

# The Gravity of Dreams

by Anna Tizard

*This short story was inspired by the Exquisite Corpse game result:  
“The fluffy cabbage fell on the flighty sleepwalker.”*

It was confusing at first, because the cabbage couldn't yet see, and it was only just beginning to hear things. There hadn't been much to think or do in the vegetable box but out here on the upper deck, there were sea-salt breezes ruffling its leaves, the ripple and slop of water against the ship's sides, and hands—so many hands.

For all the cabbage knew, it was being juggled by an eight-handed, four-headed monster, except that with each throw and catch it came to distinguish each pair as Meaty Hands, Long Fingers, Rough Nails and Sweaty. Long Fingers seemed particularly thoughtful in his handling of the cabbage between throws—not that the cabbage had any idea what sort of thoughts these might be—for its own ideas were only just waking. But the human had some sort of ragged waistcoat, and seemed fond of turning the cabbage thoughtfully between throws. Between this and the broken bristles of rope twine on the crew's grimy hands, the cabbage had grown positively fluffy.

“How long's our break?” This was Meaty Hands.

“Shut up and throw,” said Rough Nails. The cabbage winced.

“We can't let her float too long—this ship doesn't steer easy, turns about for nothing. Did you notice, last night? We were practically facing north again this morning,” said Meaty Hands.

“Word is, captain got it cheap.”

“He gets a pretty good deal out of us, too.”

“Yeah, but we do take certain liberties, don't we? I mean, here we are.”

“It's the modern way.” Long Fingers was fingering the cabbage again; the cabbage was surprised to hear a woman's voice, though almost as gravelly as the rest. “We have a right to take breaks. Even the waves have to break.”

“Where’d you get that from? *The Pirated Guide to Pirating?*”

The others all snickered, but the long-fingered pirate kept her chin up. “My pamphlet sells *exceptionally* well, thank you very much.” She waited for the others to murmur and raise eyebrows at her long word before she added, “Just don’t tell Boss... Please?”

There was a silence, filled only by the lap of waves against the sides of the ship. ‘Please’ was not a word commonly used by pirates.

This was all new to the cabbage who was beginning to develop a pair of ears, its outer leaves loosening and flapping with all the to-ing and fro-ing.

“Don’t worry,” Meaty Hands said at last, tossing the vegetable once more. “Captain’s not so fond of rules himself. So, what’s with the ship?”

“They say it’s haunted.”

There was a distinct moment when *the cabbage* became ‘Cabbage.’ It might have been here.

“You’re ‘avin’ a laugh,” declared Sweaty.

“Someone’s sleepwalking, that’s all,” said Meaty Hands.

“What, and turning the ship about, all on their own?” said Sweaty.

At this, Rough Nails laughed a weathered, salt-crusted laugh. “No-one’s going to sleepwalk ‘round here. Too knackered.”

“Yep,” said Long Fingers, but there was some hidden meaning in the way she said it. Her ‘Yep’ seemed to offer agreement at first, but the silence swelled between them, and there was no other sound but the creak of the ship, the lap of the water against the sides and soft cuff of the cabbage against calloused hands.

An unspoken, invisible tale stretched between them, carried on the wind with nothing but a ‘Yep.’

The now-ragged vegetable was starting to wonder if they weren’t all fretting about ghosts now.

“Reckon this cabbage is growing wings, look at this.”

“Yeah. Let’s not break it. Should probably go into tomorrow’s pot.”

Cabbage froze (this was difficult, bearing in mind it was mid-air). It didn’t want to end up in a pot! But the unsuspecting pirate had given it an idea.

There is nothing, nothing in this world that will change things like an idea.

At a flick of Meaty Hands’ fingers, Cabbage swooped in the longest arch yet until it bumped into the familiar, cold nest of carrots, potatoes and

other cabbages. It shivered: still whole, still itself, like these other, unsuspecting vegetables. The thick smell of stew wafted past, and Cabbage bowed its head and body (since they were one and the same thing) to those who that very afternoon had been chopped, and now simmered in a heated watery mess, all soft, and mixed with some sort of meat, it smelt like. Probably rat, all dried and stringy. Was there no escape from this destiny?

