

## Commodore Sergeant

At the end of September, when the leaves were starting to turn, and geese could be seen nursing by the rivers in between their flights south, Thomas Shepherd noticed that his 14-year old son, Miles, was sleep walking. He awoke one night to the sound of the garage door rattling open, and when he went downstairs to investigate, he saw Miles standing sleepily by his new sailboat, a 14-foot Capri bundled up in a large blue tarp.

“Miles?” Thomas said, shivering from the wind blowing in through the open garage door. Dull moonlight shone off the lake beside their house.

Miles turned around, dazed, in a half-state.

They both stood in silence, and then Miles said through sleep, “Sergeant wanted to go out.” “What?” Thomas said.

But Miles suddenly turned and re-entered the house, his eyes completely closed. On his way upstairs to his room, he swayed uneasily on the steps.

Thomas hovered behind him like a ghost, ready to catch him if he fell. He followed his son into his room and watched him get back into bed. Afterwards, he walked down the hall and made sure that Casey, Miles’ younger sister, was asleep as well. He returned to his own room, lay down, and closed his eyes.

The next morning, Miles and Casey were eating cereal at the kitchen counter.

Miles didn’t mention anything about his sleepwalking, and Thomas assumed that he didn’t remember it. He started his usual pot of coffee, which always helped him get into the swing of things in the morning, even though it was only decaf.

Miles and Casey were starting to lag in the mornings. With the school year well into September, the excitement from the first few weeks of school had already faded.

Thomas ushered them out of the house just in time to catch their bus. He had only had time to make Casey’s lunch, and he handed her the brown-paper bag. He slipped a five-dollar bill into Miles’ jacket pocket and told him not to worry about the change.

Once they had gone, Thomas went into the backyard. He walked to where their lawn met the lake and knelt by a small collection of stones on the border, the makeshift grave for their black lab, Sergeant. Thomas dusted the leaves and dirt off the stones and rearranged them into a neat pile.

Sergeant was not there.

They had not been able to recover his body from the lake back in August, when Miles had taken him sailing with him, as he always did.

The boat had capsized, and the poor dog had gotten trapped under the sail.

It had been the last week of summer before school. Thomas was just starting dinner when he heard Miles calling him from the backyard. He looked through the kitchen window and saw his son, wet and shivering, running across the lawn.

Thomas ran out of the house and crouched beside his son. “Are you alright? What happened?”

“He’s under the sail, Dad. He’s caught in the ropes, I couldn’t get him,” Miles sobbed.

At first, Thomas didn’t understand that Miles was talking about Sergeant. He was so shaken that he thought Miles was talking about himself. “You’re fine, you’re here,” Thomas said. “Where’s the boat?”

Miles wept and wept. “It’s with Sergeant,” he said. “It’s in the lake. I don’t know where.”

Thomas finally understood that the dog was gone.

Thomas had gotten the used boat off one of his buddies at the yard in exchange for some extra shifts. He had towed it home with his truck and showed it to Miles after his first day of school.

When Miles saw it, he petted its smooth finish and touched the sail sheet. He said, “Thank you,” and then he went upstairs to do homework.

The boat had remained under its tarp for weeks. Miles hadn’t put it in the water once, hadn’t even touched it.

That’s what Thomas had thought, at least.

He ran his fingers along the stones one more time, then got into his truck and went to work.

Casey had finally given her class presentation on Einstein and was now making an effort to work relativity into every conversation she could.

“Did you have a good day at school?” Thomas asked at dinner that night.

“In a sense,” Casey said. “Miss Greer didn’t let us play foursquare because Chris broke his glasses playing yesterday. But Sarah brought in cupcakes for her birthday, so relatively speaking, it was a good day.”

Thomas entertained more questions. Miles was quiet.

“Does your teacher think you’ve been behaving well?” Thomas asked.

“In a sense,” Casey laughed.

“Any cute boys in your class?”

“Ew, no!”

“Not in any sense?”

“Dad, stop!”

“Ok, sorry I asked. Let’s see... is the book you’re reading for class hard?”

“In a sense.”

“Was it cold today?”

“In a sense.”

Miles glared at Casey. “Will you stop saying that?” he said.

“Hey—” Thomas said, but Miles crossed his arms and set his eyes forward.

“Never mind,” Miles said.

“Crankeeeey,” Casey sang.

Normally, Miles would be back from an afternoon of sailing. He would be excited to tell them about his day. And whenever Thomas would look down at the newspaper, Miles would feed Sergeant scraps of food under the table.

They ate the rest of the meal in silence. When they were finished, Miles cleared the table and then excused himself to do homework, leaving Thomas and Casey to do the dishes.

“Think your brother’s had a tough day?” Thomas asked, turning the faucet on. He wondered if something had happened at school.

“In a sense,” Casey said.

That night, Thomas couldn’t sleep. He went downstairs, made himself a sandwich, and ate it standing in front of the fridge.

