In Heart of the Sea

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

Nantucket

IT WAS, HE LATER REMEMBERED, "the most pleasing moment of my life"—the moment he stepped aboard the whaleship *Essex* for the first time. He was fourteen years old, with a broad nose and an open, eager face, and like every other Nantucket boy, he'd been taught to "idolize the form of a ship." The *Essex* might not look like much, stripped of her rigging and chained to the wharf, but for Thomas Nickerson she was a vessel of opportunity. Finally, after what had seemed an endless wait, Nickerson was going to sea.

The hot July sun beat down on her old, oil-soaked timbers until the temperature below was infernal, but Nickerson explored every cranny, from the brick altar of the tryworks being assembled on deck to the lightless depths of the empty hold. In between was a creaking, compartmentalized world, a living thing of oak and pine that reeked of oil, blood, tobacco juice, food, salt, mildew, tar, and smoke. "[B]lack and ugly as she was," Nickerson wrote, "I would not have exchanged her for a palace."

In July of 1819 the *Essex* was one of a fleet of more than seventy Nantucket whaleships in the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. With whale-oil prices steadily climbing and the rest of the world's economy sunk in depression, the village of Nantucket was on its way to becoming one of the richest towns in America.

The community of about seven thousand people lived on a gently sloping hill crowded with houses and topped by windmills and church

towers. It resembled, some said, the elegant and established port of Salem—a remarkable compliment for an island more than twenty miles out into the Atlantic, below Cape Cod. But if the town, high on its hill, radiated an almost ethereal quality of calm, the waterfront below bustled with activity. Sprouting from among the long, low warehouses and ropewalks, four solid-fill wharves reached out more than a hundred yards into the harbor. Tethered to the wharves or anchored in the harbor were, typically, fifteen to twenty whaleships, along with dozens of smaller vessels, mainly sloops and schooners, that brought trade goods to and from the island. Each wharf, a labyrinth of anchors, try-pots, spars, and oil casks, was thronged with sailors, stevedores, and artisans. Two-wheeled, horse-drawn carts known as calashes continually came and went.

It was a scene already familiar to Thomas Nickerson. The children of Nantucket had long used the waterfront as their playground. They rowed decrepit whaleboats up and down the harbor and clambered up into the rigging of the ships. To off-islanders it was clear that these children were a "distinctive class of juveniles, accustomed to consider themselves as predestined mariners. . . . They climbed ratlines like monkeys—little fellows of ten or twelve years—and laid out on the yardarms with the most perfect nonchalance." The *Essex* might be Nickerson's first ship, but he had been preparing for the voyage almost his entire life.

He wasn't going alone. His friends Barzillai Ray, Owen Coffin, and Charles Ramsdell, all between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, were also sailing on the *Essex*. Owen Coffin was the cousin of the *Essex*'s new captain and probably steered his three friends to his kinsman's ship. Nickerson was the youngest of the group.

The *Essex* was old and, at 87 feet long and 238 tons displacement, quite small, but she had a reputation on Nantucket as a lucky ship. Over the last decade and a half, she had done well by her Quaker own-

ers, regularly returning at two-year intervals with enough oil to make them wealthy men. Daniel Russell, her previous captain, had been successful enough over the course of four voyages to be given command of a new and larger ship, the *Aurora*. Russell's promotion allowed the former first mate, George Pollard, Jr., to take over command of the *Essex*, and one of the boatsteerers (or harpooners), Owen Chase, to move up to first mate. Three other crew members were elevated to the rank of boatsteerer. Not only a lucky but apparently a happy vessel, the *Essex* was, according to Nickerson, "on the whole rather a desirable ship than otherwise."

Since Nantucket was, like any seafaring town of the period, a community obsessed with omens and signs, such a reputation counted for much. Still, there was talk among the men on the wharves when earlier that July, as the *Essex* was being repaired and outfitted, a comet appeared in the night sky.