Back to their work, the crew hauled and yelled and sang, their voices no longer bound in Cabbage's mind by the sensations of grappling hands but floating free. Even so, as it listened, their voices seemed anchored, tangling together like the seaweed Cabbage somehow knew waved deep below.

And an idea stirred inside Cabbage, as if the vegetable's bulbous head had inner weeds within its own depths, nudged by currents unseen—but what did that matter now? It was just food waiting for the pot, wasn't it?

Evening drew its blanket around the world. A rabble of footsteps; spoons knocked on wooden bowls; more laughter, interspersed with chatter, and yawning.

The air turned quiet and cold and indigo.

Cabbage blinked. It could see! A low haze of white light misted over the deck. Cabbage could see no further, for the moon and stars, if there really were such things, were smothered by darkened clouds.

Someone whispered across the mist. A delicate voice, slippery through shadows. Perhaps it was Long Fingers, the pamphlet-writer, telling herself a story.

“Sleepwalkin' Mary. She walks upon the seas, barefoot over the whiskers of the waves, leaving a trail of salt crystals behind her. The wife of a sea captain. Died at sea, longing for home and never getting there. But the ship is her anchor. It never lets go.”

Blinking with its makeshift eyelashes (probably rope gristle), Cabbage could make out edges emerging from the cool vapour, lines of shifting silver like condensed winks of starlight. The voice faded as the almost-shapes dwindled into the fog.

A surge of something like desperation made Cabbage tremble. It opened its biggest leaves and flapped them. For a suspended moment, the mist billowed beneath it like clouds for an eagle, before it plunged into the cold whiteness. Perhaps this was flying, or perhaps the urge for adventure gave it just enough propulsion for an elongated leap. Either way, Cabbage was carried

only a little way, because it takes hope to leap but more than a little self-belief to go as far as you really want.

What Cabbage thudded onto—or more accurately, through—was a ghost-foot. That is to say, it fell onto the place where her foot would have been, were this human whole and alive. It was the wooden boards that thumped, but Cabbage flinched at the cold that wisped through its leaves.

“Has the moon fallen?” said the voice from somewhere above Cabbage.

“I’m not the moon!”

“But you’re glowing so!”

“Am I?” The moon-cabbage quivered, unable to comprehend this strangeness when there was so much else to observe. The ghost’s edges outlined her roughly, like silver crescents, scratched glow-marks that cupped her knees and legs and elbows, shivering with every movement.

“Where is the moon tonight?” she asked, lifting those twin points of light to the sky. Hair fine as spiders’ webs flowed behind the space where her head must have been.

“It’s cloudy,” said Cabbage. “I think.”

The ghost smiled, a glint of palmed silver. “A cabbage that thinks. I’ve never met anyone like you before.”

“And I’ve never met... Who are you?”

“Sleepwalking Mary. Or that’s how the story goes.”

“Don’t you remember?”

She gave a sad smile. “It’s getting harder to remember these days. The last crew used to tell my story, which made me more solid. I could walk out on deck in the daytime, then, not that anyone saw me.” She brushed a hand over her arm, a flint of light over a silken shimmer. “Now I keep the story alive on my own, but it’s not the same.”

“What difference would it make, if someone told your story?”

Mary sighed. “Oh, people are made up of all sorts of things. Beliefs and hopes... I used to hope I could be happy. I suppose, like a fool, I still do...” She gazed out to the black sea.

Cabbage rolled to the side, trying to get a better view of the ghost, but her features were lost in the night sky. “Why can’t you? You could go anywhere you want.”

“I try, but I’m bound to this ship. It’s something to do with being a ghost—where you died. But I can still do *some* things. Like turning this ship about.” She smiled a crescent moon of a smile. “Even those that don’t remember me say that if you’re lost, just let the ship do its own thing and she’ll take you home. But it only works if you come from Cornwall.”

“The pirates were talking about that. So you can really do that?”

