

## WHY DOESN'T THE MOCKINGBIRD SING?

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*(3,400 words)*

The Hunt. Conquest. All else in the sleeping mind retreats, fading to blackness, only space and the game, the boats and the whales. Captain Kincairn stands in the plunging bow of the whaleboat, one leg braced against the gunwale, the other raised in the harpooner's stirrup.

The first mate's boat plows through the water alongside Kincairn's. Both race for the same quarry: eight blue sperm whales sighted in the morning light and pursued throughout the afternoon.

"Pull, you men—pull! Hard down with your tail, there. Break yourselves!" Kincairn's crew strains at their oars.

Charlie, the first mate, bullies his crew, determined to be the first to strike. He and his crew will take the first-strike bounty, or die trying. He grins spitefully as his boat edges ahead of Kincairn's.

"Faster!" Kincairn hisses. "God forgive your weak backs! Pull, damn you! Start your eyes out, you mother's bastards! Beach me on his back!"

Kincairn's crew presses their boat ahead of Charlie's. The whales are within striking distance. Kincairn rises full height and draws back his powerful left arm, his right arm forward, balancing him against the bucking waves. The steel-shafted harpoon is poised for flight.

Its swift, precise arc ends in the largest bull's hump, hitting solidly, so deep it barely quivers as the whale lurches forward.

"He's hit, by God!"

Charlie has also sunk his lance. The two boats are jerked across the waves by wounded whales.

"Oars, oars!" Kincairn cries. "Grip your oars, men, he's taking us for a ride! Swim, you god-forsaken phantom, you pull your hearse behind you."

The bull seems to hear Kincairn's words. In the tick of a second, his mad flight ends.

"He's ours!" Kincairn shouts, pulling at the slackened line. "Drag him in. Lay on with your hook, there. Haul in—haul in."

The bull turns. With one stroke of his monstrous fluke, he launches himself at the boat.

Kincairn's crew yammer in panic and tumble themselves into the sea. Kincairn stands rooted to his perch, staring as the mottled wall grows above him.

From a distance, he hears voices calling for him to jump. He tries but his body ignores his desperate impulse. Through the gray haze of panic, he is aware of Charlie's face. Grinning at him.

"No!" Kincairn screams. "Not yet!" He pitches himself out of the wooden coffin into the sea.

In the leisurely split-second before the gray death hits and water engulfs him, Kincairn hears a new sound through the roaring in his ears, a sound alien to the ocean world.

The mockingbird sings. Its song fills his mind, calling him back.

"No!" Kincairn fights the song. "Go away! I'm in control, damn you!"

The vision blinked off. Darkness. The bird chuckled its three notes.

No whale.                      The bird.

No death.                      The song.

Kincairn felt the capsule surround him. Anger tore him from the dream.

"Why does the mockingbird sing?" he demanded.

The metallic voice of the computer answered, "Pulse and respiratory rates had risen alarmingly."

"God damn it, Leo! That happens when you dream. I was in control. You had no right to interfere."

"Readings indicated great stress, thereby prompting interruption."

Kincairn knew the computer was right. His pulse was still rapid, his breathing erratic. The mockingbird was a warning.

"Your dreams are becoming increasingly violent, Kincairn."

"I know." Exhaustion triggered his dreaming. And his dreams, lately tortured with violence and anxiety, exhausted him further.

Tests on earth had determined the mockingbird song to be most soothing to Kincairn, with its myriad variations and tones. The bird sang to ease the effects of his enforced isolation. In the beginning, he had welcomed the warbled laughter. But recently, its repeated interruptions of his dreams had caused him to hate the song, to fear it. It sang when he lost control.

"I'm going to shoot that bird."

"You need exercise, Kincairn. It is essential." Deep within its circuitry, the computer activated a switch. Double rows of tensor handgrips descended from the ceiling.

From where he sat, looking forward through the parallel rows of exercise rings to the star-salted view screen, Kincairn could imagine himself seated on a celestial omnibus. The dearth of other passengers went unnoticed.

He released his harness and floated into the weightlessness of the capsule. One down stroke of his powerful arms propelled him straight to the nearest rings. The absence of both his legs eliminated the possibility of altered trajectory as he glided to the rings. His body maneuvered with ease in the confines of the capsule.

Kincairn was a test case in space exploration. He and men and women like him, double amputees or born without legs, were new recruits to a faltering space program. Reflective scientific minds at the Space Pioneer Institute meant to prove this new generation as the solution to the multi-year space flight dilemma: severe atrophy of the musculature due to increased duration of weightlessness. It was their hope that the non-legged (sans podal) astronauts would prove capable of enduring where their full-bodied counterparts had failed.

