

Ace and Baron

A Story for Seth

Our humanity is as durable as it is delicate. But it is hard hard to find and even easier to lose. It is a hard road for those who know what it is to be human. But we must seek it with all our heart and guard it with our life. For that is the reason we are here and it is the story of our lives. This is one such story.

Chapter 1

Ace had never actually seen Baron before but he had heard lots about him. Baron lived in Germany. Germany was at war with France. So that meant Ace and Baron were at war with each other. Baron, Ace was told, flew an all black biplane. Biplanes in those days had machine guns mounted on the nose of the plane. They also had bombs under the belly of the plane. Baron had dropped two bombs on the town where Ace lived, blowing up a train station and a train that was stopped there. When Baron tried to fly back to Germany after dropping the bombs on the train station, the French sent up their best fighter pilots to shoot Baron down before he got back home. The French fighter pilots caught up to Baron and started shooting at him. Dunt, Dunt, Dunt! Dunt, Dunt, Dunt, Dunt, Dunt! The French pilot kept Baron's black plane in his cross hairs as he sent the bullets streaking towards him, leaving a tracer tail of light. 'Zip, Zip, Ting!' was the sound the bullets made as they whizzed past Baron's head and one hit his wing. Baron looked over his shoulder and saw three French planes chasing him, and one was shooting. Baron could see the French pilots face light up from the muzzle flash of the machine gun as it fired. Baron knew this was serious. He turned back around, put his goggles on, tightened his seat belt and revved his plane up to full throttle. What he did next was very brave and very scary. And that's just what Baron was known for. He pulled up like he was going to do a loop, but when he got to the top of the loop he rolled right side up and was headed right at the plane that had been shooting at him!

The French pilot was caught by surprise. Baron was headed straight for him at full speed and he was shooting. Zip, Zip, Wap, Wap, Wap! Baron's bullets tore into the French pilot's engine and propeller. His engine started smoking and spraying oil.

About a second later Baron's black biplane roared past with a deafening growl and a powerful whoosh of air. The Frenchman had been shot down! His engine was now on fire and he was headed for the ground. If he didn't bail out soon he would crash and die for sure. He unbuckled his seat belt and climbed out of the cockpit onto the wing. The flames from the engine fire burned his face but he jumped out of the plane before they had time to burn him bad.

He pulled the rip-cord on his parachute as soon as he was clear of the plane and the trail of black smoke it left behind. His chute opened up and he found himself covered in oil floating down to Earth as he watched his flaming plane crash into a big grassy field, exploding into a huge ball of fire.

But Baron wasn't finished yet. He still had two French planes after him. After Baron had shot down the first plane and gone zooming past him so close, Baron hid in the black smoke that was trailing behind the Frenchman. Baron's all black plane blended perfectly with

the trail of smoke he was flying in. In fact he blended in so well that the other two pilots couldn't find him. They wondered for a moment if he had crashed.

Then from out of the thick black smoke came Baron. He turned hard trying to get behind the closest Frenchman. The Frenchman turned also, trying to get away. But it was too late. Baron was on his tail. The Frenchman quickly went into a loop to try to lose Baron, but Baron was an expert pilot and followed the Frenchman perfectly. The Frenchman started to panic. He knew that as soon as Baron could get him in his cross hairs bullets would come ripping through his plane. Before he was even done with the loop the Frenchman unbuckled his seat belt and dove out of his plane. At that very minute bullets from Baron's machine gun ripped through his plane. They must have hit his fuel tank because the plane exploded in mid-air. The Frenchman tumbled through the sky for a few seconds before pulling the ripcord on his shoot.

The third plane had gotten so scared that he had turned around and was racing back to the air base he had come from. Baron could have chased after him but he didn't. He thought it would be best to leave a survivor to tell everyone back at the French base about the horrible, the scary, the all black, Baron!

Chapter 2

Back at the air base the one surviving Frenchman landed on the grassy runway and stumbled into the pilots lounge. He got a cup of coffee and sat down on a couch. He tried to sip his coffee but he was so scared his hands were shaking. He spilled coffee on his coat a few times before his friend noticed how bad he was shaking.

"Give me that coffee. You're just going to burn yourself" his friend said as he took the coffee cup from him. By this time the other pilots who had heard him land were crowding into the lounge. Ace was one of the pilots who came to see what all the commotion was about. Ace sat at a table and quietly listened. The commander of the air base was the last one to arrive. Every one got quiet when he came in. He was tall with white hair and long skinny fingers.

"Tell us what happened young man" the commander said, looking at the young trembling pilot. The surviving pilot was too scared to speak. He just kept trembling. "What happened out there? Where are the other other two pilots? What did you see?" asked the commander again. The young pilot was still too scared to speak. The commander crouched down in front of the young pilot. The commander ran his long skinny fingers through his white hair. "Was it the Baron? Did you get attacked by the Baron?"

The young pilot nodded his head yes. The commander stood up and told everyone to leave. He told the pilots to make sure all the planes were full of gas and loaded with ammunition so they could take off on a moments notice. He told another man to help the young pilot out of his flying clothes and into the shower.

Then the commander turned to Ace. "I need to talk to you in my office in five minutes, Ace". Ace nodded his head and finished his coffee.

Out on the air field all the planes were parked side by side in a long line. The pilots whispered to one another about the different stories they had heard about the Baron as they topped off the planes with gas and double checked the guns. "I heard he never loses a dog fight" said one pilot. "I heard a story about a pilot who emptied his machine gun into him and he didn't go down" said another. "He must have missed him. Either that or he is bullet proof." A pilot carrying a box of ammo shouted from the other side of his plane, "Nobody is bullet proof! He must be a ghost!"

Just then the commander walked by and overheard the pilots talking. "Now listen here, fellas. This Baron isn't bullet proof and he's not a ghost! He's just a man with an airplane and

he can be shot down just the same as any of the rest of us! Now don't be getting each other all worked up and scared, Okay?"

"Yes, sir" answered the pilots in unison. The commander turned and walked towards his office to meet with Ace.

The commander found Ace waiting in the office. He sat at his big oak desk and rocked back and forth in his chair. "Ace, we need your help. You are the best fighter pilot in all of France. You're the only one who can beat this Baron. Everyone is so scared of him. If I asked these pilots to go up against Baron they would be so scared they would wet their pants! I know he's really good but you have to try to be better than he is. You have to shoot down Baron. If you don't he'll shoot down all of our planes and maybe even drop a bomb on this very airbase."

Ace scratched his chin and was quiet for a minute. Finally he answered, "It's true that everyone is afraid of Baron. I know I am and I'm usually not afraid of anything. But Baron had never lost a dogfight. He shoots down anyone who gets anywhere near him. I'll try to shoot him down but I'm going to have to use some sneaky tricks to win."

The commander smiled and shook Ace's hand. "That's the spirit! What do you need from me my friend? Whatever you need, it's yours."

"Okay first of all I won't be needing any bombs," said Ace. "It will likely be only air to air combat and bombs are for ground targets. What I want to try is a smoke bomb that makes the same color of black smoke as when your plane catches on fire. My idea is to keep the bomb on the belly of the plane and light it off so it looks like I got shot down. That way I can trick Baron into thinking he shot me down when really I'm just fine. Can you make me a smoke bomb like that?"

"Oh yes, I'll have them start on that today" answered the excited commander.

"Great. The other trick I want to try is three machine guns instead of just the one I have right now. On my plane I want to leave the one on the nose where it is and add one on each side under the wing. That way even if he's only in my sights for a second and I only get one shot at him it will be like getting three shots at the same time."

The commander smiled again. "Whatever you need Ace. I'll make sure your plane is ready in the morning. You go get some rest tonight. We'll test it out first thing tomorrow. You're our hero."

Chapter 3

That night Ace dreamed about Baron. He dreamed that he was zooming at Baron but when he got close enough to fire his new triple gun he couldn't get it to fire. Ace woke with a start. He could see Baron's eyes from the dream. They were like big blueberries. "I have blueberry eyes! Baron has blueberry eyes just like me!" Ace thought to himself.

The next morning Ace had a good breakfast of pancakes and eggs. He didn't eat too much so that if he puked from aerobatics it wouldn't be as much puke on his plane. The mechanics had stayed up all night mounting the triple guns and the specially made bomb to his new plane. Everything was ready for him to test out. Ace checked the guns and kicked the tires then he took hold of the big wooden prop and gave it a spin with all his might. THUP'AH the engine didn't start. He tried it again, THUP'AH. Still nothing. He grabbed an oil can full of gas out of his tool box. The oil can was about the size of a pop can and had a little lever you push with your thumb to pump a little squirt out of the nozzle. He squirted a few drops in the carburetor and jumped down to spin the prop by hand again. He spun the prop and the engine started up with a roar. The wind from the spinning prop was cold in the damp morning air.