“Not completely on my own,” she said. “The story must be told, and believed in, by more than just me. She doesn’t know it, but the Long-Fingered pirate sometimes buoys the ship with her dreams, so that it hovers over the water.” Mary looked down at Cabbage. “It’s a strong dream that can lift a ship.”

“But how?”

“Her dream curls out from under her pillow, full of blues and greens. It wraps around the ship and the vessel rises, just a little.” She held out her palms, to lift an imaginary weight. “It’s the suspension of disbelief.”

“The what?”

“The suspension,” the ghost quivered her open hands against the air, then touched the side of her head, “of disbelief.”

The sea nudged against the silence. The very night air seemed suspended; the stars floating impossibly, with nothing to hold them.

“As a ghost, I’m privy to the gust and flow of human thoughts. But they show up better at night, for they are delicate things to behold.”

Cabbage rolled through the fog. “Is that what this is?”

Mary shook her head. “The pirate doesn’t dream much tonight; this is all mine, my thoughts that come out to haunt me. I’d rather you didn’t get caught up in them... It must be cold down there.” Mary scooped up Cabbage. Cradled in her arm, the vegetable could see the dark bob and nudge of the water. Tiny trickles of blue and pink clouds danced over it.

“What are those funny colours hovering over the sea?”

“The thoughts of fish... Oh!” She caught her breath and stared at Cabbage. “You can see those? The thoughts of the living?”

Cabbage considered this. “There’s not much of me, but I listen with my whole body. I think, even before I was able to hear and see, I listened. Maybe that’s got something to do with it?”

“You are an observant cabbage.”

Cabbage blushed deep under its criss-crossed leaves. But there were more urgent things to consider.

“I need to get off this ship, too. There must be a way. Surely, as a ghost, you could fly to Cornwall?”

“I’ve tried. But this ship is where I found myself—and where my yearning began. I never appreciated home before I set out to escape it.” Sadness clouded Mary’s voice, and her see-through face. Tears remembered themselves in tiny silver rivulets.

“Don’t cry!” said Cabbage. “I don’t know if you heard, but I’m going to end up in tomorrow’s stew if I don’t find a way off this ship tonight!”

Mary gasped. “Then we must think, quickly! Think like we’ve never thought before.”

The ghost wafted back and forth over the deck. Cabbage rolled here and there, trying to join in in case this movement helped, and flapped its leaves a few times. If only it could actually fly—but it would need so much more propulsion, to rise and rush over these seas like a bird.

A single pirate lifted the ship enough to turn it around in the night. How many storytellers would it take to suspend Cabbage and Mary all the way back to England?

Cabbage was about to ask Mary how many pirates were on this ship, when it caught sight of an ethereal thread, twisted around one of the ropes tethering the mainsail.

“What’s this?” said Cabbage, wiggling and pointing with a leaf.

“Ah,” said Mary. “The way my thoughts snake around the ropes and pulleys, and sail, too. It’s no wonder I can’t get off this ship.”

But Cabbage saw a wink of blue. “They’re not all yours. There’re daydreams here, if I’m not mistaken. From the crew as they work. And scraps of song.”

They peered closer. Wisps of purple-green snagged around the corners and edges of things. The cloudy letters of “Hey, ho” trickled around the pulley. As Cabbage reached out a leaf, the word “Mary” struck out and hissed like a snake.

“They *do* talk about you. At least, about a ghost...I wonder. Is it possible their thoughts have kept you here, as much as your own? They hardly think of you as a person, it’s more like a haunting of the ship. You and the ship go together, in their minds.”

“...and in their daydreams,” said Mary, a distant look on those pinprick-star eyes. “My. I suppose you’re right. I’m anchored here by their

stories. It's a wonder they can't see or hear me." Mary's edges quivered with the possibility. "I've tried enough times to wake them. But perhaps I'm nothing more than an imprint of who I once was, a gathering of thoughts which they cannot perceive..."

"Don't say that!" cried Cabbage. "You're more than just thoughts. And you said yourself, these can be powerful. Don't forget, we have a storyteller on board."