NANTUCKET was a town of roof dwellers. Nearly every house, its shingles painted red or left to weather into gray, had a roof-mounted platform known as a walk. While its intended use was to facilitate putting out chimney fires with buckets of sand, the walk was also an excellent place to look out to sea with a spyglass, to search for the sails of returning ships. At night, the spyglasses of Nantucket were often directed toward the heavens, and in July of 1819, islanders were looking toward the northwest sky. The Quaker merchant Obed Macy, who kept meticulous records of what he determined were the "most extraordinary events" in the life of his island, watched the night sky from his house on Pleasant Street. "The comet (which appears every clear night) is thought to be very large from its uncommonly long tail," he wrote, "which extends upward in opposition to the sun in an almost perpendicular direction and heaves off to the eastward and nearly points for the North Star."

From earliest times, the appearance of a comet was interpreted as a sign that something unusual was about to happen. The *New Bedford Mercury,* the newspaper Nantucketers read for lack of one of their own, commented, "True it is, that the appearance of these eccentric visitors have always preceded some remarkable event." But Macy resisted such speculation: "[T]he philosophical reasoning we leave to the scientific part of the community, still it is beyond a doubt that the most learned is possessed of very little undoubted knowledge of the subject of cometicks."

At the wharves and shipping offices there was much speculation, and not just about the comet. All spring and summer there had been sightings up and down the New England coast of what the *Mercury* described as "an extraordinary sea animal"—a serpent with black, horselike eyes and a fifty-foot body resembling a string of barrels floating on the water. Any sailor, especially if he was young and impressionable like Thomas Nickerson, must have wondered, if only fleetingly, if this was, in fact, the best time to be heading out on a voyage around Cape Horn.

Nantucketers had good reason to be superstitious. Their lives were governed by a force of terrifying unpredictability—the sea. Due to a constantly shifting network of shoals, including the Nantucket Bar just off the harbor mouth, the simple act of coming to and from the island was an often harrowing and sometimes catastrophic lesson in seamanship. Particularly in winter, when storms were the most violent, wrecks occurred almost weekly. Buried throughout the island were the corpses of anonymous seamen who had washed up on its wave-thrashed shores. Nantucket, which means "faraway land" in the language of the island's native inhabitants, the Wampanoag, was a mound of sand eroding into an inexorable ocean, and all its residents, even if they had never left the island, were all too aware of the inhumanity of the sea.

Nantucket's English settlers, who began arriving in 1659, had

been mindful of the sea's dangers. They had hoped to support themselves not as fishermen but as farmers and sheepherders on this grassy, pond-speckled crescent without wolves. But as the increasing size of the livestock herds, combined with the growing number of farms, threatened to transform the island into a wind-blown wasteland, Nantucketers inevitably looked seaward.

Every fall, hundreds of "right whales" appeared to the south of the island and remained until the early spring. So named because they were "the right whale to kill," right whales grazed the waters off Nantucket much like seagoing cattle, straining the nutrient-rich surface of the ocean through the bushy plates of baleen in their perpetually grinning mouths. While English settlers at Cape Cod and eastern Long Island had already been hunting right whales for decades, no one on Nantucket had had the courage to pursue the whales in boats. Instead they left the harvesting of whales that washed up onto the shore (known as drift whales) to the Wampanoag.

Around 1690, a group of Nantucketers was standing on a hill overlooking the ocean where some whales were spouting and playing with one another. One of the onlookers nodded toward the whales and the ocean beyond. "There," he asserted, "is a green pasture where our children's grandchildren will go for bread." In fulfillment of his prophecy, a Cape Codder by the name of Ichabod Paddock was soon thereafter lured across Nantucket Sound to instruct the islanders in the art of killing whales.

Their first boats were only twenty feet long, and they launched them from the beaches along the island's south shore. Typically a whaleboat's crew was comprised of five Wampanoag oarsmen, with a single white Nantucketer at the steering oar. Once they'd killed the whale, they towed it back to the beach, where they removed the blubber and boiled it into oil. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, English Nantucketers had instituted a system of debt servitude that provided them with a steady supply of Wampanoag labor. Without the

island's native inhabitants, who outnumbered Nantucket's white population well into the 1720s, the island would never have become a successful whaling port.