Locomotion in the small vehicle required little effort. To keep in shape, Kincairn practiced a strict regimen of tension twists and extensions upon the rings. He swung on the rings like a chimpanzee in the zoo, for the same benefit of exercise and limited amusement.

"How are you feeling, Kincairn?" the computer asked.

"Excellent, Leo. Tip top. See...no cause...for...alarm," he said between twists. "Let's have some music, for a little atmosphere."

The computer obliged. The sonorous voice of a French horn blanketed the walls.

"Nice choice. Now, how about lowering the temperature in here. Give me a little sensation of autumn." As he twisted, he allowed the music to bait his imagination. He saw himself coursing his way on horseback through the dusky half-light of a forest, breathing crisp, unpackaged air. He pivoted from ring to ring to the cadence of beating hooves.

"You need rest, Kincairn." The computer's voice drew him from his thoughts. "Your mental polygraphs indicate increasing fatigue."

"I'm fine, Leo."

"The readings—"

"To hell with the readings! I'm all right. If you'd quit butting into my sleep all the time I could get some rest."

"The sleep is not restful. Sleep should revitalize the system, not drain it."

"Don't worry about me. Look at my pulse now. No strain, not even after twice my normal workout. So ease off, Leo."

"You are tired, Kincairn. Mentally exhausted. I should awaken Charlie."

"No!" He paused. "There's no need to do that. Not now, not ever."

"You just registered great anxiety. Why? Do you fear Charlie?"

"No. There's just no need to wake him."

"Increasing anxiety. You fear him. Or is it the sleep you fear? Suspended animation is harmless, Kincairn. As a scientist, you know this to be true."

"I don't fear it. I just don't want it. Look, you're a programmed psychologist, aren't you?"

"Certainly."

"Then you should understand. I'm *living* now. For the first time since I lost my legs, I'm free. I'm no toad in a chair now. Legs don't matter in this world. If I'm put to sleep, I'll lose the little time I have to be whole."

The computer was silent. Panel lights flickered across its console like fleeting expressions of thought. "Your dreams," it spoke. "Why are your dreams stressors? Because you fear sleep?"

"Not at all." Kincairn pushed himself off gently from the rings. He free-floated while his body cooled. "In my dreams, I can do things I'll never be able to do again in my life. I always have two solid legs in my dreams. I'm not tied to the earth, strapped to a chair, a living bust of myself. You *know* what a person can do with legs?"

"It makes no sense to do those activities if they cause increasing stress on your system. Why do you wish to do them?"

"It's a challenge, Leo. You challenge yourself. You take your life in your hands and push yourself to the very edge, tempting your own death. For a short time, *you* determine whether you live or you die. It's electrifying. That isn't stress registering, Leo, it's exhilaration."

"Interesting. Stress. Exhilaration. Differing causes but with identical systemic results. You are running down your body's resilience, Kincairn."

Kincairn had no reply. The computer was right. It told him nothing new. He fought the obvious response. He would not give in. Charlie would have to wait.

Kincairn side-stroked to his chair. "Leo, play some Mahler. I'm in the mood for triumph. And heat this place up a bit."

The computer chose an appropriate recording. Kincairn settled back into his contoured seat and let the music sift through his mind. Mahler was a favorite of his.

He drifted into the silhouette world of pre-sleep.

Sun slants through the broad leaves of the jungle green. The moist heat clings to Kincairn's face, a wet handkerchief threatening to suffocate him. He steals his breath in quick hisses through clenched teeth. Sweat stings his eyes. The stripes will be difficult to distinguish in the patchwork light.

A faint rustle. Kincairn freezes. He feels its eyes upon him. To his left. There! He tightens his grip on the gun.

The tiger glides from the fan of leaves. Its amber eyes hold Kincairn's. Without fear. Kincairn shifts the gun. He aims between the yellow-brown eyes. Charlie's eyes.

The mockingbird chuckles.

Kincairn pulled out of the dream. Charlie, again! He swiped at his eyes.

"This is asinine!"

"What is asinine, Kincairn?"

"Shut up."

"You spoke. I responded."

"Don't you ever switch off?"

"Unlike you, Kincairn, a computer has no need for regeneration. My energy is self renewing."

"Why don't you go study stars or something?"

"I do so continuously. I am a multi-tasking unit, Kincairn. Had you forgotten?"

He had not. It was Leo X29, after all, which controlled the craft after launch. Kincairn was along as scientist/maintenance man. The title "Captain" was more honorary than functional. He had his scientific duties to perform with Leo's help, and often-unsolicited advice, according to Institute-established directives. His secondary duties concerned maintenance of the computer, the repair and calibration of equipment under Leo's instructions. The maintenance duties drove home the reality of his pseudo-command. The "captain" of the vessel was the computer's minion.

