

A white fiberglass catchboat bounced over two-foot chop on the lower Chesapeake Bay. Two men in heavy sweaters, canvas pants, and slickers stood hunched in its cubby against the icy salt spray. The night was dark, and rags of fog streaked past, but the boat burned no running lights.

“F-fucking freezing out here,” the bigger man shouted to the one gripping the wheel.

The helmsman shrugged, tapping one ear under his pilled wool cap: *Can't hear you.*

They looked away from each other, glancing at a long bundle wrapped in an old blue tarp, lying in the stern.

Through a slit in the fish-stinking tarp, the boy saw a slice of night sky studded with stars. Like pinholes punched in a paper bag, he thought. Each time the boat hit a wave he levitated, then was slammed against the deck. He felt dizzy from a throbbing in the back of his head, and whatever they'd doped him with back on the ship. Black spots reeled and flickered before his eyes, and each time this happened he retched. A sour slime of vomit smeared face and neck, but he could not make his hands rise to wipe it off. He was so cold the stars jerked in time to his shivering; the specks of lights shuddered, grew brighter, then dimmed to pinpricks again.

A hand snatched the tarp away, unrolling it so hard and fast he tumbled into the bottom of the boat like a bluefin dumped from a pound net. He gasped at the wind's wicked bite, the fisted battering of fiery cold.

Somewhere, far off, a foghorn groaned in sympathy.

A figure in a slicker stood over him, silhouette tall and broad-shouldered, though he could not see a face. Only a thin curve of new moon smiling coldly over the left shoulder.

“Get up,” a man said roughly, toeing him hard in the ribs. “Up, you damned bastard.”