Ace climbed in the cock pit and waved to the commander who was standing in the door

to his office. He revved up the engine and taxied down the runway, picking up speed. He lifted off and circled back over the air base. The sun was warm and shining bright. It was the perfect day for practice.

First he tried out the new tripple gun. T,T,T,T,TT,T,T,TA! It worked GREAT! It fired three times faster and sent hundred of bullets zipping down range in under two seconds. Next was to practice faking like he was shot down. Ace throttled back his engine and went into a nose dive the way planes do when they get shot down. He even wobbled the plane back and forth so it looked like it was broken and flying crooked. He pulled out of the dive before he got too close to the ground. "That was perfect" he thought to himself. Now if he could do it again with a trail of black smoke from the new smoke bomb he'd be all set to fool Baron. He pulled the lever that lit off the smoke bomb and started into a nose dive like he had before. Tons of black smoke trailed behind him in a long downward curve. To any other plane that saw him he would look like he was on fire and about to crash. Even if you were really close you wouldn't be able to tell that it was just a smoke bomb.

Ace pulled out of the dive as he had before. About that time the smoke bomb ran out of smoke. Ace headed back to the air field but as he was flying he noticed he was still smoking a little bit. He leaned out of the cockpit and saw flames on the belly of his plane! "Oh no!" His heart started to panic. He knew if the fire got to his gas tank the entire plane would blow up. That would mean certain death for Ace. Suddenly Ace had an idea. At the far end of the grass runway was a wheat field. The wheat was about waist high and was wet with dew from the night before. His plan was to land in the wheat field and let the wet tall grass put out the fire as he came to a stop. He ~~was~~ super scared and almost felt like crying, but he put the fear out of his mind so he could do a good job of saving the plane and his life.

He touched down as light as a feather and heard the sound of sopping wet wheat smearing down the belly of the plane. It sizzled as it licked the charred hot spot. When he came to a stop, a cloud of stinky steam and white smoke wafted around the plane. Ace tumbled out of the cockpit coughing. The fire was out, thankfully. Ace crawled under the plane to see what had happened. The smoke bomb was very hot. Apparently, it had gotten hot enough to catch the underside of the plane on fire. This had to be fixed.

The mechanics showed up to help. They tied a rope around the tail wheel and hitched the plane to a big strong horse. The horse towed the plane out of the field and down the runway backwards. Ace stood riding on the wing.

Chapter 4

When Ace and the mechanics got back to the base the town Mayor was there along with a crowd of people. The mayor had brought a band. They were playing patriotic songs and everyone was gathering around to hear the mayor give a speech. When the Mayor spotted Ace he asked the commander, "is that the young man right there?" The commander nodded yes. "What's his name again?" asked the Mayor. "His name is Ace" said the commander.

The mayor, who was a short fat man in a striped suit with a polka dot tie, called out loudly, "there you are Ace! The hero of our town!" The crowd cheered for Ace. The mayor went on. "Today is a day of danger for the people of our town. We live in fear and terror because of an enemy that hates us and wants to kill us all! That enemy is Germany. And the evil mastermind of the attack on our beloved train station is that vicious murderer The Baron! The Baron hates us because we like to eat fine cheese and because French girls are pretty. But I, as your mayor, promise that we will hunt down the Baron and bring him to justice!"

The crowd cheered and clapped their hands. The mayor pulled Ace out onto the stage with him and lifted Ace's hands up in the air for the crowd to see. The crowd cheered even

louder and started chanting, "Ace! Ace! Ace! Ace!" The mayor put a wreath of flowers around Ace's neck, then turned to the crowd and announced, "this young man is a HERO! He's going to save us from the evil Baron. And when Ace comes home with news that Baron has been killed we will have a parade for Ace and the whole town will have a party just for him!"

While the Mayor had been giving his speech the mechanics had put a cookie sheet on the belly of Ace's plane so that it would block the heat from the smoke bomb. That way the plane wouldn't catch on fire. The mechanics told Ace his plane was ready to fly again. Ace made his way to his plane with the crowd all around him. Pretty girls gave him flowers and winked and blew him kisses. Old men saluted him and young boys ran around with toy air plans that looked just like Ace's red and white plane.

Ace climbed into the cockpit of his plane and tied on his scarf. The mechanics made the townspeople stand clear of the prop. Then one of them gave the prop a good spin with both hands. Ace's engine burst to life like thunder. The wind blew into the crowd. People grabbed their hats to keep them from blowing off. Girls fought to keep their skirts from blowing up. The wind was strong enough on the faces of the people that they all looked away or covered their eyes.

All of them, that is, except a young daddy and the baby he was holding in his arms. They looked Ace right in the face through the blowing prop wash. The father and son didn't look away, they didn't even blink. They had bright clean blueberry eyes. Ace looked into their eyes and instantly remembered Baron's blueberry eyes from his dream the night before. Everyone in the crowd scattered and the father and son were the only ones left. Even as Ace revved up the engine and started to taxi away they did not move.

Ace lifted into the air and left the crowds and cheers behind. He couldn't stop thinking about the baby's blueberry eyes. He thought about the father's eyes, about his own eyes, and about the Baron's eyes from his dream. He put it out of his mind and focused on his mission. It wasn't his job to like the Baron, it was his job to kill the Baron. And he couldn't very well do that if he was always thinking about his blueberry eyes, about how he and the Baron weren't that different, about what it might be like if he and the Baron were friends. He shook his head and tried hard not to think about it.

Chapter 5

Ace flew through the sky hoping to spot Baron. It wasn't long before he did. Baron was a long ways off. Ace didn't change his course or fly toward Baron at all. Ace knew that Baron could probably beat him in a dog fight. The only way Ace thought he could win was to catch Baron by surprise. Ace's plan was to let Baron sneak up on him, then once Baron started shooting, Ace would light off the smoke Bomb to fool Baron into thinking he was going down. Once Baron thought Ace was shot down he would surprise attack. It was a long shot but it was all Ace could do.

He felt his hands tingle with fear as he held a steady course and watched Baron sneaking up on him out of the corner of his eye. Baron came in low and from behind. Ace's heart was pounding. "That's close enough!" he thought to himself and he began to roll his plane to one side and dive to escape from Baron. Baron followed Ace through the roll and dive with masterful precision. Ace knew that the moment Baron was in range he would start shooting. Sure enough, just as Ace had anticipated, Baron's guns burst to life the second Ace was in range. The bullets were passing Ace overhead. Ace pulled the lever that lit off the smoke bomb. The trail of thick black smoke blocked Baron's vision. Both planes swerved; Baron to get out of the smoke and Ace to get away from Baron.

Ace had to convince Baron that he had hit Ace. He had to make it look real. Ace flew

straight for the ground and let his engine rev out of control. Baron circled overhead watching. If Ace didn't think of something fast Baron would just keep watching until Ace ran out of smoke and the trick wouldn't work.

Ace looked around. The ocean was nearby and there were clouds over the water. Ace thought maybe he could make it into the clouds before his smoke ran out. He zoomed towards the clouds. They weren't very high above the water. If Ace didn't pull up fast when he got into the clouds he would crash into the ocean. Ace was almost there. Baron still circled overhead, watching.

Shortly after Ace got into the clouds and out of Baron's sight, the smoke bomb ran out. Ace pulled up sharply and circled back around. He couldn't see Baron but he could hear him coming in for a closer look. Baron skimmed over the tops of the clouds looking for any sign that Ace had in fact crashed. Baron passed right over the top of Ace. This was Ace's chance! He knew he would never be that close to Baron again.

Ace popped up out of the clouds right behind Baron. Baron tried to escape but it was too late. Ace fired off his new triple gun. Bullets ripped through Baron's cockpit. One bullet went in Baron's back and came out his shoulder. Baron's plane was somehow still flying but Baron himself was bleeding badly. Baron realized he had been tricked. He revved his engine and pulled into a loop. He did it so fast and so tight that he was almost instantly above Ace and flying straight down at him. He opened fire at Ace and filled his plane full of holes. Ace's plane caught on fire. Ace was done for!

They were over the ocean, land was nowhere in sight now. Ace didn't want to parachute into the water, but it was that or burn alive in his flaming plane. He knew what he had to do. Ace knew the water would be cold and he didn't know how he would get back to land, but it was his only option. He jumped out, pulled his ripcord, and floated through the clouds towards the sea.