In the year 1712, a Captain Hussey, cruising in his little boat for right whales along Nantucket's south shore, was blown out to sea in a fierce northerly gale. Many miles out, he glimpsed several whales of a type he had never seen before. Unlike a right whale's vertical spout, this whale's spout arched forward. In spite of the high winds and rough seas, Hussey managed to harpoon and kill one of the whales, its blood and oil stilling the waves in an almost biblical fashion. This creature, Hussey quickly realized, was a sperm whale, one of which had washed up on the island's southwest shore only a few years before. Not only was the oil derived from the sperm whale's blubber far superior to that of the right whale, providing a brighter and cleaner-burning light, but its block-shaped head contained a vast reservoir of even better oil, called spermaceti, that could be simply ladled into an awaiting cask. (It was spermaceti's resemblance to seminal fluid that gave rise to the sperm whale's name.) The sperm whale might be faster and more aggressive than the right whale, but it was far more enriching. With no other means of support, Nantucketers dedicated themselves to the single-minded pursuit of the sperm whale, and they soon outstripped their whaling rivals on the mainland and Long Island.

By 1760, the Nantucketers had practically wiped out the local whale population. But no matter—by that point they had enlarged their whaling sloops and equipped them with brick tryworks capable of processing the oil on the open ocean. Now, since it would not need to return to port as often to deliver bulky blubber, their fleet had a far greater range. By the outbreak of the American Revolution, Nantucketers had made it to the verge of the Arctic Circle, to the west coast of Africa, the east coast of South America, and as far south as the Falkland Islands.

In a speech before Parliament in 1775, the British statesman Edmund Burke looked to the island's inhabitants as the leaders of a new American breed—a "recent people" whose success in whaling had exceeded the collective might of all of Europe. Living on an island that was almost the same distance from the mainland as England was from France, Nantucketers developed a British sense of themselves as a distinct and superior people, privileged citizens of what Ralph Waldo Emerson called the "Nation of Nantucket."

The Revolution and the War of 1812, when the British navy marauded offshore shipping, proved disastrous to the whale fishery. Fortunately, Nantucketers possessed enough capital and inherent whaling expertise to survive these trials. By 1819, Nantucket was well on its way to reclaiming and, as the whalers ventured into the Pacific, even surpassing its former glory. But the rise of the Pacific sperm-whale fishery had an unfortunate side effect. Instead of voyages that had once averaged about nine months, two- and three-year voyages had become the norm. Never before had the division between Nantucket's whalemen and their people been so great. Long gone were the days when Nantucketers could watch from shore as the men and boys of the island pursued the whale. Nantucket was now the whaling capital of the world, but there were more than a few islanders who had never even seen a whale.

In the summer of 1819 people were still talking about the time when, nine years earlier, a pod of right whales was spotted to the north of the island. Whaleboats were quickly dispatched. A crowd gathered on shore to watch in fascination as two whales were killed and towed back into the harbor. For the people of Nantucket, it was an epiphany. Here at last were two of the creatures they had heard so much about, creatures upon which their livelihood depended. One of the whales was pulled up onto the wharf, and before the day was out, thousands of people—including, perhaps, the five-year-old Thomas Nickerson—

had come to see it. One can only imagine the intensity of the Nantucketers' curiosity as they peered at the giant creature, and poked and prodded it, and said to themselves, "So *this* is it."

Nantucket had created an economic system that no longer depended on the island's natural resources. The island's soil had long since been exhausted by overfarming. Nantucket's large Wampanoag population had been reduced to a handful by epidemics, forcing shipowners to look to the mainland for crew. Whales had almost completely disappeared from local waters. And still the Nantucketers prospered. As one visitor observed, the island had become a "barren sandbank, fertilized with whale-oil only."

