

Lost at Sea with a Talking Dog and a Man Named Vladimir

by

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“Don’t drink the water,” Captain Scruffy barked.

Rick Cannery looked at Captain Scruffy incredulously. “You’re a dog. What do you know? And who names their dog ‘Captain Scruffy’ anyway?”

“Well, since you asked, my full name is Captain Tiberius Scruffy, but you can call me Scruffy. The captain title is more a formality than anything anyway. Look, I’m not trying to tell you your business, but you’re going to dehydrate yourself.”

“Shut up. I’m not taking advice from a hallucination.”

“I...what?”

“Dogs don’t talk. It’s kind of an immutable truth.”

“Well, hallucination or not, that water is filled with salt. Salt dehydrates. So, go ahead, kill yourself.”

Rick examined the water pooled in his hand dripping through his fingertips, and allowed it to fall back into the ocean inches below. He looked up from the blackness of the water to

find more blackness. The ocean at night, there were few things he had seen in his life that looked bleaker. Far off, already cresting the horizon, sailed the cruise ship that Rick had been a passenger aboard only moments before.

He remembered waking with a start, the bell not far from his headboard clanging incessantly, warning him to flee. He remembered running to the nearest lifeboat, too consumed with his own safety to notice or care about the other passengers. Though, upon reflection, he had to admit, they seemed entirely too calm for a sinking ship.

He remembered pressing every button he could find until the lifeboat began the mechanical process of dropping into the ocean below. He remembered leaping into the small vessel as it descended. And that was about it. He must have hit his head on the way down, sliding on the wet wood as he landed, crashing into the bottom of the lifeboat and knocking himself out cold. The next thing he knew a dog introduced himself as one “Captain Scruffy.”

“You don’t have to say it, because I’m thinking it too: we jumped off a boat because of a faulty alarm,” The Captain said as his eyebrows lowered into a facial expression that could only be described as cutely sad.

Rick’s head hung on his shoulders. The Captain was right.

Scruffy’s tail began to wag, and his mood changed instantly, almost as if he had already forgotten their dire circumstances, and asked, “What did your master name you? Are you a captain too?”

“Rick, just Rick.” He sat and continued to watch the cruise ship disappear over the horizon. “So, Tiberius, I guess it’s just me and my imagination. Waiting to die.”

“I prefer Scruffy, but no. There’s him too.” The Captain pointed his nose in the direction of the unconscious man lying at the bottom of the lifeboat. His body rocked in time with the vessel as shallow waves pushed it back and forth.

“I don’t suppose you know his name do you?”

“He said it was Vladimir, but I don’t really believe him. He doesn’t even have a Russian accent.” The Captain licked his chops and gave a large silent yawn. “He said he needed some rest. He told me to tell you not to wake him until sunup.”

“Is he okay?”

“What am I, his doctor? I’m just telling you what he told me.”

Captain Scruffy and Rick sat in awkward silence. The sound of the ocean lapping against the side of the boat became deafening. Occasionally Captain Scruffy would lick his cheeks or scratch his chest, but neither conscious occupant of the boat spoke for a long time.

Things had moved so fast Rick didn’t have to time to take in his canine companion. Captain Scruffy, by most definitions of the name, didn’t look like an officer, and wasn’t particularly scruffy. His smooth white fur looked almost blue in the dim, pale moonlight. His eyes were black coals sunk into his head. Even in the darkness, Rick could tell that they gleamed with an intelligence that he rarely saw in animals. The Captain stood about as tall as a beagle, but bore none of that

breed's standard markings. He was a mutt, through and through.

"So what do we do now?" the Captain asked as if Rick would know.

"How long does it take to die of exposure?"

The Captain tilted his head slightly to the left. "A few days I guess, why?"

"Just trying to plan my time."

"Has anyone ever told you you're a bit of a defeatist?" Then a tilt in the other direction.

"Not any imaginary dogs that I can remember."

"So we're stuck on a boat. It could be worse."