Meanwhile above the clouds, Baron wasn't the only thing with bullet holes in it. His fuel tank was leaking and he was about out of gas. Not only that but he was getting light headed and dizzy from losing so much blood. That's when his engine quit. He was gliding in silence over the cloud covered ocean. He knew he had to get out before his plane crashed. He couldn't move his shot arm. He unbuckled his seat belt with one hand, checked his parachute, and slowly flopped out of the plane. He tumbled through the sky like a rag doll for a minute before he pulled his ripcord to open his chute.

He drifted silently through the clouds until they opened up and he could see the cold gray water below him. Land was nowhere to be seen, but he did spy a log floating in the waves. He tried to steer towards the log. He knew he would not have the strength to swim after being shot and losing so much blood.

Chapter 6

Ace had splashed into the cold water, gotten out of his parachute harness, which promptly sank, and started swimming. He didn't know where he was. It was just cold grey water in all directions. Ace swam and swam until he was too tired to swim. Then he swam some more. "I'm going to drown out here" he thought to himself. He swam on his back, looked up at the clouds and thought about dying.

"No! Don't die!" he said out loud. He shook his head and looked around. He saw something floating in the distance. Was it for real, or was he imagining it? He looked again. It was getting closer. He swam for it. As he got closer he could see that it was a log. If he could just make it to the log he could keep from drowning. The log was close now, close enough to reach. But there was something on the log. It looked like a man. It was a man, a

pilot. It was Baron! He was slumped over the log with his back to Ace. As Ace got closer he noticed there was blood in the water. He didn't know if Baron was alive or dead.

Ace grabbed hold of the log. The log bumped and shook as he adjusted his grip and caught his breath. Baron didn't move. The waves lapped against the log. Baron's white scarf floated like a cloud in the bloody water. Ace was quiet for several minutes. He had to know if Baron was alive or dead. He moved to the other side of the log and crept closer to Baron so he could see his face. Baron's face looked sad and was motionless. Ace could smell Baron's aftershave. He could also smell gasoline from the crash and blood from the wound.

Baron was wearing mirrored goggles. Ace looked into Baron's face but saw his own face in the reflection. He stared for a long time. Ace saw his own blueberry eyes reflected back as he studied the peaceful sadness on Baron's face. Then, ever so slowly, Ace reached up and pulled Baron's goggles off. There looking back at him were Baron's eyes. They were clear and bright blueberry eyes.

Just then Baron's lips moved. "So this is how it end for us," he whispered. Ace felt cold and could feel a lump in his throat.

"What do you mean?" asked Ace?

"I am shot badly and we are far from shore. We will both die here. I'm glad you're here. I...I don't want to die alone. Now I won't. I'm glad you're here." Baron smiled a delicate smile as a tear ran down his face.

Ace started crying too. "I'm sorry I...I'm sorry I shot you. I've killed you. I'm so sorry. I don't, you're not..."

Baron stopped him. "I shot you too" he whispered.

Ace wiped his tears and asked softly, "w...why?"

"I guess because I thought you were bad," whispered Baron.

"I thought you were bad too. Everyone told me you were bad" said Ace.

"Yes. And everyone told me you were bad" said Baron.

The two men looked into each others eyes not knowing what to say. They were silent for a long time. Nothing they had been told mattered anymore.

Ace moved closer to Baron. He took Baron's white silk scarf off of him and pressed it into his wound to slow the bleeding. Ace held it firm into Baron's shoulder. Baron reached across the log and held Ace's hand. He didn't say a word. The sun was setting and it would be dark soon.

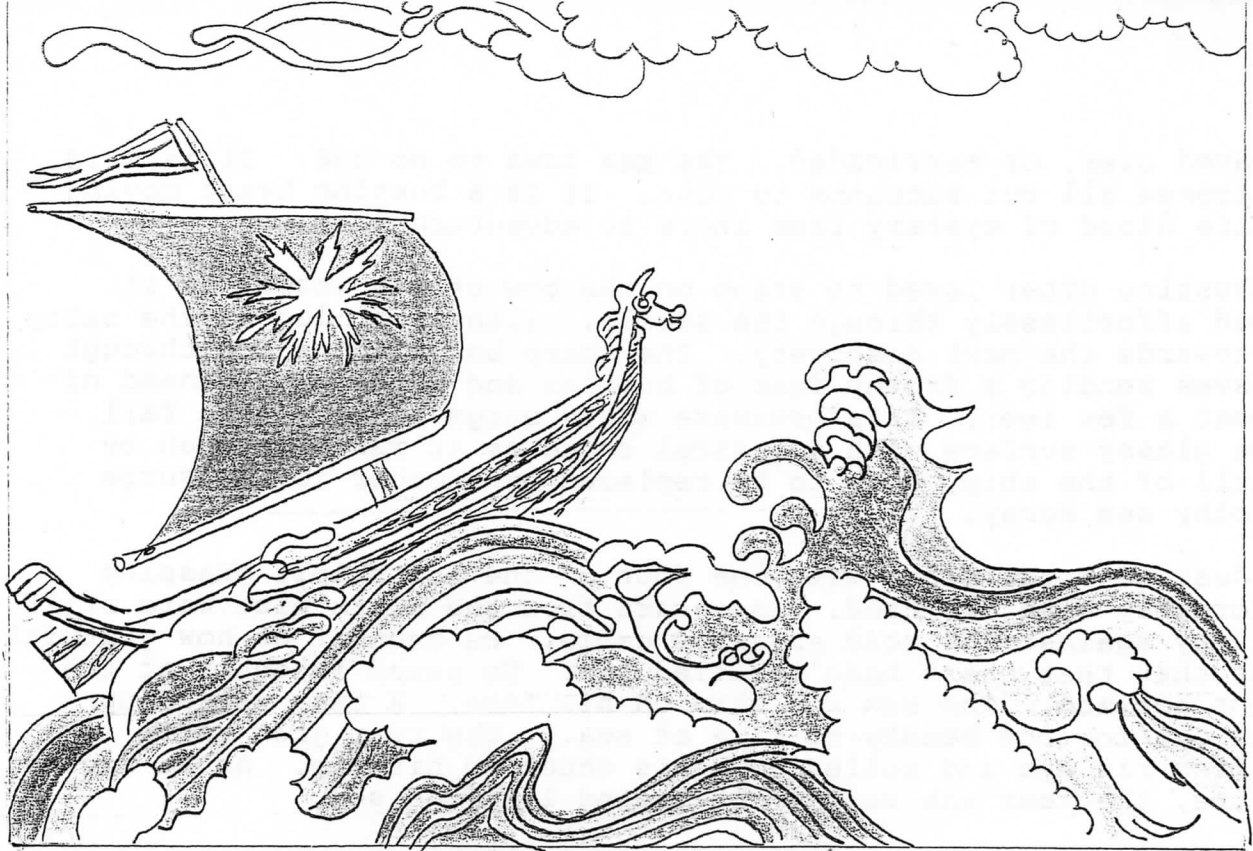
Baron died that night. Ace woke some time later in the darkness to find that Baron was dead. Baron's eyes had closed. His blueberry eyes were gone forever. Ace cried and cried until he had no more energy left to cry. The darkness and waves rocked him back and forth like his mother used to when he was a boy. He didn't feel cold any longer. He put his face on the log and wept until he fell asleep.

Ace drifted in the ocean the rest of that night and all the next day without waking up. A boat passing by found him on the log. Baron was nowhere to be found. The men on the boat pulled Ace on deck. They thought Ace was dead at first. They nursed him back to health on their way back to port. They knew who he was from his clothes. Ace was the hero who had killed Baron.

Ace woke up in the hospital. As soon as he was well enough to walk the Mayor in the striped suit with the polka dot tie came to see him. "Ace my boy!" he exclaimed, "the whole town wants to see you. They want to hear a speech from you about how you killed Baron. You're a HERO my boy!" The mayor took Ace by the arm and took him to a truck that was waiting for them outside. Ace and the mayor got in the back. A nurse handed Ace a bag with his belongings in it. The truck rolled slowly through town. The streets were lined with cheering people waiting to see Ace.

The truck pulled up in front of a big stage. The mayor hopped down from the truck and motioned to Ace.

"I need a moment alone" said Ace as he walked behind a nearby building. There he saw a little path through the field going towards the mountains. Without a thought he followed it. He walked for a very long time until he came to a big oak tree. He sat down under it and listened to the birds. He felt the sun on his face and the breeze in his hair. He opened the bag of his belongings. There on top was the white silk scarf, though it was no longer pure white. Ace started to cry. He wrapped the scarf around his hand and dabbed his tears. He didn't say a word. The sun was setting and it would be dark soon.