THROUGHOUT the seventeenth century, English Nantucketers resisted all attempts to establish a church on the island, partly because a woman by the name of Mary Coffin Starbuck forbade it. It was said that nothing of consequence was done on Nantucket without Mary's approval. Mary Coffin and Nathaniel Starbuck had been the first English couple to be married on the island, in 1662, and had established a lucrative outpost for trading with the Wampanoag. Whenever an itinerant minister came to Nantucket looking to establish a congregation, he was firmly rebuffed by Mary Starbuck. Then, in 1702, Mary succumbed to a charismatic Quaker minister named John Richardson. Speaking before a group assembled in the Starbucks' living room, Richardson succeeded in moving Mary to tears. It was Mary Starbuck's conversion to Quakerism that established the unique fusion of spirituality and covetousness that would make possible Nantucket's rise as a whaling port.

Quakers or, more properly, members of the Society of Friends, depended on their own experience of God's presence, the "Inner Light," for guidance rather than relying on a Puritan minister's interpretation of scripture. But Nantucket's ever growing number of Quakers were hardly free-thinking individuals. Friends were expected to conform to

rules of behavior determined during yearly meetings, encouraging a sense of community that was as carefully controlled as that of any New England society. If there was a difference, it was the Quaker belief in pacifism and a conscious spurning of worldly ostentation—two principles that were not intended to interfere, in any way, with a person's ability to make money. Instead of building fancy houses or buying fashionable clothes, Nantucket's Quakers reinvested their profits in the whale fishery. As a result, they were able to weather the downturns that laid to waste so many mainland whaling merchants, and Mary Starbuck's children, along with their Macy and Coffin cousins, quickly established a Quaker whaling dynasty.

Nantucketers saw no contradiction between their livelihood and their religion. God Himself had granted them dominion over the fishes of the sea. Peleg Folger, a Nantucket whaleman turned Quaker elder, expressed it in verse:

> Thou didst, O Lord, create the mighty whale,
> That wondrous monster of a mighty length;
> Vast is his head and body, vast his tail,
> Beyond conception his unmeasured strength.
>
> But, everlasting God, thou dost ordain
> That we, poor feeble mortals should engage
> (Ourselves, our wives and children to maintain),
> This dreadful monster with a martial rage.

Even if Nantucket's Quakers dominated the island economically and culturally, room was made for others, and by the early nineteenth century there were two Congregational church towers bracketing the town north and south. Yet all shared in a common, spiritually infused mission—to maintain a peaceful life on land while raising bloody havoc at sea. Pacifist killers, plain-dressed millionaires, the whalemen of Nantucket were simply fulfilling the Lord's will.

. . .

THE town that Thomas Nickerson knew had a ramshackle feel about it. All it took was one walk through its narrow sandy streets to discover that despite the stately church towers and the occasional mansion, Nantucket was a far cry from Salem. "The good citizens of [Nantucket] do not seem to pride themselves upon the regularity of their streets [or] the neatness of their sidewalks," observed a visiting Quaker. The houses were shingled and unpretentious and, as often as not, included items scavenged from ships. "[H]atchways make very convenient bridges for gutters . . . ; a plank from the stern of a ship—having the name on it—answers the double purpose of making a fence—and informing the stranger if he *can* be at a loss—in what town he is."

Instead of using the official street names that had been assigned for tax purposes in 1798, Nantucketers spoke of "Elisha Bunker's street" or "Captain Mitchell's." "The inhabitants live together like one great family," wrote the Nantucketer Walter Folger, who happened to be a part-owner of the *Essex,* "not in one house, but in friendship. They not only know their nearest neighbors, but each one knows all the rest. If you should wish to see any man, you need but ask the first inhabitant you meet, and he will be able to conduct you to his residence, to tell what occupation he is of, and any other particulars you may wish to know."

But even within this close-knit familial community, there were distinctions, and Thomas Nickerson was on the outside looking in. The unhappy truth was that while Nickerson's mother, Rebecca Gibson, was a Nantucketer, his father, Thomas Nickerson, had been from Cape Cod, and Thomas Junior had been born in Harwich in 1805. Six months later, his parents moved him and his sisters across the sound to Nantucket. It was six months too late. Nantucketers took a dim view of off-islanders. They called them "strangers" or, even worse, "coofs," a term of disparagement originally reserved for Cape Codders but

broadened to include all of those unlucky enough to have been born on the mainland.