The dim kitchen was half-illuminated from the hallway light, and Thomas squinted at the memorabilia on their fridge as he chewed: a magnet from Miles’ elementary school, past report cards, colored pencil drawings, an on-going grocery list, and a picture of Miles and Casey’s mother when she was in college.

Her thin lips framed a wide smile, and her eyes glimmered kindly at the photographer, another ivy league student. Thomas hadn’t even gone to college. He always joked that she had taken pity on him.

Anna had died in a car crash shortly after Casey was born, when Miles was four. As hard as it was, Thomas had been grateful that his children were too young to be fully aware of what was happening around them, even though they were in the middle of it. Casey never knew Anna, and Miles could only recall her in bits and pieces.

Thomas had gotten the black lab for Miles’ fifth birthday, a new addition to the family after the loss. Sergeant had been a family dog, as most dogs are, but he truly belonged to Miles.

Thomas heard some shuffling upstairs. He put his sandwich on the counter and stood in the doorway of the kitchen.

Miles slowly made his way downstairs in his boxers and T-shirt. His eyes were closed, and his head was tilted upward like he was following a scent.

Thomas stepped aside and let Miles explore the space. “Evening,” He said.

“Mmhm,” Miles said, padding around the kitchen.

“You’re up late.”

“I’ve got...something. To do,” Miles said slowly. He turned and walked through the side door into the garage.

Thomas followed him, fascinated at his son’s ability to navigate the house so well while he was asleep.

They were both in the garage again. Thomas watched Miles approach the sailboat in the darkness. Miles pulled off its tarp and petted its side.

“Let’s go...to the water,” Miles said.

“We can do that tomorrow.”

“Now,” Miles said.

“It’s too dark right now –”

“Where’s Sergeant?” Miles suddenly asked.

Thomas wasn’t sure how to respond.

Miles moved around the garage and called for the poor dog.

“He must be outside already,” Thomas offered.

Miles hugged his arms close to his chest and whimpered, switching between soft moans and gasps. “He’s outside?” He said between breaths. “It’s so cold.”

Thomas put his hand on Miles’ shoulder.

Miles dropped his arms and returned to a neutral state.

Thomas led his son back into the house, up the stairs, and into bed. He tucked Miles in like he used to when he was younger. When he left, he couldn’t resist leaving the hall light on.

Miles used to ask him to do that.

Thomas went back downstairs to put the tarp back on the sailboat and clean up the kitchen. The whole time he was trying to remember when Miles had stopped asking him to keep the hall light on.

Around noon the next day, Thomas got a call from Miles’ school asking him to come in. He got one of his buddies to cover for him and took his truck down to the school.

He walked down the tiled hallway in search of the principal’s office, something he had not done since he had gone to school. He had to double back down a hallway with green lockers after he overlooked the door marked “Main Office.”

The secretary led Thomas into the principal’s office.

Miles was sitting in the corner while the principal did paperwork.

“Good afternoon,” Thomas greeted the principal.

“Ah, Mr. Shepherd,” the principal said. He had a round face and very thick fingers. He shook hands with Thomas and invited him to sit down. He explained that Miles had been cheating off of other students’ math homework for the past few weeks, and that his teacher had caught him copying his friends’ answers during study hall.

“I find that a little hard to believe,” Thomas said. “Miles comes home every day and does homework for hours.”

“Does he do it in front of you?” The principal asked. “Are you able to monitor him?”

“Well, no, he’s in his room,” Thomas said, looking at Miles.

“His teachers say that they see him doing his homework regularly in homeroom and other classes. I want to stress the importance of doing homework *at home*. If accommodations need to be made to better suit Miles’ needs, then you let me know, but I’m assuming he can do an hour or two of homework at home, *undisturbed*.”

“No accommodations necessary,” Thomas said, rubbing his eyes. “I’ll make sure he gets his work done before coming to school.”

Thomas looked at Miles and gestured towards the door. “I think we’ll go home early today,” he said. “Get a head start on that homework.”

In the car, Miles was quiet.

Thomas wasn't sure what to say. "Is this about —" he started.

"No," Miles said.

They were quiet for a couple of seconds.

"If you're not doing homework, what are you doing up there in your room all night?"

Thomas asked.

"I don't know, Dad," Miles said. "I like reading, or just relaxing. If I go downstairs, Casey will bother me. And I'm just bored a lot of the time."

"Weather's still good. You could go sailing," Thomas ventured.

Miles leaned back in his seat. "Not likely," he said.

They stopped at a diner for lunch, and Thomas told Miles he could order whatever he wanted.

Miles wanted French fries along with a chocolate shake to dip them in.

An interesting combination, Thomas thought, but he ordered it without objecting. He watched Miles dip French fry after French fry into the drink. "It's alright to feel sad about things," he said suddenly.

Miles didn't look up from his food. "It's fine, Dad."

