarily in the middle of any evolution. It isn't yet decided. Other pirates had been in Germany and released. Another had gone to New York and

had become a sort of celebrity. Surely they know this. But they do not answer. They do not say anything. They no longer speak, no longer communicate at all.

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Amir lies on the seat of the lifeboat in the brilliant white under the heat where he looks at Mustafa slouched in the seat across. Amir still has the broken Kalashnikov. But Mustafa has left the useless pistol unattended near the transom. The man they thought was the ship's master remains alive where they left him, handcuffed near the porthole. After a while, the men with the gig marry up to let other men come on board with their arms and caution. They release the Chief Engineer, mute, stiff, and by appearances, unharmed. They help him to the warship and safety where he meets the warship's Captain, and they greet each other in joy. Their picture together is taken, a snapshot for the media.

Before they remove Amir and Mustafa, official photographs are made. These photos would remain secret for a time. But after people no longer cared about what had happened, they would emerge where the people who wished it could take pleasure in their squalor.

The Chief Engineer was to be celebrated for his safe return and his courage, and the logic of the whole event was constructed to go like this: the Chief Engineer was well-liked by all the men on the tanker who had been able to flee to the engine room. The master was always sorry he had abandoned him, but they both agreed it had probably saved the Chief Engineer's life. If there had been two, one would have been shot to make a point. It would have been the Chief Engineer, older and less consequential, only useful if he was the sole hostage.

Sole hostage or not, they probably *would* have killed him, in the end. Or perhaps, they would not have. The Negotiator is used to such ambiguity in outcomes, accustomed to their placement far from him where he will never return to visit. He packs up to leave the scene, and as he does, he hopes the next one will be as painless. There will be fewer of these events due to this outcome. The range of probable results will be more dreaded, and the promise of paradise less certain. But the team doesn't care about this. They care about their return home, and it isn't easy. A helicopter lily-pads to shore, first to one ship then another for fuel, finally feet dry and gone.

As the Interpreter watches Fouad in the aircraft, he prays he has done the right thing in the eyes of God. But he is not really sincere about this. He knows he did the best thing he could. He never deceived them, never thought he had told them an untruth. He had no foreknowledge of the sniping, and without him, they never would have been able to save this boy.

Fouad is shackled, and he leans forward on his straps alone.

He will be tried in our court somewhere by someone and interrogated in some manner. His guards have taken their places about him, too far to be touched, near enough to touch. They are masked and helmeted anonymities who will never be known to those who will soon see Fouad's face posted under screaming magazines, blogs, official reports, and broadcast speculation: "The Face of Terror." Fouad will have a real name, soon, and there will be some family constructed, a past, a future, a present. He will never leave us now, and perhaps that was God's will, the Interpreter thinks. Perhaps that is the sense of it. Fouad's eyes flit about the long rib cage of the helicopter, its naked hydraulics, its tiny ports, its benches full of the men who had caught him and killed the others. He does not look afraid to the Interpreter who continues his prayer for mercy. Maybe if he had not performed as he had, the hostage would have been killed. But he knows, as it was, as it will be. God wills it. He is not sincere, and he asks forgiveness for this, and for himself.

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The warship's Captain leaves Mustafa and Amir on the lifeboat, as ordered, until the flagship comes, equipped for decedent affairs with its body bags and morgue, to take them away. That ship cranes the lifeboat up out of the ocean and onto its flight deck where there will be an investigation. Later it will go to a museum, then to storage when the museum is no longer of interest. The press pool arrives, and the Captain starts his journey into the airwaves and on the Internet, his promotion, and the dream he will have from time to time. It will return in different guises, but it will always feature a decoration. He wears it but does not recognize it. He is allowed it but knows it must belong to someone else.

The press pool left after taking all they wanted, and there was nothing left to do but set the frigate on its normal passage, relieved and comfortable, finally able to imagine themselves free to let the engines drive where they would go with their accustomed grace.

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The Hostage never loved his captors; we were right about him. He never once thought of them as if they were his own sons or imagined himself in their positions. But he too has his dreams, and these boys will return to him, their sudden stillness in the white lifeboat with the shocking copper taste in the dead air, both their heads skewed, their eyes closed. He hears a last exhalation, a child's signal of boredom as the boy comes to rest, his shoulders frail and broken. He will dream it over and over until it becomes part of the life he'd given up living—he forgets that calm moment when he'd seemed inconsequential—and he heaves his way up from the empty

basin below the lifeboat; he kicks and pumps, his blood fires through him. His clothes bind and twist around him, ever tighter they squeeze. His feet club into the water without purchase; he cannot claw up the boat's high freeboard. He is alone in these dreams, always alone and ever weakened, he struggles against it, that pull, that corporeal draw.

This, we believe, is mostly true.