It might have earned Thomas Nickerson some regard on the island if his mother had at least come from old Nantucket stock, with a last name like Coffin, Starbuck, Macy, Folger, or Gardner. Such was not the case. On an island where many families could claim direct descent from one of the twenty or so "first settlers," the Gibsons and Nickersons were without the network of cousins that sustained most Nantucketers. "Perhaps there is not another place in the world, of equal magnitude," said Obed Macy, "where the inhabitants [are] so connected by consanguinity as in this, which add[s] much to the harmony of the people and to their attachment to the place." Nickerson's friends and shipmates Owen Coffin, Charles Ramsdell, and Barzillai Ray could count themselves as part of this group. Thomas might play with them, go to sea with them, but deep down he understood that no matter how hard he might try, he was, at best, only a coof.

Where a person lived in Nantucket depended on his station in the whaling trade. If he was a shipowner or merchant, he more than likely lived on Pleasant Street, set back on the hill, farthest from the clamor and stench of the wharves. (In subsequent decades, as their ambitions required greater space and visibility, these worthies would gravitate toward Main Street). Captains, in contrast, tended to choose the thoroughfare with the best view of the harbor: Orange Street. With a house on the east side of Orange, a captain could watch his ship being outfitted at the wharf and keep track of activity in the harbor. Mates, as a rule, lived at the foot of this hill ("under the bank," it was called) on Union Street, in the actual shadow of the homes they aspired one day to own.

On the corner of Main and Pleasant Streets was the Friends' immense South Meeting House, built in 1792 from pieces of the even bigger Great Meeting House that once loomed over the stoneless field of

the Quaker Burial Ground at the end of Main Street. Just because Nickerson had been brought up a Congregationalist didn't mean he had never been inside this or the other Quaker meetinghouse on Broad Street. One visitor claimed that almost half the people who attended a typical Quaker meeting were not members of the Society of Friends. Earlier that summer, on June 29, Obed Macy recorded that two thousand people (more than a quarter of the island's population) had attended a public Quaker meeting at the South Meeting House.

While many of the attendees were there for the good of their souls, those in their teens and early twenties tended to have other motives. No other place on Nantucket offered a better opportunity for young people to meet members of the opposite sex. Nantucketer Charles Murphey described in a poem how young men such as himself used the long gaps of silence typical of a Quaker meeting

> To sit with eager eyes directed
> On all the beauty there collected
> And gaze with wonder while in sessions
> On all the various forms and fashions.

Yet another gathering spot for amorous young people was the ridge of hills behind the town where the four windmills stood. Here couples could enjoy a spectacular view of the town and Nantucket Harbor, with the brand-new lighthouse at the end of Great Point visible in the distance.

What is surprising is how rarely Nantucketers, even young and adventurous Nantucketers like Nickerson and company, strayed beyond the gates of the little town. "As small as [the island] is," one whale-oil merchant admitted in a letter, "I was never at the extreme east or west, and for some years I dare say have not been one mile from town." In a world of whales, sea serpents, and ominous signs in the night sky, all Nantucketers, whalemen and landsmen alike, looked to the town as a

sanctuary, a fenced-in place of familiar ways and timeless ancestral alliances, a place to call home.

PASSIONS stirred beneath Nantucket's Quaker facade. Life might seem restrained and orderly as hundreds, sometimes thousands, of people made their way to meeting each Thursday and Sunday, the men in their long dark coats and wide-brimmed hats, the women in long dresses and meticulously crafted bonnets. But factors besides Quakerism and a common heritage also drove the Nantucket psyche—in particular, an obsession with the whale. No matter how much the inhabitants might try to hide it, there was a savagery about this island, a bloodlust and pride that bound every mother, father, and child in a clannish commitment to the hunt.

