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Sea Stories

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Abstract

Sea Stories is a collection of creative nonfiction essays centered around the growth of a young woman through her experiences with water and ships. The pieces trace the origins of the narrator's tie to water from a childhood involving boating with her dad to sailing a brigantine across the Pacific Ocean and then a six-year career as an officer in the U.S. Coast Guard. The narrator's relationship with her father, predominantly viewed through their shared intimacy with water, is a base theme for the whole collection. Other themes explored in individual essays include reckoning expectations with reality, explorations of the self in and against a group, gender dynamics in military service, and the influence of fiction on life. *Sea Stories* shows that what we think we know, what we may have only imagined, and on the water, that self-constructed reality can be a dangerous thing.

Keywords: women in the Coast Guard; female military officer; father/daughter relationship; SSV *Robert C. Seamans*; coming of age; gender in the military; gender at sea; women on ships

Sea Stories

> The standard structure of a sea story: a sailor embarks upon a voyage; during the course of the voyage he is tested – by the sea, by his colleagues, or by those that he encounters upon another shore; the experience either makes him or breaks him.
>
> -John Peck, *Maritime Fiction*

At around age three, I was convinced I could become a mermaid through training and willpower. I would stretch out along the bottom of the bathtub and have my mom time how long I could hold my breath. The water blurred the glass-encased ceiling light and the lines of my mom's face and her dark hair. The sounds of my dad's and my brother's footsteps in the hallway softened to thumps. The water enveloped every part of me in a weightless cradle.

When the bathwater chilled, I'd pull the plug for a few minutes, refresh the bath with a gush of hot water, and sink back beneath the surface. My skin pruned, and my mom made a show of shaking out a towel to encourage me to finish my bath. Although the water dulled her chiding words into easily-ignored, rounded tones, I had to come up for air at some point. Mermaids didn't have to surface and get toweled off and sent to bed. They spent their lives swimming freely, buoyed and protected from the outside world by the sea.

Sadly, years of breath-holding proved my anatomy was entirely human.

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In elementary school, I discovered a different way to live through the water: young adult books. Avi's *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* led to L.A. Meyer's *Bloody Jack*. I developed a passion for tales of girls who learned to climb tall ship rigging and hoist sails while surrounded by rugged characters, most of whom would rather dump the "she-rats" at the next port or toss

them overboard. I saw these girls as mirrors of myself and who I wanted to be. Training to turn into a mermaid might've failed, but plenty of people sailed across the ocean. Besides, my dad had a boat; I was already on my way to becoming a ruddy-cheeked, rough-handed sailor.

The boat came from the driveway of a family friend, who'd let the poor thing dry rot for years. Though Dad hadn't spent time on the water in decades, he had fond memories of boating on a small lake in Illinois as a child. My mom and my brother avoided the water, so I slid into the role of first mate. Because I was five years old, this job consisted of watching from the dock as my dad backed the boat trailer down the concrete ramp into the fishy waters of Lake Hickory, a skinny reservoir in western North Carolina. Dad would inch along the truck bed and trailer tongue and unhook half a dozen chains and cables without even dampening his toes. Finally, he'd start the engine and putter the boat to the dock, where I had the all-important task of securing bow and stern lines to metal cleats. Guiding the rope in figure-eights with a twist on the final loop was all it took to make me feel like a salty mariner.

“All set, Bobyn?” My dad had several names for me that were just left of the norm. While other fathers called their daughters “Peanut,” he preferred “Peanuckle” (like “Pinochle,” in pronunciation but not intent; we preferred *Twister* and *Trivial Pursuit* over cards).

I'd nod, and he'd cut the engine and step up onto the dock to park the truck. I'd guard the boat until he returned; I wasn't allowed aboard without him.

Dad's life jacket was black and twice the size of mine, a white and purple vest with hot pink straps. We always put them on before leaving the dock.

