

# The Raft (2000)

By Peter Orner

My grandfather, who lost his short-term memory sometime during the first Eisenhower administration,<sup>1</sup> calls me into his study because he wants to tell me the story he's never told anybody before, again. My grandmother, from her perch at her dressing table, with the oval mirror circled by little bulbs I used to love to unscrew, shouts, "Oh, for God's sake, Seymour. We're meeting the Dewoskins at Twin Orchard at seven-thirty. Must you go back to the South Pacific?"

My grandfather slams the door and motions me to the chair in front of his desk. I'll be thirteen in two weeks.

"There's something I want to tell you, son," he says. "Something I've never told anybody. You think you're ready? You think you've got the gumption?"

"I think so."

"Think so?"

"I know so, sir. I know I've got the gumption."

He sits down at his desk and stabs open an envelope with a gleaming letter opener in the shape of a miniature gold sword. "So you want to know?"

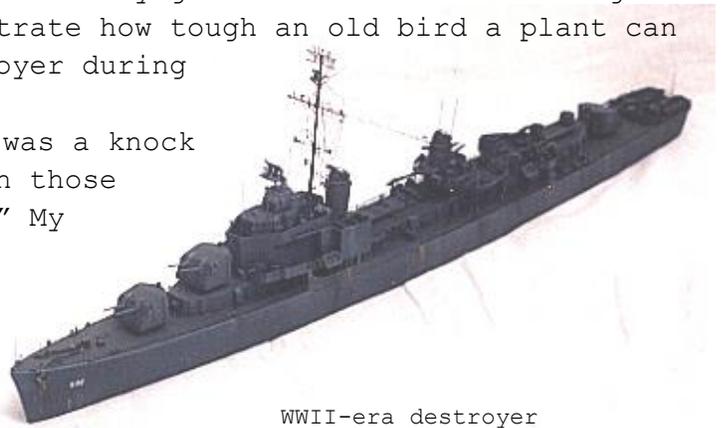
"Very much."

"Well then, stand up, sailor." My grandfather's study is carpeted with white shag, which feels woolly against my bare feet. I twist my toes in it. Many cactuses are also in the room. My grandfather often encourages me to touch their prickles to demonstrate how tough an old bird a plant can be. My grandfather captained a destroyer during World War II.

"It was late," he says. "There was a knock on my stateroom door. I leaped up. In those days I slept in uniform-- shoes too." My grandfather smiles. His face is so perfectly round that his smile looks like a gash in a basketball. I smile back.



Peter Orner  
born 1968



WWII-era destroyer

---

<sup>1</sup> president from January 20, 1953 - January 20, 1961

"Don't smile, he says. "Just because I'm smiling, don't assume I couldn't kill you right now. Know that about a man."

"Oh Seymour, my God," my grandmother says through the door. "Anyway, isn't he supposed to be at camp? Call his mother."

He looks at me and roars at the door, "Another word out of you, ensign,<sup>2</sup> and I'll have you thrown in the brig,<sup>3</sup> and you won't see Beanie Dewoskin till V-] Day.<sup>4</sup>"

"I'll make coffee," my grandmother says.

"It was late," I say. "There was a knock."

"Two knocks," he says. "And by the time he raised his knuckle for the third, I'd opened the door. 'A message from the watch, sir. A boat, sir, three miles due north. Very small, sir. Could be an enemy boat, sir; then again, it might not be. Hard to tell, sir.' I told the boy to can it. Some messengers don't know when to take a breath and let you think. They think if you aren't saying anything. You want to hear more, which is never true. Remember that. I went up to the bridge.<sup>5</sup> 'Wait,' I told them. 'Wait till we can see it. And ready the torpedoes,' I told them, or something like that. I forget the lingo."

"The torpedoes?" I say.

"Yes," he says. "The torpedoes. I couldn't make it out, but the chance that it wasn't a hostile boat was slim. You see what I'm driving at?"

"I do, sir,"

"No, you don't, sailor."