The imprinting of a young Nantucketer began at the earliest age. The first words a baby was taught included the language of the chase—"townor," for instance, a Wampanoag word meaning that the whale has been sighted for a second time. Bedtime stories told of killing whales and eluding cannibals in the Pacific. One mother approvingly recounted how her nine-year-old son attached a fork to the end of a ball of darning cotton and then proceeded to harpoon the family cat. The mother happened into the room just as the terrified pet attempted to escape, and unsure of what she had found herself in the middle of, she picked up the cotton ball. Like a veteran boatsteerer, the boy shouted, "Pay out, mother! Pay out! There she sounds through the window!"

There was rumored to be a secret society of young women on the island whose members pledged to marry only men who had already killed a whale. To help these young women identify them as hunters, boatsteerers wore chockpins (small oak pins used to keep the harpoon line in the bow groove of a whaleboat) on their lapels. Boatsteerers, superb athletes with prospects of lucrative captaincies, were considered the most eligible of Nantucket bachelors.

Instead of toasting a person's health, a Nantucketer offered invocations of a darker sort:

> Death to the living,
> Long life to the killers,
> Success to sailors' wives
> And greasy luck to whalers.

Despite the bravado of this little ditty, death was a fact of life with which all Nantucketers were thoroughly familiar. In 1810 there were forty-seven fatherless children on Nantucket, while almost a quarter of the women over the age of twenty-three (the average age of marriage) had been widowed by the sea.

In old age, Nickerson still visited the graves of his parents in the Old North Burial Ground. In 1819, during the last few weeks before his departure aboard the *Essex,* he undoubtedly made his way to this fenced-in patch of sun-scorched grass and walked among its canted stones. Nickerson's father had been the first of the parents to die, on November 9, 1806, at the age of thirty-three. His gravestone read:

> Crush'd as the moth beneath thy hand
> We moulder to the dust
> Our feeble powers can ne'er withstand
> And all our beauty's lost.

Nickerson's mother, who had borne five children, died less than a month later at the age of twenty-eight. Her oldest living daughter was eight years old; her only son was not yet two. Her inscription read:

> This mortal life decays apace
> How soon the bubble's broke
> Adam and all his numerous race
> Are Vanity and Smoke.

Nickerson, who was raised by his grandparents, wasn't the only orphan aboard the *Essex*. His friend Barzillai Ray had also lost both his parents. Owen Coffin and Charles Ramsdell had each lost a father. This may have been their closest bond: each of them, like so many Nantucketers, was a fatherless child for whom a ship's officer would be much more than a demanding taskmaster; he would be, quite possibly, the first male authority figure the boys had ever known.

PERHAPS no community before or since has been so divided by its commitment to work. For a whaleman and his family, it was a punishing regimen: two to three years away, three to four months at home. With their men gone for so long, Nantucket's women were obliged not only to raise the children but also to run many of the island's businesses. It was largely the women who maintained the complex web of personal and commercial relationships that kept the community functioning. J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, whose classic *Letters from an American Farmer* describes his lengthy stay on the island a few years prior to the outbreak of the Revolution, suggested that the Nantucket women's "prudence and good management . . . justly entitles them to a rank superior to that of other wives."

Quakerism contributed to the women's strength. In its emphasis on the spiritual and intellectual equality of the sexes, the religion fostered an attitude that was in keeping with what all Nantucketers saw plainly demonstrated to them every day: that women, who on Nantucket tended to be better educated than the island's men, were just as intelligent, just as capable as their male counterparts.

By necessity and choice, the island's women maintained active social lives, visiting one another with a frequency Crèvecoeur described as incessant. These visits involved more than the exchange of mere gossip. They were the setting in which much of the business of the town was transacted. The ninteenth-century feminist Lucretia Coffin Mott, who was born and raised on Nantucket, remembered how a husband

back from a voyage commonly followed in the wake of his wife, accompanying her to get-togethers with other wives. Mott, who eventually moved to Philadelphia, commented on how odd such a practice would have struck anyone from the mainland, where the sexes operated in entirely different social spheres.