THE WAY OF THE SEA

By F A Schaeffer Cox

Justice Otter was not a terribly big creature. He was medium sized and fit. His muscles were lean, and he had a sharp eye and a quick mind. He was many things, but above all, he was an explorer. Several years before, Justice Otter had done what all explorers must do eventually; he set out to explore the sea.

Justice Otter had a wife, Loyal Otter. They had a son and daughter: Brave Otter and Pretty Otter. Together they sailed the Seven Seas in search of adventure, friendship and new places. They had been through storms and doldrums. They had run their ship aground in the night. They had been chased by cannibals in the jungles. One time they ran out of food and had to eat snails and slimy seaweed until a passing ship gave them fruit and sea bread.

The Otters never knew what tomorrow would bring, but they always found a way to get by. Life was grand and the world was theirs.

Justice Otter was fearless. Sometimes he would get hurt, like the time he went diving for pearls and a shark bit his hand. There was also a time when he was captured by robbers in town. They beat him up, but he escaped with everything they had stolen from him and then some. Every time something scary happened to Justice he found a way to get through it.

Justice Otter loved the sea because it belonged to no man. After being explored for thousands of years it still wasn't tamed, and it never would be. A thousand ships could sit on its surface under the watchful eye of a thousand lighthouses and the sea's proud waves would still roar and do as they pleased. The sea can not be fenced

in, paved over, or barricaded. The sea bows to no one. It is wild. It welcomes all but succumbs to none. It is a beating heart moving the life blood of mystery from shore to adventurous shore.

Justice Otter loved to stand on the bow of his vessel as it slipped effortlessly through the swells, silently pulled by the salty wind towards the next discovery. The sharp bow would slice through the waves sending a frothy foam of bubbles and white water ahead of the boat a few feet. This bow-wake would surge forward then fall to the glassy surface with a musical sound as it was overtaken by the hull of the ship, only to be replaced by another jovial surge of frothy sea spray.

Justice Otter stood with one foot on the bow pulpit grasping the forestay with his hand. The scars from the shark bite were stiff and lumpy against the cold abrasive cable. He thought of how grateful he was that that shark hadn't killed him. He gazed intently at the distant horizon. The sun was warm on his face. A tear welled up in his eye for the beauty of life at sea. The tear grew until it fell from his eye and rolled down his cheek to his lip. As he licked his lips, the tear was salty. It tasted like the sea.

About midday, when the sun was warmest, the otters came upon a happy little island with a long sandy spit that reached out into the rolling waves. As each of the slow steady swells approached the shallows, it would rise above the rest, as if the ocean floor had reached up and tickled its belly, causing the wave to laugh and curl over like a piece of shaved chocolate.

"Ho what a nice gift the ocean has given us," said Justice Otter. "This means we are meant to take a break to go surfing. Who wants to go with me?" Brave Otter could hardly wait. "I do daddy! I want to ride the nose of your surfboard." Justice Otter smiled a big knowing smile as he pulled down the sails, rounded up into the wind, and gave the anchor a kick. The heavy anchor was clanky and clumsy on the bow of the boat. Justice heaved it over the roller and into the sea. The crystal clear water made a loud gulp as it swallowed the anchor, but once it was in the water it glided downward like a sting ray beneath the dancing reflection of the clouds. Justice paid out a good length of anchor line past the chain and the boat settled onto its hook nicely.

In one swift move, Justice tossed his surfboard over the rail and dove in. The board clapped down loudly and a moment later Justice surfaced, drawing in a deep breath as he lunged onto the board. Brave Otter was right behind. He jumped in feet first holding his nose. He made it over to the board and clawed his way onto his father's back as his little otter feet kicked furiously. "Here we go!" said his daddy. Justice Otter made long steady strokes with one hand after the other until they were gliding over the water at a good speed. Brave Otter could see the waves they were headed for, which looked a lot bigger from the surfboard than they did from the boat. Brave Otter clasped his hands tightly around his father's neck. "I love you daddy," he said. "I love you, too, son. My favorite thing in the world is spending time with you," answered Justice with a warm contented voice.

As the two of them got closer to the break, the rumble and whoosh



of the waves got louder and louder. Brave Otter got a flutter in his tummy as he felt a wave lift them up then suddenly fall out from underneath them. "That wasn't our wave. Maybe the next one," said Justice. Brave Otter turned to look over his shoulder and saw a monster wave building. It seemed far away, but the bigger it got the closer it felt. "Now!! Get on the nose!" yelled Justice. Brave Otter scrambled to the front of the board as his daddy paddled faster and faster. His arms dug into the water and hurled it toward the wave that was bearing down on them. The sea started getting sucked out from underneath them. Everything, the whole ocean, the air, the board they were on, it was all being pulled toward the now towering wave. "If you go under just hold your breath and keep kicking! You'll have to fight to get back to the surface! But you can do it!" Justice yelled over the rumbling roar of the cresting wave.

Brave Otter took a deep breath and held it as he tightly gripped the edges of the board. He wondered, for a moment, if this whole thing was a mistake, if he was about to get hurt bad. But before he could finish his thought, the wave was upon them. They pitched forward. Brave Otter was now slipping off the nose while churning white water engulfed the tail of the board. Justice stood to his feet and took two quick steps backwards. The board leveled, then dropped into the wave with a frothy chatter. It seemed now, that the wave was standing still and the world was moving. Brave Otter let out his breath with a laugh. His daddy laughed with jovial delight too.

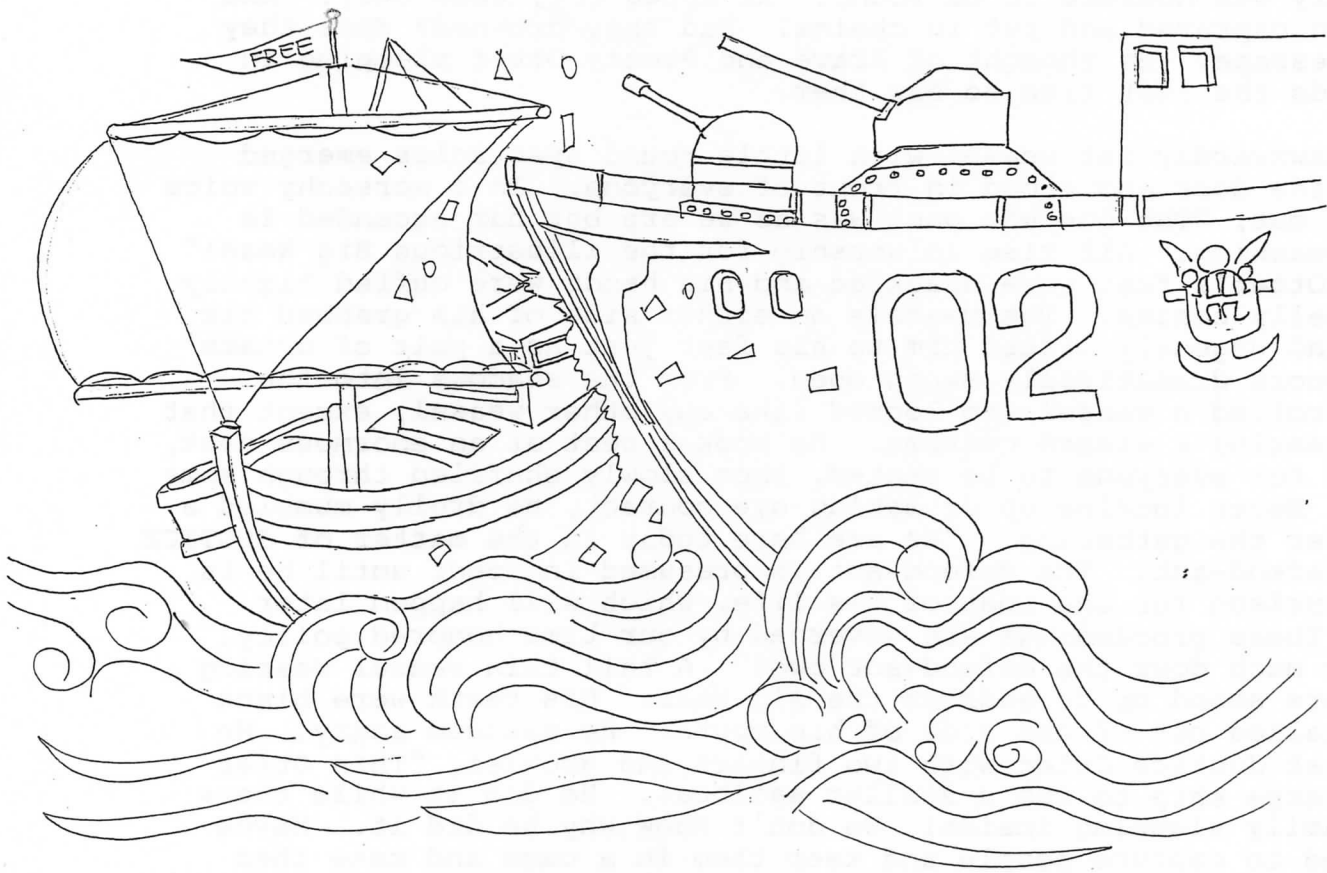
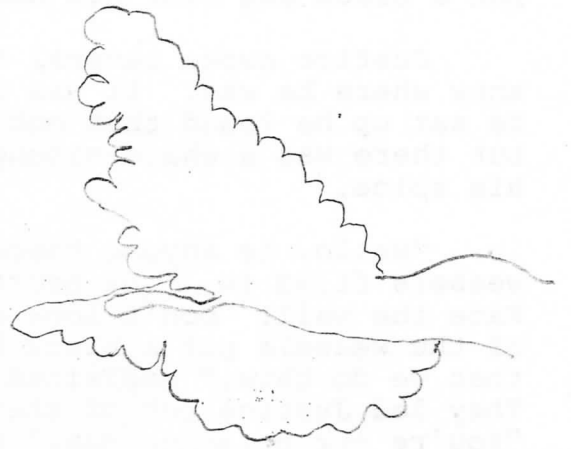
Laughter is a language beyond words. It always tells the truth. It comes and goes as it pleases, and everyone speaks it. It was the language of the day that day. Father and son surfed and laughed until the sun was low. Then they returned to their boat, raised the sails and rode the evening breeze westward.