Before Mary could react, Cabbage bounced down into the lower deck and, with difficulty, roused Long Fingers with a bump and a whistle it made by blowing through the thin breaks in its ragged leaves. The pirate rubbed her face then jolted at the sight of the whispering vegetable.

"Come on to the upper deck, Long Fingers! Now!"

Cabbage rolled ahead and the pirate staggered after. "Am I dreaming?" she whispered as the ghost floated closer. Perhaps it was the pirate's half-dreaming state that let her eyes perceive the ghost.

"If that makes this easier, then yes, you are dreaming," said Mary. "But please—we need your talent tonight. Will you tell a story of how a cabbage and the ghost of Sleepwalking Mary—that's me—floated out over the sea and back to Cornwall?"

"Is this really just a cabbage?" said Long Fingers, once she could tear her terror-struck face from the ghost and stare through the vapour at her feet, "or is this the fallen moon?"

Mary smiled. "I thought that too, didn't I, Cabbage? You really are glowing."

The vegetable tried to look at itself, rolling back and peering at its sides.

It was true. It glowed like a giant, half-opened rose bud, white and hazy.

"Perhaps it's my thoughts," it said. "I've been having quite a few, and they haven't had time to leave my head."

The pirate considered this, tapping a finger to her lips. "But the moon would be a good start to a story, if you want to be in the sky. A sweet, pale cabbage believed it was the moon's twin, and floated up to meet its celestial sister."

Cabbage's leaves ruffled with pride. It looked down to find it was hovering three inches off the deck. "Keep going! It's working!"

“But you can’t go without me!” said Mary. “How am I supposed to fly?”

Long Fingers cast about for an idea. If only she could see thoughts as clearly as Cabbage and Mary could, she would have realised she was surrounded by ideas, songs and daydreams, though none of them might have been right for what she needed.

Cabbage spotted it before the pirate did. “Mary, grab that cleaning rag, over there by the bucket, and wrap it over me. Let’s see if I can carry you up. You don’t weigh much, do you?”

Mary made a loop of the rag and leapt up, hooking it over the cabbage, but there they floated, the ghost’s feet dangling in the mist.

“Please,” she said to the frozen, gaping pirate. “Will you suspend your disbelief for us?”

Long Fingers blinked, a frown slowly forming on her brow as if something strange was beginning to make sense.

“Tell the story,” said Cabbage.

The pirate cleared her throat. “And so the cabbage rose up over the sea, carrying the ghost with it...”

Jostled about by an uncertain wind, the ghost clung to the rag around Cabbage. Neither of them knew how long belief alone could carry them, but they had each other, and there wasn’t much else they could do but try. They didn’t dare speak or look behind them until they guessed the ship was far out of sight. It was then they began to tell each other the same story over and over, knowing that if the pirate’s suspension of disbelief failed at any time or if she lost her train of thought, they’d have nothing but each other to keep their story buoyant.

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It was for some time that Long Fingers stared after the spectacle. As the ghost faded from view, the cabbage glowed on until the pirate began to half-convince herself that she herself had been the legendary sleepwalker all along, wandering out on deck after dreams that made barely any sense. As she began to turn away, her thoughts turning to her warm blanket, the moon dipped suddenly, and Long Fingers caught her breath.

That was no moon! It had all been real, after all.

In the morning, the crew blinked awake, but no-one with eyes as bright as the long-fingered pirate. The ship hadn't turned about in the night, in fact, the Portuguese shoreline, their long-awaited destination, was already visible.

After that, the ship steered more easily. The crew was quieter than usual, under a clear sky that seemed strangely bright, lighting up a ship that seemed cleaner than before. As she worked and smiled to herself, Long Fingers knew exactly what she'd write and print next: *A Pirated Guide to Seaborne Hauntings*.

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Stories are born of unlikely yet resonant connections. Anna Tizard used to go after them with a net, a jam jar and a pen, but since she discovered the Surrealist word game of Exquisite Corpse, she has everything she needs. Play it, and seek with her, at [www.annatizard.com](http://www.annatizard.com). You may even inspire the next story in *The Book of Exquisite Corpse*.