Rick waved his hands in the air to indicate their current situation. "How, exactly, could it be worse?"

"We could be treading water surrounded by sharks."

A loud crash of splashing water grabbed Rick and Captain Scruffy's attention. They looked into the black night, but saw nothing.

Rick answered slowly, "Well I guess there's that."

"So snap out of it. We don't have to die out here. Shouldn't this dinghy have an engine, or paddles, or something? What's that back there?"

Rick stood on unsteady feet. He stepped carefully over Vladimir's sleeping body, though this proved harder than expected as Vladimir was a big man, and took up most of the

section of the boat he occupied. It was hard to tell in the darkness, but even if he weren't Russian, he looked it. Vladimir wore a huge mustache on his face obscuring a majority of his mouth. His chin and cheeks were covered in a layer of wiry scruff, not quite a beard. His hair was as black as the ocean water.

Rick placed each foot gently, and at each brush against the large man, Vladimir would stir and groan, but didn't wake.

Rick reached the aft of the lifeboat, and looked over the edge.

"You were right, it's a motor!"

Captain Scruffy shushed Rick, "Don't wake Vladimir."

He mouthed an apology and whispered, "You were right, it's a motor. Maybe we can catch up to the cruise ship before it gets too far away."

Rick reached toward the starter, but a moment before he could turn it on Captain Scruffy barked firmly, "Wait."

"What?" Rick said a little irritated.

"Won't it be loud?"

"So?"

Captain Scruffy nosed in the direction of Vladimir again.

"I don't care if I wake him up. This is our chance to get back to the ship."

“There’s something else. Something I just remembered he told me before he closed his eyes.” The Captain looked skyward as if recollecting the exact words Vladimir used. His tongue hung loosely out of his mouth as he panted gently.

After a while Rick raised his hands and eyebrows in an expression of impatience.

“Sorry, I get distracted sometimes.” The Captain shook his head, ears flapping against his cheeks. “He said not to wake him, because tomorrow morning he’d know how to get us back to safety.”

“What do you think I’m about to do?”

“I don’t know, man. He seemed pretty confident.”

“And the sound of a motor sending us back to the cruise ship isn’t?”

“Well, now, wait a second. I mean, we don’t know that this thing will get us back to the cruise ship. Do you even know which direction to go?”

Rick looked into the night, but the ship had disappeared beyond his view. He pushed on undeterred, “And his plan, the one where he sleeps all night and knows how to save us in the morning is better?”

“It’s not worse.”

“This is ridiculous. Let’s not forget that you’re a damn hallucination.”

Scruffy’s ears folded back on his head and he said, “I don’t remember agreeing to that.”

Rick jabbed a finger in the direction of Vladimir. “And he’s probably a figment of my imagination too. I’m done arguing with myself. This is the best chance I’ve got.”

Captain Scruffy in a last ditch effort to preserve Vladimir’s slumber barked, “Why a dog?”

“Excuse me?”

“If I’m a figment of your imagination, why did you choose a dog, huh?”

“What is that supposed to mean? Why not a dog?”

“If I’m just fake, what do I symbolize? What is your brain trying to tell you?”

Rick gave a dismissive wave, “I really have no idea.”

“I don’t know either, you see?” Captain Scruffy barked and wagged his tail as if the statement resolved some mystery.

“You’re just trying to confuse me.”

“No, don’t you get it? If I were just in your head I think I’d know why you imagined me this way, but I don’t. What if I’m not a figment of your imagination? What if I’m his? What if you are too?”

“That’s insane.”

“Is it?”

“Stop answering me with questions!” Rick yelled. He stood bolt upright, and the lifeboat rocked in defiance of the sudden movement. Rick dropped to his knees, and held on to the side waiting for the craft to stabilize.

Vladimir stirred, but didn't wake. Both Rick and Captain Scruffy froze in place careful to make no noise that would further interrupt the big man's sleep. The lifeboat returned to an equilibrium before either spoke again.