A fiberglass half-wall separated the bow from the rest of the boat, which had four cushioned seats behind the protection of the windshield. One of those seats was at the helm, but

my dad always stood, head and shoulders above the windshield, as he steered. Until I learned to steer, I rarely moved back past that half-wall, preferring to sit on the bench seats that ran along the inside of each gunwale. On the rare occasion when my mom and my brother came out on the boat, they huddled in the seats behind the windshield, but Dad and I liked the wind in our faces and a clear view of the horizon.

Perhaps because I'd grown up boating, I hadn't thought of ships and the water as masculine domains. My dad never prohibited me from doing anything because I was a girl – only because I was too young (or more frequently, because my mom was worried I'd hurt myself). Therefore, reading about *Bloody Jack's* Jacky Faber getting fitted for a naval uniform or Charlotte Doyle hauling lines elbow-to-elbow with a crew of barefooted sailors seemed natural and common sense. They worked hard – often harder than the others – but they enjoyed a freedom not found on land. Of course, I noticed that the rest of the ships' crews tended to be male, but so what? The men weren't the protagonists.

Now that I've traveled and read a bit more, I know my experience wasn't the norm. Men have long dominated the lineage of maritime-minded writers – Herman Melville (*Moby Dick*, 1851), Jack London (*The Sea Wolf*, 1904), and Patrick O'Brian (*Master and Commander*, 1969), to name a few. Their stories feature male protagonists with predominantly (or entirely) male secondary casts. Female characters flesh-out the stories as wives, daughters, girlfriends, or prostitutes, often only appearing in the sailors' forays onto land. In the Victorian period, the popularity of boys' adventure stories (which avoided the “problem” of romance and sex) meant that girls and women were stricken from hundreds of fictional seas. Despite a few forays by

authors like Avi and L.A. Meyer, the genre of the sea story has always slanted toward the masculine.

But I only thought about gender and the sea long after my dad and I had stopped boating.

Maintaining the boat year after year was expensive. When I was in high school, my parents sold their struggling auto parts store and barely managed to break even. Dad moved between temp jobs, the longest one involving cardboard box assembly, and he worked odd hours for low pay. At around my high school graduation, my parents divorced, and my father moved to an apartment. The boat listed on its rusting trailer at the end of our driveway as the vinyl seats cracked and dry leaves filled the gunwales. Eventually, a stranger rescued the boat, just as my dad had rescued her decades earlier.

***

The summer after my freshman year of college, I went on a vacation with my mom and her boyfriend to Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, where I insisted on spending the better part of a day crawling around replicas of the Jamestown Settlement ships. As Mom took photos of me on the deck of the *Susan Constant* in the most nautical pose I could imagine (my hand wrapped around a thick rope anchored by an iron eye bolt to the yellow-painted gunwale), I told her I wanted to return one day.

My mom slid the camera back in its cushioned pouch and zipped it shut. “We aren’t even through with *this* vacation.”

I stepped toward her, relishing the creak of the deck boards and the nearly-undetectable sway of the docked ship. “No, like coming back to work here. I could be a re-enactor, like him.”

I pointed across the deck to a heavy-set man with silver whiskers carpeting his jowls. Sweat stained the armpits of his linen blouse as he showed a pair of boys how to splice a line.

Mom gave a brief, nervous chuckle through set teeth – the same nervous chuckle that I imagine tumbled out when I'd asked her to time me holding my breath in the bathtub. "This is just a seasonal job, Robyn. Besides, do you see any women on the ships? For historical accuracy, they'd probably stick you in the settlement, weaving cloth or baking."

She was right; all the re-enactors on the ships were men. But what about the Irish queen of the seas Grace O'Malley and the Caribbean pirate Anne Bonny? Sure, the time periods and countries didn't match Jamestown's seventeenth-century English settlement, but female seafarers deserved a spotlight too. And if that reasoning didn't work for Jamestown administrators, I had no qualms about dressing like a man to get the job. After all, my literary heroines transformed their appearances for the sea.