Kincairn gripped the back of his chair, elbows over his head, his back arched. That idea again. He had toyed with it before. Until then, the idea had been one conjured up by annoyance and dismissed as quickly as it had come.

But, why not? he thought. He's ... *it's* only a machine. I'm a *man*, damn it! He closed his eyes and concentrated on breathing evenly. No use giving Leo any warning. Take him by surprise. The only way, actually.

He pictured the complex circuitry. Just sever those lines necessary to take control from Leo. There's a manual override for everything, including Leo. Leave the rest of the system intact. No more Leo. Once he's executed....

What if it doesn't work? What if I slip up? Leo wouldn't slip. I'd be dead in a second.

"What's the trouble, Kincairn?"

I can't do it. Who am I fooling?

"Kincairn?"

"What!"

"You seem disturbed."

"Back off, Leo. I'm fine, okay? I'm just thinking. If that's all right with you."

"You are tense. You should relax."

Kincairn rolled his shoulders back against the seat, easing off his thoughts. "You're right, Leo. I'll do just that." He unbuckled his harness. "I'll ... I'm going to take a shower." Kincairn propelled himself into the adjacent compartment.

Against the wall opposite the sonic shower lay a silver casket. Pale violet light radiated from the seams and viewplate.

Charlie slept in that casket.

He had slept there since the beginning of the flight. Seventeen months. Leo was programmed to awaken Charlie when Kincairn showed signs of "debilitating exhaustion." This tag-team command was to continue throughout the expected twelve-year voyage. Or so it had been planned.

Kincairn had decided that Charlie would sleep the duration. The capsule was designed to maintain only the one astronaut at a time. Kincairn was determined to prevent Leo from effecting the trade-off. To do so, he had to filibuster, had to continue to convince Leo that he was fit and able to command.

If he slipped, Leo would waste no time in awakening Charlie.

Kincairn propelled himself around the cabin, his eyes fastened on the silver casket. He circled above the casket, in gradually tightening spirals, staring at Charlie's wax-like face beneath the viewplate.

Charlie! he spat in his mind. The spare drone. You're useless, Charlie. You're not a man. You're a damned useless, legless spare. Charles de Vane, the boy genius out in space. So sad, really. A brilliant mind, but withered legs. No one on earth would have you. You thought this would be your breakthrough, didn't you? Well, you'll be an old man by the time you get out of there, buddy-boy. I won't break. You knew that, too, before they put you under. I'm the one had the luck of the draw, boy. You knew then you'd lost it forever. I saw it in your eyes. Ha! Sleep, Charlie, you've got years ahead of you. Your hollow gray face isn't coming out of there this trip. You're as good as dead, Charlie-boy!

Kincairn hovered above Charlie's unit, his hands gripping the viewplate. A new idea forced its way into his thoughts. Kill Charlie.

Leo's not the threat. You're the one causing the problems. With you gone, Leo couldn't threaten me. "I could short out the plug right now, Charlie," he whispered fiercely at the sunken shadowed eyes. "You'd fizzle like a fried egg, and nothing you could do about it." Kill Charlie.

Charlie's eyes open. Waxen lips draw back over yellowed teeth as he opens his mouth to speak. His face presses against the faceplate as he struggles to sit upright.

Kill Charlie!

Kincairn grips the black cylinder plug above the faceplate, closing his eyes against the pulsing fog enshrouding his mind. He wrenches the plug. Charlie screams as his face bubbles.

The mockingbird sings.

Kincairn gasped. His palsied hands unclench from around the viewplate. Charlie's face slept peacefully beneath him. "Why does the mockingbird sing?"

No voice answered. The mockingbird soliloquized.

Dazed, Kincairn swung himself to the control room. He lowered himself into the chair and fastened the harness. His shuddering breaths made the straps difficult to grasp.

Christ! he breathed, what a dream. He had done it again, and hadn't even felt himself slip into it.

"Are you feeling better, Kincairn?"

He started. "Sure. Why not?"

"Why were you upset?"

He doesn't know! Of course he doesn't know. Leo registered anxiety readings, but couldn't interpret them. "I ... I thought something had happened to Charlie's unit. Thought it had short circuited, by accident."

"My instruments would have warned of any malfunction."

"I know. I just didn't think about that. I panicked."

"I assure you, Charlie's unit is functioning at one-hundred percent capacity."