The wind had carried them far that day. By nightfall they had found a quiet sheltered cove where they anchored up for the night. The air was still and the shadows of night turned the water a deep inky blue. The reflection of their anchor light flickered on the water like a firefly.

The children were asleep. Justice Otter and Loyal Otter were getting ready for bed themselves when Justice took Loyal in his arms. "I love you," he said. "I don't ever want to be anywhere but here with my family." Loyal smiled and kissed him. "I love you too," she whispered. "Now be quiet so we don't wake the children."

The next morning Justice Otter awoke to a sound so awful and loud that he sprung out of his berth and hit his head on the ceiling. The boat shook and rolled to one side. The hull creaked and groaned. Broken glass rained down on Brave and Pretty Otter as a faint and unexcited voice from outside mumbled something about "policy" over a speaker. Their boat was being rammed by a bigger boat!

Justice Otter grabbed his sabre and jumped on deck. The bow of the bigger boat was plowing right into the side of the boat where everyone had been sleeping a moment earlier. The deck was halfway



under water. Two weasels wearing green uniforms and masks were already on board. "Stop resisting! This is the policy!" said one of them. "GET OFF MY BOAT!" yelled Justice, and at that, the weasels lunged at him with their swords and clubs. Justice blocked the first swing with his sabre but the other weasel clubbed him from behind and put a black bag over his head. Justice was unconscious.

Justice awoke several hours later. It was dark and he did not know where he was. It was damp and smelly. His back hurt. When he sat up he found that not only were his hands and feet shackled, but there was a chain cinched tightly around his belly. It cut into his spine.

"Hello, is anyone there?" said Justice. A door opened and three weasels filed in. The shortest one yelled out "Get up! Turn around! Face the wall! Don't look at me!" Justice did as he was told. One of the weasels put a black bag over Justice's head. "It's the policy that we do this," explained the weasel, as if that made it okay. They led Justice out of the room. "Where are we going?" asked Justice. "You're our prisoner now," explained the short weasel. "When the policy says so, we'll keep you in that cage for years and years."

The weasels pushed, prodded, and dragged Justice on the deck of the ship and sat him in a chair. They pulled the bag off of his head. The bright sunlight made him squint at first. As his eyes adjusted, he recognized the ship as the one that had rammed their boat earlier. His family was nowhere to be found. He hoped they were okay. Had they been captured and put in chains? Had they drowned? Were they able to escape? He thought of Brave and Pretty Otter sleeping in their beds the last time he saw them.

An awkwardly fat weasel with little round spectacles emerged from a side door and stood in front of everyone. In a screechy voice she sang out, "The one who once was as we are but has ascended is now approaching. All rise in worship for the illustrious Big Weas!" Justice Otter's feet were shackled and his hands were cuffed tightly to his belly chains. The weasels on either side of him grabbed his elbows and urgently lifted him to his feet just as a pair of ornate wooden doors dramatically swung open. From the shadows into the light strolled a weasel who looked like any other weasel, except that he was wearing a wizard costume. He took a seat at an enormous desk, motioned for everyone to be seated, then slowly shuffled through some papers. Never looking up or making eye contact, he drolly mumbled a spell over the gathering. "We are here today in the matter of JUSTICE OTTER, defend-ant. The defend-ant is presumed innocent until he is sent to prison for the rest of his life, which will happen later today. These proceedings are governed by our time honored policy. Now, how much does the defend-ant owe?" A tall thin weasel wearing suspenders stood up to address the Big Weas. His teeth were black and he talked out of the side of his mouth. He sounded angry. He pointed at Justice Otter with two fingers and growled, "This Otter used a large ship to ram a smaller sailboat. He did it while there was a family sleeping inside! We don't know why he did it. Maybe he wanted to capture people and keep them in a cage and make them wear chains and put bags on their heads."

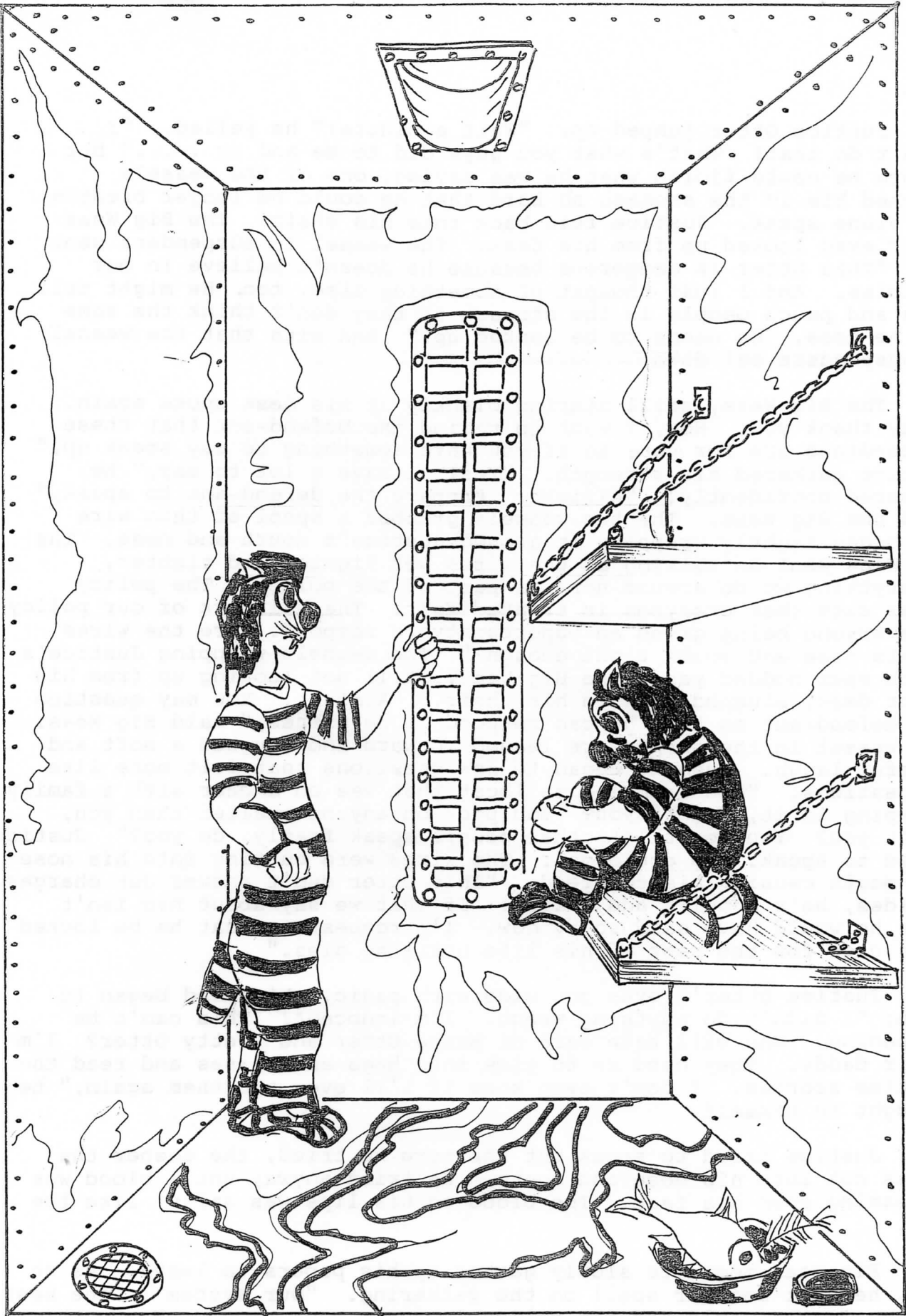
Justice Otter jumped up. "Wait a minute!" he yelled. "I didn't do that! That's what you guys did to me and my . . ." but before he could finish what he was saying, one of the weasels punched him in the stomach so hard that he could no longer breathe, let alone speak. Justice fell back into his chair. The Big Weas never even looked up from his desk. The weasel in suspenders went on. "This Otter is dangerous because he doesn't believe in our policies. And I just thought of something else, too. He might tell lies and punch people in the stomach if they don't think the same way he does. He needs to be locked up." And with that the weasel in suspenders sat down.