Rick realized that he was holding his breath. "Why am I doing this? Who cares if he wakes up?"

"Let's just think about this," the Captain whined softly, "this whole situation is surreally idiotic. Two men on a boat with a talking dog in the middle of the ocean? That screams fever dream to me, and there's only one person sleeping between us."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm not made up."

"Aren't you?" Captain Scruffy growled in a challenge. Rick almost yelled again, but the Captain apologized quickly for the question, "What I mean to say is, show me proof."

"I have a last name, dammit. Cannery. Your name is Mr. Scruffy."

"Captain Scruffy."

"Whatever."

"If you think about it, that's not really proof. And if you're real and I'm fake, you still haven't told me what I symbolize."

"God. You symbolize God. That's pretty obvious."

"What? Why?" The Captain thought about it for a moment, "Oh, I see. You're clever, but no, I'm not God."

Rick stopped searching the boat and looked toward Captain Scruffy expecting more nonsensical ranting from the chatty canine, but saw him licking his crotch delightfully.

Rolling his eyes, Rick said, “You’re probably right about that.”

“What are you looking for?” Captain Scruffy asked as Rick continued his search.

“A paddle.” He could see the dog’s head tilt to the side as if he was about to ask why again, and responded before the question could be verbalized, “Either to row us somewhere or beat you with it. I haven’t decided yet.”

“Why don’t you just relax? When Vladimir comes to we’re both going to disappear, so why don’t you just sit back and enjoy the ocean air for a bit.”

“You may have convinced yourself that you’re fake, but I—”

“Ah, so you admit that I might be real!” The Captain’s tail wagged enthusiastically.

“What? No, I’m just saying you’re not going to convince me, so stop trying.”

“Fine, whatever. It’s not like I care. Go ahead, wake him up. See what that gets you.”

Captain Scruffy turned and put his paws on the edge of the boat. He rested his head on his feet, and looked out into the ocean. Occasionally he would move his eyes and tilt his head a bit to look at Rick. With his eyes gazing from the side of his head, Scruffy seemed to affect a cute expression, but in Rick’s mind it was all just more attempts at manipulation.

Rick remained at the aft of the boat looking at the sleeping Vladimir and then back at the motor. Silence fell over them again, and the sound of the ocean returned to fill their heads. It seemed somehow, quieter.

“Ah, screw it,” Rick blurted and turned to start the motor.

“No!” barked the Captain, but it was too late.

The engine sputtered and began to roar to life, but almost as quickly as it started, it died. A small pop and a puff of smoke rose from the base of the machine, and the thumping of the motor slowed to a stop.

Vladimir groaned loudly, rolled on his side, but again, didn’t wake.

“No! Dammit, no!” Rick yelled.

“Would you please be quiet!” the Captain growled.

Rick didn’t respond. He slid down the back of the boat and rhythmically pounded his head into his knees.

“Are you ready to listen to me now?”

“About what?”

“About our place in the world.”

“No,” but Rick’s statement came with less resistance than before.

“The only proof you’ve got is your last name—”

“—Cannery.”

“Right, Cannery, but how about the proof that I have?”

“Proof?” Rick asked, deflated.

“If you were real, that motor would have started and Vladimir would have woken up, and we’d be off in some direction or another, lost, but moving. Instead, the engine died, Vladimir is still asleep despite the obnoxious racket, and you’re still talking to me. How about that?”

“I’m real,” Rick argued weakly. He continued pounding his head against his knees.

“Just hear me out. What if we’re here to help that guy over there? What if we need to figure something out tonight so he can get to safety tomorrow?”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” More head pounding.

Captain Scruffy stood and paced back and forth on the lifeboat. “It does. Before you came to, Vladimir told me not to wake him, and that he’d have the answers by tomorrow. What if we’re the ones who are actually supposed to be figuring that out?”

Rick stopped pounding his head into his knees.