Some of the Nantucket wives adapted quite well to the three-years-away, three-months-at-home rhythm of the whale fishery. The islander Eliza Brock recorded in her journal what she called the "Nantucket Girl's Song":

> Then I'll haste to wed a sailor, and send him off to sea,
> For a life of independence, is the pleasant life for me.
> But every now and then I shall like to see his face,
> For it always seems to me to beam with manly grace,
> With his brow so nobly open, and his dark and kindly eye,
> Oh my heart beats fondly towards him whenever he is nigh.
> But when he says "Goodbye my love, I'm off across the sea,"
> First I cry for his departure, then laugh because I'm free.

The mantle of power and responsibility settled upon the Nantucket woman's shoulders on her wedding day. "[N]o sooner have they undergone this ceremony," said Crèvecoeur, "than they cease to appear so cheerful and gay; the new rank they hold in the society impresses them with more serious ideas than were entertained before. . . . [T]he new wife . . . gradually advises and directs [the household]; the new husband soon goes to sea; he leaves her to learn and exercise the new government in which she is entered."

To the undying outrage of subsequent generations of Nantucket loyalists, Crèvecoeur claimed that many of the island's women had developed an addiction to opium: "They have adopted these many years the Asiatic custom of taking a dose of opium every morning, and so deeply rooted is it that they would be at a loss how to live without this indulgence." Why they took the drug is perhaps impossible to deter-

mine from this distance in time. Still, the portrait that emerges—of a community of achievers attempting to cope with a potentially devastating loneliness—makes the women's dependence on opium perhaps easier to understand. The ready availability of the drug on the island (opium was included in every whaleship's medical chest) combined with the inhabitants' wealth may also help to explain why the drug was so widely used in Nantucket.

There is little doubt that intimacy—physical as well as emotional—between a wife and a husband must have been difficult to establish under the tremendously compressed circumstances of the few months available between voyages. An island tradition claims that Nantucket women dealt with their husbands' long absences by relying on sexual aids known as "he's-at-homes." Although this claim, like that of drug use, seems to fly in the face of the island's staid Quaker reputation, in 1979 a six-inch plaster penis (along with a batch of letters from the nineteenth century and a laudanum bottle) was discovered hidden in the chimney of a house in the island's historic district. Just because they were "superior wives" didn't mean that the island's women were without normal physical desires. Like their husbands, Nantucket's women were ordinary human beings attempting to adapt to a most extraordinary way of life.

THOMAS Nickerson may have enjoyed his first moments aboard the *Essex,* exploring her dark, hot interior, but the thrill was soon over. For the next three weeks, during the warmest summer anyone could remember, Nickerson and the gradually accumulating crew of the *Essex* labored to prepare the ship. Even in winter, Nantucket's wharves, topped by a layer of oil-soaked sand, stank to the point that people said you didn't see Nantucket when you first rounded the lighthouse at Brant Point, you smelled it. That July and August the stench rising from the wharf must have been pungent enough to gag even a veteran whaleman.

At that time on Nantucket it was standard practice to have the newly signed members of a whaleship's crew help prepare the vessel for the upcoming voyage. Nowhere else in New England was a sailor expected to help rig and provision his ship. That was what riggers, stevedores, and provisioners were for. But on Nantucket, whose Quaker merchants were famous for their ability to cut costs and increase profits, a different standard prevailed.

Whalemen did not work for wages; they were paid a share, or lay—a predetermined portion of the total take—at the end of the voyage. This meant that whatever work a shipowner could extract from a sailor prior to a voyage was, in essence, free or, to Nickerson's mind, "a donation of . . . labor" on the part of the sailor. A shipowner might advance a seaman some money to help him purchase the clothing and equipment necessary for the voyage, but it was deducted (with interest) from his lay at the conclusion of the voyage.

As cabin boy, Thomas Nickerson had what was known as a very "long" (or meager) lay. Although the ship papers from the *Essex*'s 1819 voyage have vanished, we know that Nickerson's predecessor, the cabin boy Joseph Underwood of Salem, received a 1/198 lay for the previous voyage. Given that the *Essex*'s cargo of 1,200 barrels of sperm oil sold for about $26,500, Underwood was paid, once the expenses of the voyage were deducted from the gross and his personal expenses were deducted from his own portion, a grand total of about a $150 for two years' work. Although this was a pitiful wage, the cabin boy had been provided with room and board for two years and now had the experience to begin a career as a whaleman.