"No, I don't," I say.

"Don't at all."

"We'd been warned in a communiqué from the admiral to be on high alert for kamikaze flotillas.<sup>6</sup> Do you have any idea what a kamikaze flotilla is?"

"Basically," I say, "it hits the side of your boat, and whango."

"You being smart with me? You think this isn't life and death we're talking about here?"

"Sorry, sir."

"So I waited. It took about a half hour on auxiliary power for us to get within a quarter mile of the thing-- then I could see it with the search."

My grandfather pauses, opens his right-hand desk drawer, where he keeps a safety-locked pistol and a stack of pornographic comic books. They



---

<sup>2</sup> a junior rank of a commissioned officer in the Navy

<sup>3</sup> a prison, especially on a warship

<sup>4</sup> Victory over Japan Day, the day on which the surrender of Japan occurred, effectively ending World War II

<sup>5</sup> the area of a ship from which it is commanded

<sup>6</sup> A *flotilla* is a fleet of ships or boats.

are strange books. In the cartoons men with long penises with hats on the ends of them and hair growing up the sides, so that to me they look like pickles, chase women with their skirts raised over their heads and tattoos on their asses that say things like "Uncle Sam's my daddy" and "I never kissed a Kaiser." He whacks the drawer shut and brings his hands together in front of his face, moves his thumbs around as if he's getting ready either to pray or to thumb-wrestle.

"Japs,<sup>7</sup>" he says. "Naked Japs on a raft. A raftload of naked Jap sailors. Today the bleedyhearts would probably call them refugees, but back then we didn't call them anything but Japs. Looked like they'd been floating for days. They turned their backs to the light, so all we could see were their backsides, skin and bone fighting it out and the bone winning."

I step back. I want to sit down, but I don't. He stands and leans over his desk, examines my face. Then he points at the door and murmurs, "Bernice doesn't know." On a phone-message pad he scrawls, BLEW IT UP in capital letters. Whispers, "*I gave the order.*" He comes around the desk and motions to his closet. "We can talk in there," he says, and I follow him into his warren<sup>8</sup> of suits. My grandfather long ago moved all his clothes out of my grandmother's packed-to-the-gills closets. He leaves the light off. In the crack of sun beneath the door I can see my grandfather's shoes and white socks. He's wearing shorts. He'd been practicing his putting in the driveway.



"At ease, sailor," he says, and I kneel down amid the suits and dangling ties and belts. And I see now that it's not how many times you hear a story but where you hear it that matters. I've heard this before, but this is the first time I've been in a closet alone with my grandfather.

"Why," I say. "Why, if you knew it wasn't--"

"Why?" he says, not like he's repeating my question but as if he really doesn't know. He sighs. Then, still whispering even though we're in the closet, he says, "Some men would lie to you. They'd say it's war. I won't lie to you. It had zero to do with war and everything to do with the uniform I was wearing. Because my job was to make decisions. Besides, what the hell would I have done with a boatload of naked Japanese? There was a war on."

---

<sup>7</sup> The racial slur here is deliberate.

<sup>8</sup> a rabbit burrow (here used metaphorically)

"But you just said--"

"Listen, my job. Just because men like me made the world safe for men like your father to be cowards doesn't mean you won't ever blow up any civilians. Because you will. I do it once a week at the bank." He places a stumpy, powerful hand on my shoulder. "*Comprende?*"

"Never," I breathe.

"Good," he says, and we are standing in the dark and looking at each other and the story is the same and different-- like last time, except this time his tears come so fast they're like lather. He blows his nose into his hand. I reach and offer him the sleeve of one of his suit jackets. "I'll let myself out," he says, and leaves me in the confessional,<sup>9</sup> closing the door behind him.

This time I don't imagine anything, not even a hand that feels like a fish yanking my ankle. Another door opens.

"Seymour? Seymour?" my grandmother says. "Where's the kid?"

---

<sup>9</sup> a small, enclosed booth used for the Sacrament of Penance, often called confession