“Do you see now? We can make a difference, but we have to do it before Vladimir wakes up. Will you help me?” The Captain stopped pacing and looked at Rick expectantly. He held his tail out, extended to its full length behind him.

Rick looked into the Captain’s coal black eyes. He searched for some kind of truth in those dark abysses. There was nothing. “I refuse to believe you. I’m going to get this boat

moving even if I have jump out into the water and push myself!”

Rick turned and began mashing the ignition switch of the motor over and over again. Other than the sound of metal grinding on metal, nothing productive came of the effort.

“Dammit!” Rick yelled into the night sky. The stars above him twinkled apathetically at his struggle. Vladimir shifted his large mass again, but did not stir.

Captain Scruffy seemed to have given up on reasoning with Rick. He sat, panting faintly in the night. His partially open mouth gave his face an almost sinister grin.

“Wake up, you fat bastard!” Rick yelled in frustration at Vladimir. He dropped to his knees and started shaking the large man vigorously. Vladimir barely moved.

“Dammit!” he called into the night again. Rick collapsed into the lifeboat, exhausted from his outbursts.

“You see now; don’t you?”

Rick looked at Captain Scruffy and nodded, completely defeated. He didn’t speak again.

“Now that you’re thinking rationally, this is what I think we mean.”

A tear rolled down Rick’s cheek. He felt a mix of emotions, but he cried for his lost existence.

“As a dog, the fact that I’m clearly not purebred means that I’m not locked into a particular metaphor. For instance, were I a greyhound I would obviously represent quickness, but

being a mutt, the way I look could mean a lot of things. Personally I think it means security and unconditional love.”

Rick sat still. He didn't say a word as he took in the Captain's lecture. Tears continued to crawl down his cheeks and pool on the boards below. He tried to let the noise from the shallow waves fill his head, but they couldn't keep the Captain's words at bay.

The Captain began pacing around the boat, tail waiving thoughtfully as he explained his hypothesis, “Now, for you. You're a bit of a coward, a lot of a defeatist, I'd say you represent Vladimir's insecurities about his situation. He's clearly afraid, being lost at sea and all. I'd say you represent the side of him that wants to give up. Look at your ridiculous last name: Cannery.”

The Captain paused to give Rick a silly look, as if to drive home the absurdly transparent symbolism of it.

“I mean come on. Clearly you feel trapped. As if in a cage, maybe? Or perhaps it's a symbolic misspelling of ‘canary.’” Captain Scruffy licked his lips at the thought, “canaries are small little yellow birds that represent a portent of bad things to come. A warning to get out before it's too late.”

The Captain scratched his ear with a back leg before continuing. “You symbolize the side of him who has to get us out of this mess.”

Rick gazed on at the dog. The Captain was winding down, a professor coming to the end of his proof.

“So, in a nutshell I'm the physical manifestation of security and comfort. My influence will help you have the confidence to

solve this problem tomorrow morning when Vladimir wakes up. If I can make you, the manifestation of his fear and insecurity, have confidence in your future, that will give Vladimir the strength he needs to face this challenge anew and survive!”

And that was that. Q.E.D. Rick’s head fell upon his knees.

He took in every word, “I—I don’t know...”

“Trust me. This makes sense.”

They sat in silence. Even the sounds of the ocean failed to register in Rick’s ears. Not until a faint wind blew across his neck did he look up. Far on the horizon the sky lightened just a fraction.

“The sun will be up in a few hours. We don’t have much time to make a decision,” the Captain whined.

Rick leaned over the edge of the lifeboat and gazed out at the horizon. His tears plopped into the ocean below. He looked into the water, and saw nothing reflected back up at him, not even the stars above.

“Even if it were light enough, you still wouldn’t have a reflection,” the Captain opined through parted teeth.

Rick finally said at a metered, thoughtful pace, “Okay, let’s find me, I mean Vladimir, some confidence.”

Captain Scruffy barked happily and wagged his tail. He stood on all four legs, spun in a circle twice, then barked again. “Now we can finally solve some problems. Tell me about your most embarrassing moment as a child.”