The Big Weas, still staring blankly at his desk spoke again. "Okay thank you. Now, I want to remind the Defend-ant that these proceedings are for you, so if you have something to say speak up." Justice gathered his strength. "Yes! I have a lot to say," he answered confidently. "Alright. Prepare the defend-ant to speak," said the Big Weas. The two weasels grabbed a spool of thin wire and began tightly wrapping it around Justice's mouth and nose. The Big Weas went on talking as the wires got tighter and tighter, "Everything we do around here is part of the policy. The policy makes sure that everyone is treated fair. The hallmark of our policy is everyone being given an opportunity to respond. Are the wires on his nose and mouth tight enough?" The weasels wrapping Justice's mouth shut nodded yes. The Big Weas, still not looking up from his giant desk, slumped back in his chair. "Alright. You may question the defend-ant so that he can respond if he wishes," said Big Weas. The weasel in the suspenders leaned forward and laughed a soft and hateful laugh. Then he began to ask questions that felt more like accusations. "You rammed a sailboat that was on anchor with a family sleeping in it, didn't you? You pick on anyone smaller than you, don't you? You don't let other people speak freely, do you?" Justice tried to speak. He could not. The wires were cutting into his nose and mouth causing him to bleed. "This Otter can't answer our charges. Besides, he's a bully and a liar! If what we say about him isn't true, he would have said so by now. I'm requesting that he be locked in a cage for the rest of his life until he dies."

Justice Otter's eyes got wide with panic. His mind began to race; "I didn't do anything wrong. I'm innocent! This can't be happening. Who will take care of Brave Otter and Pretty Otter? I'm their daddy. They need me to give them hugs and kisses and read them bedtime stories. I don't even know if I'll ever see them again," he thought to himself.

Justice tried to speak but the more he tried, the deeper the wires cut into his nose and mouth. He tried anyway until blood was streaming down his face. The blood on his lips was salty, like the sea.

Big Weas began to slowly gather up his papers to leave. As he did, he cast another spell on the gathering. "Our system is the best system in the world and the policy is never ever wrong. We on this ship value what people have to say even and especially dissenters.



That's what makes us so great. The policy says no ramming boats with bigger boats and the defend-ant does not deny that he did that and the policy says he should spend the rest of his life in a cage. It's not my decision. The defend-ant is turned over to the weasels to be kept for all his life in accordance with the policy. Now, let's go to lunch early today." The weasel in the wizard costume slipped back into the shaddows and the two big doors shut behind him with a thud.

Justice collapsed with sorrow and cried. He loved his son and daughter so much and he would never see them again now. His tears mixed with the blood and he tasted again the taste of the sea. His heart felt hollow and his mind felt numb. He sobbed as the weasels dragged him away.

They took him below, removed the chains, then shoved him into a dark cell. The door screeched, then slammed shut behind him. The crash echoed through the darkness. Then all was silent. As Justice's eyes adjusted to the darkness he saw that he was not alone. There was another otter in the cell, older than Justice, but still young. "What happened?" asked the older otter, in a soft even voice. Justice stumbled forward. The older otter stood up to meet him. Justice could see that the older otter was lean and fit under his tattered prisoner's clothes. The older otter gently unwound the wires from Justice's nose and mouth. "What happened?" he asked again. Justice had blood in his teeth and it hurt when he spoke, but he managed to form the words, "They said I can never see my children again." At the sound of his own voice speaking such a horrible thing, Justice Otter felt weak and started to stumble. The older otter hugged him and held him close as he steadied him from falling. The older otter said nothing, for there was nothing to say. He too had been attacked. He too had gone to the Big Weas. He too had wept for his lost children. He knew the pain that was in Justice Otter's hollow chest. There was nothing to say. There was Nothing to do. He lowered Justice to a mat on the little bunk next to his own and sat quietly by in understanding reverence.

Justice did not sleep that night. His bed was damp with sweat and tears. He cried out between sobs, "MY SON! HO MY SON!" Morning came, and darkness fled, but the sorrow clung to that cell like fog clings to a putrid bog.

Weeks turned into months and months turned into years. Justice Otter began to function and regain his strength, but he still could not sleep well. He would jolt awake from a nightmare and find himself alone in his cell. He would try to jolt himself awake from the nightmare of his cell, as he had the previous nightmare, but he could not. That cell, the loss of his family, it was all real. There was no waking up from that nightmare. Nonetheless, his mind refused to accept it, and the standoff continued. What was, and what should be, stood like gladiators toe to toe, neither willing to run, neither willing to fight.

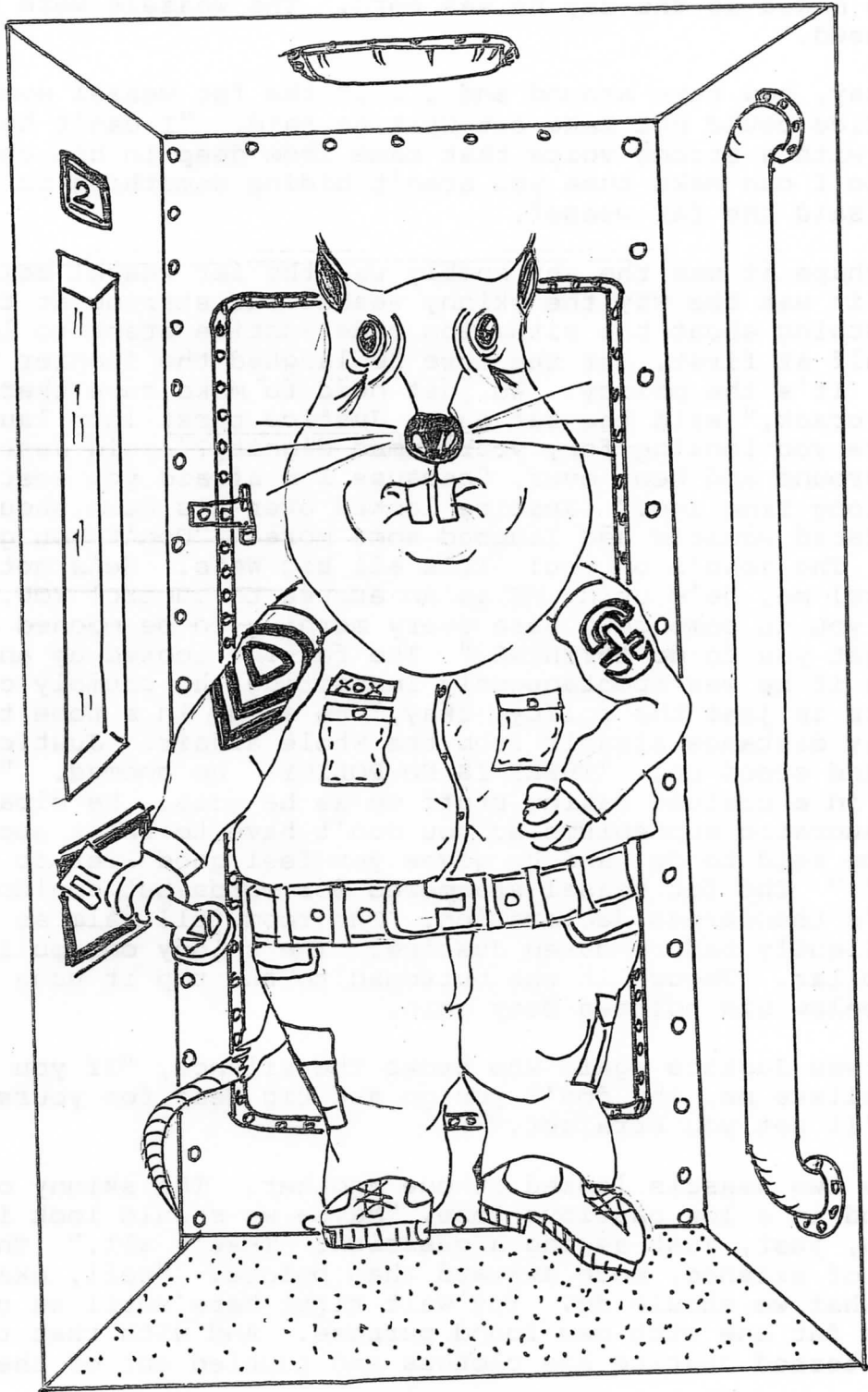
Justice resented the weasels who held him there. He hated the lifeless monotony in their faces as they fumbled through their meaningless tasks.