By the end of July, the *Essex*'s upperworks—just about everything at deck level and above—had been completely rebuilt, including a new layer of pine decking and a cookhouse. At some point—probably before Nickerson joined the crew—the *Essex* was laid over on her side for coppering. Immense block-and-tackle systems were strung from the ship's masts to the wharf to haul the ship onto her side. The exposed

bottom was then sheathed in copper to protect the ship from marine growth, which could turn her four-inch-thick oak hull planking into a soft, porous veneer.

At twenty years of age, the *Essex* was reaching the point when many vessels began to exhibit serious structural deterioration. Whale oil seems to have acted as a preservative, providing most whaleships with lives much longer than that of a typical merchant vessel. Still, there were limits. Rot, teredo worms, and a condition called iron sickness, in which the ship's rusted iron fastenings weakened the oak, were all potential problems.

The ever lengthening voyages around Cape Horn were another concern. "The ship[s] being so long at sea without much repairs," Obed Macy would write in his journal, "must shorten the durations of the ships [by] many years." Indeed, the *Essex* had undergone several days of repairs in South America during her previous voyage. She was an old ship caught up in a new era of whaling, and no one knew how much longer she would last.

Owners were always reluctant to invest any more money in the repair of a ship than was absolutely necessary. While they had no choice but to rebuild the *Essex*'s upperworks, there could well have been suspicious areas below the waterline that they chose to address at a later time, if not ignore. That summer, the *Essex*'s principal owners, Gideon Folger and Sons, were awaiting delivery of a new, much larger whaleship, the *Aurora*. This was not the year to spend an inordinate amount of money on a tired old vessel like the *Essex*.

NANTUCKET'S shipowners could be as fierce in their own bloodless way as any whaleman. They might "act the Quaker," but that didn't keep them from pursuing profits with a lethal enthusiasm.

In *Moby-Dick*, one of the *Pequod*'s owners is Bildad, a pious Quaker whose religious scruples do not prevent him from extorting cruelly long lays from the crew (he offers Ishmael a 1/777 lay!). With

his Bible in one hand and ledgerbook in the other, Bildad resembles a lean, Quakerly John D. Rockefeller, his mind and soul devoted to the cold calculus of making a whaling voyage pay.

There were some observers who claimed that, rather than leading the islanders to prosperity and grace, Quakerism was at the root of whatever evil flourished in the sharp business practices of Nantucket's shipowners. According to William Comstock, who penned an account of a whaling cruise from Nantucket in the 1820s, "Unfortunately, the anger which [the Quakers] are forbidden to express by outward actions, finding no vent, stagnates the heart, and, while they make professions of love and good will . . . , the rancor and intense malevolence of their feelings poisons every generous spring of human kindness."

Gideon Folger and Paul Macy, two major shareholders in the *Essex,* were prominent members of the island's Quaker upper class. Yet, according to Nickerson, Macy, in charge of outfitting the *Essex* that summer of 1819, attempted to cut costs by severely underprovisioning the ship. In this practice he was not alone. "[T]he owners of whaleships too frequently neglect to victual their ships properly," Comstock wrote, "depending on the Captain to stint his crew in proportion to his means, by which a few dollars are saved to the rich owners, while the poor hard laboring sailor famishes with hunger." While it would be unfair to point to Paul Macy as responsible, even in part, for the grief that eventually awaited the men of the *Essex,* the first step toward that future began with Macy's decision to save a little money in beef and hardtack.

On Nantucket in the early nineteenth century, people didn't invest in bonds or the stock market, but rather in whaleships. By purchasing shares in several ships rather than putting their money in a single vessel, islanders spread both the risk and the reward throughout the community. Agents such as Macy and Folger could expect a total return on their whaling investments of somewhere between 28 and 44 percent per year.