Thomas imagined how guilty Miles felt about Sergeant, and how close Miles himself came to drowning that day. All he could do was buy his son a snack.

When they got home, Miles went upstairs to do homework.

"Show me it when you're finished," Thomas said.

Casey came home soon after and drew with markers at the kitchen table while Thomas prepared dinner.

When the food was ready, Thomas called Miles to come downstairs to eat, but Miles said that he was still full from the diner. Thomas decided not to push it.

It was just him and Casey for dinner. As always, she struggled to finish her broccoli.

"Is broccoli *really* that good for you?" she asked.

"In a sense," Thomas winked.

"You can't say it!" Casey said.

"Sorry, sorry," Thomas laughed. "Didn't realize the phrase belonged to just you."

"Not anymore, really," Casey said. "I'm a trend-setter. It caught on."

"Oh?"

"The other kids, they say it all the time now."

After they finished eating, Thomas let Casey continue drawing with her markers. He went to the bottom of the stairs and called up to Miles to help him clean up.

Miles didn't reply.

Thomas went up the stairs and stood outside of Miles' room.

He had been in there long enough.

Thomas knocked on the door. “Miles?” he said. He heard papers shuffling and movement around the room.

“I’m finishing my math homework, like I’m supposed to,” Miles said. “I’ll be down in a minute.”

“You can take a break and help me wash the dishes.”

“In a minute.” There were more papers shuffling.

“What’s really going on in there?” Thomas asked.

There was more silence, and then Miles said, “I’m not feeling well. I think it’s the diner food.”

“I’m coming in,” Thomas said.

“No – ”

Thomas opened the door and walked into Miles’ room. There were two open textbooks on his desk and lots of papers scattered around the floor. Miles sat in the middle of it all gripping a spiral notebook and a pencil.

“I don’t get it,” Miles said, his head bent towards the floor. “I don’t get this math. I’m too stupid.”

“No, you’re not,” Thomas said, moving towards Miles.

“I’m sorry you had to leave work to come get me,” Miles said.

Thomas stopped in the middle of the room. “Don’t worry about that.”

“It was stupid. They didn’t need to call you.”

“Well, I’m glad they did.”

“Why?” Miles asked. He wiped his nose with his sleeve.

“I got to spend some extra time with you – ”

“Why would you want to do that?” Miles said.

“What are you talking about? If you needed help with math, I could have – ”

“I’m a cheat at math. And I capsized the sailboat. I killed Sergeant.” He was stifling tears as best as he could. “Can you leave?” He said. “Can you please leave?”

Thomas hesitated, but then nodded and left the room. He decided to go back to the kitchen to sit with Casey, but he only made it halfway down the stairs before he stopped and sat down.

That night, Thomas stayed up in bed, listening. He wanted to make sure that Miles wasn’t crying or staying up and trying to finish his homework so that he wouldn’t get caught in homeroom.

Sometimes, Thomas felt like he could hear papers shuffling, or Miles sniffing. Mostly, though, it was just a dog’s howl, or his own breath.

And then it was a door creaking open, and footsteps walking down the hallway.

Thomas flew out of bed and stumbled to his door, opening it just in time to see Miles disappearing downstairs. Thomas followed him through the kitchen and into the garage again. He switched on the light, and the boat, its tarp, and Miles came into full view. “Miles,” He said, “everything’s ok.” But his son was asleep, tugging feebly at the tarp.

Thomas walked to the other side of the boat and pulled the tarp off completely, and then he opened the garage door.

It rose noisily, and Miles took a step back.

Thomas picked up the handle that was connected to the boat's lift. "Come on," he said to both Miles and the boat. He pulled hard, and the lift's wheels turned slowly.

Thomas towed the boat out of the garage and into the driveway, towards the lake. Specks of gravel kicked up behind him at first, and the wheels rumbled noisily. But once he made it on to the lawn, the grass quieted everything down. Wind was coming from the lake and rustling the trees.

Thomas brought the boat to the water's edge and lowered it off the side of the thin wooden dock. He secured it with rope and finally stood up to look behind him. "Miles!" He called.

The boat was rocking gently. Everything was dark blue and grey, except for the bright yellow light coming from the garage.

Miles was standing by its open door.

Thomas was sure he was awake now.

"It's alright." He said.

And finally, Miles made his way to the edge of the water.

Thomas had so many memories of Miles walking towards the dock with Sergeant right beside him. They combined to form a single picture. In it, Miles wore swim trunks and a T-shirt. He cradled a life-vest in one hand and Sergeant's tennis ball in the other. Sergeant ran ahead, getting ready to hop in the boat and wait for Miles to cast off. A perfect snapshot, like the picture of Anna on the fridge.

Now, Miles walked towards the sailboat alone. He made his way across the yard, his slim frame silhouetted by the shimmering lake.

Tiny stars watched them from the sky. Everything looked like a dream. But the wind was real and fast. And the night was dark and alive.