Every few days the weasels would take Justice for a shower. They would order him to stand up and face the wall. Then they would enter the cell and cuff his hands behind his back. Each weasel said the same ridiculous thing when they were putting the handcuffs on Justice, "This is for your safety." Every single time they came in they would say this. They would then lead Justice down a darkened corridor to another cage, one with a drain in the floor. They would order Justice to step inside the cage and get down on his knees. Then they would order him to lie down face first on the cold, wet, dirty floor. The tiles gave off a smell like sour milk and rusting iron. The weasels would stand over him and remove the handcuffs, then back out of the cage and slam the bars shut. Once the cage was locked, a weasel with a fire hose would order Justice to stand and face the bars as he unleashed the freezing cold blast of the hose. "Turn around!" he would order. The blast of the water would sting. It made Justice's skin feel like brittle wax.

This hosing ritual would end with Justice being thrown back in his filthy cell, no cleaner than he was before. He was cold, exhausted and humiliated, but try as they might, and cry tho he did, the little Otter's spirit remained unbroken.

Early one morning, when Justice was still sleeping, two weasels came for him. There was a fat one and a skinny one. The fat weasel led the way. He sort of waddled when he walked, as if his hips were fixed in place. His skinny sidekick followed behind him with a somewhat bashful stroll. "It's time to get up," said the fat one as he clumsily fumbled through his ring of oversized keys. Justice rose to his feet and straightened his tattered clothes. The fat one entered the cell, handcuffs in hand. As he approached Justice he said, with a tone of droning trepidation, "This is for your safety." Justice did not move. He looked at the fat weasel until he finally made eye contact. Justice saw a distinctive look in the fat one's eyes. It was self doubt. The two of them paused, eyes locked, for only a fraction of a second. But to them it felt like forever. Justice broke the silence, "Those aren't for my safety," he said matter of factly. The fat one stared at him, unable to answer. "Those handcuffs, they aren't for my safety. You can lie to yourself every time you put them on me if it makes you feel better about what you are doing. But you're not lying to me. I don't believe the lie you say out loud to yourself every time you come in here. Those are NOT for my safety." The fat one rocked side to side for a moment then said apologetically, "Well this is the policy. I don't know, I, I just obey the policy. That's all I know." Justice glanced up at the skinny one, clearly the smarter of the two weasels. He would not return Justice's gaze. The fat one ratcheted the cuffs around Justice's wrists. "I know that's all you know," said Justice in a genteel voice.

The pair of weasels led Justice to a small room, removed the cuffs, then ordered him to stand with his back to the wall facing them. The fat one grabbed a bag, held it out open in front of him, then he spoke. "Take off all your clothes and put them in this bag." Justice just looked at him. "This is the policy," the weasel continued, "it's a security inspection." Justice raised one eyebrow, looked at the bag, then back at the fat weasel. "Is that what the Big Weas told you?" he asked. The two weasels looked at one another but said



nothing. Justice sighed, removed his clothes and put them in the bag, then just stood there, sure footed, back straight, head held high, as naked as the day he was born. The weasels were clearly embarrassed.

"Okay, now turn around and . . ." the fat weasel mumbled something but Justice could not make out what he said. "I can't hear you," said Justice with a strong voice that came from deep in his chest. "Turn around so I can make sure you aren't hiding something in your butt crack," said the fat weasel.

Perhaps it was the shy mumbly way the fat weasel said it, or perhaps it was the way the skinny weasel was staring at the floor, but something about the situation made Justice start to laugh. Just to himself at first, but the more he laughed the funnier it became. "C'mon. It's the policy. We just need to make sure there's nothing in your crack," said the fat one. Justice burst into laughter. "What are you looking for, your human dignity?" said Justice as he turned around and bent over, "because I'm afraid you lost that for good a long time ago." Justice looked over his bare shoulder at the two redfaced weasels and laughed some more. "Don't you get it you morons? The joke's on you! It's all Big Weas. He's not using you to control me, he's using ME as an excuse to control YOU. If he can get you to come down here every morning to be mooned by prisoners, he can get you to do ANYTHING." The fat one looked up and to the left, as if he was spontaneously inspecting the crumbly ceiling. "Uh, this is just the policy, okay," he said, in a tone that seemed to subtly distance himself from the whole affair. Justice spun around and stood up. "THERE IS NO POLICY!" he boomed. "There's just a crook in a costume making stuff up as he goes. He cloaks his orders in bureaucratic euphemisms so you don't have to think about what you are being told to do, and he gives you feel good lies to repeat to yourself." The fat weasel stammered for words but couldn't reply to Justice's thunderous declaration. The room fell calm as the weasels stood silently before naked Justice. The skinny one pulled at his shirt collar. Though it was buttoned to the top it hung loosely, gaping below his pointed bony chin.

It was Justice again who broke the silence, "If you two weasels don't believe me, why don't you go ask Big Weas for yourself. I'm sure he'll set you straight."

The two weasels looked at one another. The skinny one spoke first and in a low cautious tone, "Maybe we should look into this. I, you know, just, just asking a question. That's all." There was another stretch of silence, more awkward than before. "Well, okay. I suppose that's what we should do. You wait right here until we get back," said the fat one with new found purpose. And with that the pair of weasels tossed Justice his clothes and bumbled out of the room.

No sooner had they left the room than Justice noticed that the big ring of oversized keys had been left hanging in the door. He lunged at the opportunity. He thought fast, he knew they would soon return looking for the keys. Justice, still naked, swung the heavy

steel bars shut. The loud screech and clang of the bars made Justice wince. If someone heard him he would be done for, but this was no time for trepidation. This was a day that called for moxie.

He reached through the bars and held them tightly shut as he twisted the key, locking himself in the cage. He then removed the keys. Working with swift and methodical efficiency he pried the keyring open and worked the key to his cell around the loop until it snapped loose. Sweat beads formed on his brow but his breath stayed slow and even. He bit the precious key in his teeth as he reached back through the bars with both hands and tried each key one by one until he found one that fit in the key hole. He left the keys there, hanging in the locked door minus the actual key to his cell. Justice quickly got dressed and hid the key in his sock. He wiped the sweat from his brow and took a deep breath.

Justice curled up in the corner and tried to sleep. Some time later a thud followed by a strange voice floated through the darkness. A door opened, flooding the corridor and cells with light. Three figures stood in the doorway, silhouettes illuminated from behind. Their movements caused long regular columns of light to jut into the dank dark cells like a hand groping blindly under a desk.

As the three figures came closer, Justice could see that it was the fat one and the skinny one. The third he did not recognize. He was small, no larger than a child, though his face was fat and droopy. The light struck his face as he turned, giving Justice a better look. He was bald on top with some stiff waves of black shiny hair just above his ears. His lips hung loosely to one side. He looked subtly confused as his eyes drifted back and forth, as if he was devising the next step in a long line of deceptive treachery. He walked with strides that were awkwardly large for a weasel of his size, though they were still smaller than a normal stride of anyone else. Without a word Justice could tell this one had pride. But it was not pride that was his own. It was borrowed pride, the most dangerous pride of all.

