* On November 20, 1820, the American whaling ship *Essex* was rammed by a sperm whale and sunk. The incident inspired Herman Melville’s famous novel *Moby Dick*.

On November 20, the US ship *Essex* encountered a pod of whales off the west coast of South America, and her small whaleboats set off to harpoon the animals and tow them back to the ship for processing.

Captain Pollard watched from on deck, the *Essex* herself—238 tons, 27 meters (87 feet)—was forcefully, purposefully rammed by an enormous sperm whale separated from the pod. There was nothing the crew could do about it—the animal was bigger, stronger, and had much, much greater agility than the ship. The ship sank within two days, leaving 20 survivors in three leaky whaleboats.

By mid-December, after weeks at sea, the boats began to take on water, more whales menaced the men at night, and by January, the paltry rations began to take their toll. On one boat, a man went mad, and died before the next morning. According to a first- hand account, the crew “separated limbs from his body, and cut all the flesh from the bones; after which, we opened the body, took out the heart, and then closed it again—sewed it up as decently as we could, and committed it to the sea.” They then roasted the man’s organs on a flat stone and ate them.

The rations of human flesh did not last long, and the more the survivors ate, the hungrier they felt. On both boats the men became too weak to talk. The four men on Pollard’s boat reasoned that without more food, they would die. On February 6, 1821—nine weeks after they’d bidden farewell to the *Essex*—Charles Ramsdell, a teenager, proposed they draw lots to determine who would be eaten next. It was the custom of the sea, dating back, at least in recorded instance, to the first half of the 17th century. The men in Pollard’s boat accepted Ramsdell’s suggestion, and the lot fell to young Owen Coffin, the captain’s first cousin.

Pollard had promised the boy’s mother he’d look out for him. “My lad, my lad!” the captain now shouted, “if you don’t like your lot, I’ll shoot the first man that touches you.” Pollard even offered to step in for the boy, but Coffin would have none of it. “I like it as well as any other,” he said.

Ramsdell drew the lot that required him to shoot his friend. He paused a long time. But then Coffin rested his head on the boat’s gunwale and Ramsdell pulled the trigger.

No one was charged with the murder of Owen Coffin. Captain Pollard lived out his life as a night watchman on Nantuckett.