"Christ, I thought he was a goner!" Kincairn could not help but smile. "What a tragedy that would have been. Let's have some music." Leo chose Liszt's *Les Préludes*. Kincairn settled back into his chair. He would take care of Charlie later.

"Why don't you sleep, Kincairn?"

"No, not yet. I'm too wound up. I have to do something, clear my mind. Gotta relax. Don't want to dream. What'll work? Puzzles. Mind games. That'll do it, Leo. I challenge you."

"To chess?"

"No way. I want a chance. Logic puzzles."

"That is no challenge. I can never lose. I know all answers to any questions you might create."

"True. So you ask me. If I answer correctly, I score a point. If I don't, you score."

"Accepted. What level?"

"Ah, intermediate. Start out easy."

"First puzzle: During the Korean War an officer fell asleep in the ruins of an old building. While he slept, he dreamed he was fighting a tank, which chased him through the street of a deserted village. At one point in the dream, he fell and helplessly watched while the tank rolled

towards him. Just at that moment, the walls of the bombed-out building in which he slept collapsed. He was not hurt by the crumbled wall, but his friends later found him dead. 'My god,' a fellow officer exclaimed, 'He thought the tank ran over him, and he died of fright!' What is wrong with this story?"

Kincairn smiled. "Too easy, Leo. The officer died in his sleep. No way anyone could know what he was dreaming."

"Correct. Your point."

"Give me something harder. Try Mensa level."

Leo challenged him with the dead midget in the circus, the naked man lying in a field holding an unlit match, the dead hiker with a pack on her back, and several others, each more difficult than the previous.

While he waited between questions, Kincairn drifted in the soothing tide of half-sleep, aware only of the pleasant background of music and the computer's whirring.

After seventeen questions, Kincairn had twelve points.

"One more," he said, "and then that's it." He was fighting hard to concentrate. "I think I'll sleep now." He stretched against his harness and relaxed.

The computer spoke, fraying the edges of his sleep. "Last question: I exist. But when you say my name, I no longer exist. Who am I?"

Kincairn nods slowly. "You exist. But if I say your name, you exist no longer?" He felt himself slipping into deep sleep and thought vaguely about fighting it. "Who exists and then doesn't?" He didn't know the answer. And, finally, he didn't care. He slipped into silence.

Winds shift across snow drifts. Whispering snow flurries. He sees the snow spiral off the drifts to snag on granite spurs. Ice needles slice into his skin, painfully spiking his frostbitten hands. Above him rises the chimney. Twenty feet to the peak. He will have to wedge himself into the chimney and back-walk up. He braces himself against the walls. Back and heels dig into the rock.

Each inch is pried from the rock. Life sweats out of him. He will be a shadow at the top.

Leg muscles tear away from the bone in the agony of effort. The boot heel doesn't catch. It slides an inch. No strength to pull it up. His back burns against granite. Where's his check? The rope hasn't gone taut. Check me! Whoever the hell's up there, check me!

The rope is slack. He stares down the chasm. Far below, an ink river cuts across a folded map.

He looks desperately to the peak, seeking his check. Charlie leans, grinning, over the edge of the chimney, in his hand the frayed end of the life line. With a three-note laugh, he tosses it into the abyss.

Jesus! I'm falling!

"Why doesn't the mockingbird sing?"

It isn't singing. "Leo, why isn't it singing? Wake me up, Leo!"

I can't move. Leo, my legs are melting. Help me!

"Why doesn't the mockingbird sing?"

He understands. A gentle laugh starts deep inside of him, building to hysteria as it rises. Tears pump through his eyes with the laughter. "You got me, Leo, caught me unaware. You traitor. And you woke Charlie! Didn't you? Bastard ... Charlie. I should have killed you ... will next time ... That music ... what's the music, Leo? I should know it ... wait ... *The Flying Dutchman*? ... ha, Leo ... that's almost funny ...."

Darkness strangles him. Circles of black pulse through his mind, thoughts of Charlie echoing through the spirals. Kincairn whimpers a laugh.

"How's he doing, Leo?"

"He's quiet now, Charlie. Readings are normal again."

"He's really fighting to come out of it, isn't he?"

"His dreams have become significantly more agitated."

"Is that dangerous?"

"Possibly."

"I guess we should wake him. It's been eleven months since launch. It's about time to trade off."

"Are you fatigued?"

"A little. I just thought I'd give Kincairn the helm for now."

"Very well. I will awaken him."

"So, guess this is it for a while." Charlie strapped himself into his silver sleep unit. "See you in a few months, Leo."

The whale's spume. The mockingbird sings. The tiger springs.

Kincairn broke from the suffocating sleep.

**The End**