The three weasels walked to the end cell where the fat and skinny ones turned to face the light. Justice held back a gasp as they turned. They were badly beaten and had wires wrapped around their nose and mouth. The short one spoke to them. He slurred his speech and wagged his head from side to side. The distorted words dribbled off his lips like thick drool. "You ha been place under investigation to assess whether you pose a threat to the safety and security of the institution. I can na tell you how long you will be here but the Policy authorizes the use of other means nesissary if it is determen dat you coul pose a threat, now or at a later time." And with that the short little weasel ordered his fellow weasels into a cage. He slammed the door shut, which took all of his strength, then looked about frantically for the keys. Spying them hanging in the keyhole of Justice's cell, he moved for them. As he drew the keys from the slot, Justice stepped into the light. Looking him in the eyes Justice whispered "So you're locking your friends up now? Who's going to lock

you up?" Startled, the little weasel jumped, then shot back, "I'm not locking them up because they are my friends. The policy dictates the procedures for an investigation. I can na question the policy." Justice chuckled "You can't question the policy, eh? How do you know that?" The question tumbled around in the little weasel's head like ice in a blender for a moment or two before he answered, or at least tried to answer. "Without enforcing the policy everyone would just do whatever they wanted to do." This disconnected statement of fact in no way answered the question of why the little weasel couldn't question the policy. None the less, the little weasel rocked back on his heels with a sloppy grin of self-satisfaction. Justice folded his arms and scratched his chin, "Hmmm, people everywhere just doing what they want to do, what a nightmare. I'm sure glad you have these cages."

The little weasel was not very smart, but he was smart enough to know Justice was making fun of him. He did not like this. The system and the policies were his life, they were his power and his identity. He believed in them, because it was the only way he could believe in himself. He stood up on his tippie toes, poked out his little round belly and proudly declared, "If the policy instructed me to burn all of the otters alive in an oven I'd do it, because the policy is the law!" Justice was silent. The words of evil the little weasel had said were shocking, but not as shocking as the fact that he was so proud to say them. Justice stared at him with bewilderment and pity. "I'll die for the system, the policy, and Big Wease!" shouted the little weasel. To this Justice had no reply.

The little weasel walked over to the cage containing the other two weasels and spun the lock with a key. The sharp clack of the lock shot through the dim light. He secured the keys to his belt and walked past Justice. The two of them locked eyes but the stare was broken when, at the same moment, they smelled smoke.

Justice grabbed the bars and peered into the light. The little weasel dashed towards the door. Justice quickly pulled the key from his sock and reached through the bars to unlock his cage. Justice coughed. A rolling layer of smoke now covered the ceiling. It was hot and burned his eyes. The key was stuck! Justice took a firm hold on the bars and shook the door side to side with all his strength. Flakes of rust and grime fell out of the latch. The smoke was growing thicker. He let out a yell as he twisted the jammed key with all his might. It twisted about half way. Justice gave the door a kick, then twisted the key again. This time it gave way and the door opened.

Justice ran onto the deck of the ship. Flames were already climbing up the wooden masts. Several of the neatly furled sails were already on fire. Across the deck, Justice saw Big Weas through the smoke. He had a torch and was setting more fires to the rest of the ship. Justice crouched behind a barrel to hide as he looked on. Big Weas knocked out the glass in a window then tossed the torch through the gaping hole ringed by jagged shards. The interior of the room became visible as the flickering glow of flames grew brighter. Smoke poured out of the broken window frame like an upsidedown waterfall into the sky. It was evening and the smoke disappeared into the dusky sky.

Big Weas was hunched over and moved frantically in the fire light. With one foot on the ship's rail he stood over a pile of canvass bags and sea chests. One by one he heaved them over the rail into a rowboat. The bags and chests were overflowing with treasure! One bag ripped as Big Weas lifted it. A glistening arch of gold, gems, and pearls scattered across the deck and into the sea. The gold and silver coins fluttered through the water, reflecting the light from the blaze as they traveled down into the blackness that would soon receive the entire ship as well. Big Weas payed no attention to the loss. He simply grabbed the next bag and continued grumbling to himself as he loaded the rowboat.

The bald little weasel came darting out of the giant double doors of Big Weas' chambers. His eyes were red and he coughed as he held a rag over his nose. "I was looking for you, to save you! Quick, into the life boats," yelled the little weasel. But as the little weasel stumbled through the smoke he saw the rowboat loaded with treasure and Big Weas slinging the last chest over the rail. Astonished and confused, the little weasel walked up behind Big Weas. Without a word, without a sound, without a break in his rhythm, Big Weas spun around and stabbed a cold sabre blade into the little weasel's gut. He sank it to the hilt, until the full length of the long curved blade emerged from the little weasel's back. Justice gasped and felt a tingle in his finger tips as he watched the blade run the little weasel through and shine in the glow of the flames. The blade was wet, but somehow not bloody. The little weasel grabbed Big Weas forearm with both hands. The little weasel tried to scream, but only a silent breath rushed out of his open mouth. He tried to draw in another, but he could not. That breath was to be his last. He felt as cold as ice. He gazed into the face of Big Weas. He could smell his sweat and breath. Their faces were only inches apart, but Big Weas never looked into the face of the one whose life he was ending. He just put his foot on the little weasel's chest and with one long smooth kick pushed him off the tip of the sabre. The little weasel fell to the deck face down, his hands trembling in the darkness. Big Weas tossed the sabre to the side, where it clattered across the deck. Then he awkwardly tumbled into the treasure-laden rowboat and shoved off into the darkness.

The flames were now soaring into the night sky. The ship was listing badly to port and heavy chunks of burning rigging rained down on the deck. Justice narrowly dodged a heavy block and tackle as it crashed through the decking right where he had been standing. He took a deep breath and ran for the starboard rail. But as he was about to leap to safety something stopped him. He just went stiff. It was the thought of the two weasels still below and how they would burn alive in their cages. Justice had no time to think. He turned and ran to the little weasel, flopped his limp body over and struggled to free the keys from his belt. The lifeless face stared up at the burning ship. Justice, having freed the keys, paused momentarily in reverence, then with two fingers, as if pointing, gently closed the little weasel's eyes one by one. When he touched him, his words echoed through Justice's mind, "I'll die for Big Weas!" A deep sorrow swelled in Justice's throat. Just then the mizzen mast split with a loud crack like a bolt

of lightening. It crashed down to the deck. Justice ran into the now pitch black corridor of cages. He heard no noise. He feared the weasels were dead. Feeling his way to the back cage he called out, "Are you still alive?" No reply, but as he fumbled through the ring of keys, the weasels scrambled to the door. Justice was relieved to see them. He opened the door to the cage and with a few quick twists each, he removed the wires from both of the weasels' noses and mouths. "To the sea! There's no time to waste!" yelled Justice. The three of them ran on deck, flames licking their bodies. Justice squinted his eyes as the heat burned his nose and ears. He could smell his singed hair. Without breaking stride, Justice kicked off the rail and dove head first into the slate black water. The cool rush enveloped his body. The clap of the initial splash turned to a gurgle, then to a low rumble as the cold pressure squeezed him tight. He arched his back and curved back toward the surface. Making short fast kicks, he churned upwards, until he broke through the waves and drew in a deep breath.

The burning ship against the night sky was a spectacular sight. The moon was full and bright and the stars felt like falling snow. The flames danced with fury, sending a stampede of glowing embers heavenward. Much to Justice's dismay, neither of the weasels had jumped ship! They both just stood there tottering on the rail. "Jump!" yelled Justice. "We never learned how to swim," they yelled back frantically. "What!? Why not?" screamed Justice. "We were planning on staying on this ship!" came the reply. "My GOODNESS! ARE YOU SERIOUS? It looks like Big Weas took a lot more from you than just your gold and silver," shouted Justice over the roar of the inferno. "What do we do?" asked the skinny one. "Jump, or burn alive," retorted Justice with a firm voice. There was a moment of thought, then one after the other the weasels splashed into the water.

No sooner had they hit the water than they were each trying to climb the other to stay afloat. Justice, already a good ways off from the burning ship, called out to them, "You have to let go of others to swim! You can't stay afloat by sinking someone else! Come this way! Come this way!" It was no use. The two began to fight as they each clawed to take advantage of the other. The yelling turned to gasps, and then to coughs, and then fell silent. The weasels had each drowned the other, or perhaps they had each drowned themselves long ago.

Justice floated on his back and kicked his feet, putting more and more distance between him and the blazing ship, which burned long into the night, until it was not but a faint glow on the horizon and at last slipped beneath the waves. No trace was left of the mighty ship and its hallowed policies. All that remained was a few swirls of smoke that skimmed the surface of the silent deep, like secrets told to a dead man soon to be forgotten.

Justice gazed up into the great expanse of the night sky. The stars, by which he had sailed many a summer night, burned with a crisp brilliance that seemed to welcome him home. He turned westward

until the North Star was at his left. He paddled lazily along as the following sea carried him toward the morning. "Tomorrow," he thought to himself, "I will look for my son, for my daughter, for my family." And with that, a salty tear rolled down his cheek and into the salty sea.