“Excuse me?”

“Well, anything you remember is going to be from Vladimir’s memory. It’s okay. Remember, at some level I know this stuff too.” Captain Scruffy licked Rick’s hand to reassure him.

“Fair enough,” Rick paused to think for a moment, “well, when I was still in grade school there was this girl named Mindy Sterling...”

Rick continued while Captain Scruffy sat with his ears perked at full attention. Over the remaining hours of night Rick confessed his life to this strange talking dog. He admitted things he hadn’t even told his best friends—Vladimir’s best friends. His fear of rabbits, the crippling anxiety he felt about protons spontaneously dying, all the times he pleased himself while watching Three’s Company; nothing was off limits.

And through it all, Captain Scruffy helped him to contextualize those events, and what they could mean in the larger tapestry of Vladimir’s mind. The dialog between fictional man and dog proved that Captain Scruffy hadn’t lied, the dog did have a calming influence. By the time the tip of the sun peeked over the horizon, Rick felt better.

Not just about himself, but about his fate, about his existence as a metaphor for cowardice. He knew that even though his reality would end when Vladimir opened his eyes, he was helping him solve a larger problem. Though Rick would cease to be, Vladimir would go on because of the confidence that Captain Scruffy and he were helping him to find through the remainder of the fading night.

After several hours, the sun had almost completely risen into the sky. "It won't be long now," Rick said.

"That's right. Soon Vladimir will wake, and our jobs will be done. It's been good knowing you, Rick."

"You too, Captain."

"You can call me Scruffy."

"Oh, I know, but you've earned the title."

Captain Scruffy wagged his tail in appreciation. He barked at the compliment.

The noise seemed to stir Vladimir who began to groan and move around on the deck of the boat. He made few more noises then rubbed his eyes.

"It's been good to know you, Captain Scruffy."

"You too, Rick."

As Vladimir finally woke, Rick closed his eyes ready to meet his fate, confident that his work and self-realization would help the large man make it back to land. He sat on the boat, eyelids clenched for several seconds, waiting for something, anything to happen, but nothing did.

He opened one imaginary eye tentatively to see if he had entered the peaceful realm of nonexistence only to find Vladimir greeting Captain Scruffy, and allowing the dog to lick him on the cheek.

"You're awake! Great!" Vladimir said with a thick, boisterous Southern accent. He wasn't Russian.

The dissonance between Vladimir's assumed nationality and his accent broke something loose in Rick's suddenly swirling conflicted mind. Shouldn't he have known about Vladimir's Southern roots? Wouldn't that be something a manifestation of the mustachioed man's subconscious be privy to? Confusion grew like seaweed in Rick, reaching from the ocean floor to anchor him back into the harsh reality that he was so blissfully near to escaping from. "Wait, why am I still here?"

"Um...'cause you jumped off a cruise ship when an alarm went off?" Vladimir pointed out with a chuckle.

"But I'm a figment of your imagination. I'm here to help you find the confidence that you need to make it back to shore."

"What? That's the craziest damn thing I ever heard. You're as real as ol' Captain Scruffy or I am."

"But why didn't you wake up with all the noise? Scruffy said you needed to sleep."

Vladimir laughed deeply and said, "Hell yeah I did. Most people do after a three day bender. I don't think the Rapture itself would have woken me up last night."

Rick pointed at the dog, his expanding realization of the canine's duplicitous con causing an equally expanding anger. "Captain Scruffy! He told me I was fake. He said I needed to come to terms with my deepest insecurities to make sure you had the confidence to make it home!" And then a quick realization, "I told him about Three's Company!"

The Captain just stood next to his master wagging and panting innocently.

“Captain Scruffy said that?” Vladimir asked in a shocked tone as he patted Scruffy’s head.

Rick could only nod as he continued to point in the dog’s direction. The sound of the ocean waves once again crept into Rick’s ears.

“Aw, he was just fuckin’ with ya’.”