I read and reread the stories of Charlotte Doyle and Jacky Faber leaving their native soil while fitting what late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century English society expects of them. The former is a sheltered young woman in the fine dressings of the upper-class. The latter, an orphan, transforms herself into someone society finds more useful: a ship's boy, taken aboard solely for his (her) ability to read and write. But maritime adventure sparks inward change in both girls, and they pursue the "new frontier" of shipboard life, despite the remoteness of being the lone female – and often the youngest crew member – aboard the ship. At the ends of the novels, Charlotte and Jacky reach American shores, and (Jacky's gender having been uncovered) both are pressed back into ladylike trappings. However, in true American spirit, they rebel and fight back toward the sea.

I had lost my childhood boat and been deterred from my first wanderings toward a nautical career, but I, too, would fight back toward the sea.

***

During the spring of my sophomore year in college, one of my friends attended a study-abroad fair and saw a table emblazoned with the outline of a sailing ship. She ran to me with a pamphlet featuring photos of a two-masted brigantine, sails full of wind and hull slicing through indigo seas. Applications for the summer session were due within two weeks. I shoved aside my classwork, dogged my professors for letters of recommendation, and took out loans. And a few weeks after the semester ended, I left North Carolina on my own for the first time to study oceanography, maritime studies, nautical science.

As the SSV *Robert C. Seamans* sailed from Honolulu to San Francisco, the studying and coursework became a backdrop to experiencing life as a rough-handed sailor with her eyes on the horizon and the wind in her hair. I imagined the brigantine's decks to be the ones in Avi's and L.A. Meyer's stories, although driving my dad's twenty-foot motorboat hadn't really prepared me to handle a one hundred- and thirty-four-foot-tall ship across the open ocean. But in addition to climbing rigging and handling sails, each student had to conduct a month-long oceanographic study. For the other students, many of whom were majoring in marine science, the coursework directly contributed to their studies. For me, I was earning a summer’s worth of extracurricular credits; pursuing a sailing fantasy was worth staring at dead fish under a microscope every other day.

My classmates mentioned that Jeremy, the first mate on the *Robert C. Seamans*, had spent a few years as an officer in the U.S. Coast Guard. After the Jamestown/Williamsburg trip, I'd

explored other options for a nautical career and kept returning to the Coast Guard. The idea of helping people and protecting the environment while spending time on the water appealed to me. Maybe my dad, who'd volunteered ten years with the Coast Guard Auxiliary, would be proud if I joined. The only problem was, I'd never actually met a member of the Coast Guard, and other than what I'd skimmed through on the website, I didn't have much understanding of what the job entailed. I didn't want to seem foolish or naive to Jeremy, so for much of the voyage, my questions stayed behind sealed lips.

But one clear afternoon, the two of us stood alone at the helm. My hand rested between the spokes of the wooden ship's wheel. There wasn't much of a current halfway out in the Pacific Ocean, so I just had to make sure we didn't drift off course. Jeremy stood by my side, as I'd only had helm duty once or twice before. All around us, the powder blue sky met the midnight ocean without a single other vessel to interrupt the panorama. We'd seen our last bird a few days prior and wouldn't see another for several weeks. I could understand how all that space would terrify someone, but I felt euphorically boundless. The world opened to me, and the freedom offered by all that water washed away my fears.

“I think I want to join the Coast Guard,” I said.

“Why?” Though my words had broken the quiet of the deck, Jeremy didn't startle. I envied his calm. He always seemed to see what lay beyond the horizon. “What do you want to do in the Coast Guard?”

The questions caught me off-guard; I don't know what I had expected. Affirmation? Encouragement?

I mumbled something about helping people and saving the environment and that I was okay with doing paperwork too. While all that wasn't exactly a lie, revealing the whole truth – that I wanted to be rocked asleep by waves, to look up and see millions of stars scattered across the night sky, and to have the breeze blow my hair wild every day – risked laughter, or worse, discouragement.

Jeremy tilted his chin down but kept his gaze on the horizon. “Just be sure that's what you really want before you sign up.”

A year and a half didn't change my mind, and Jeremy even agreed to write me a letter of recommendation for Officer Candidate School. While my classmates scattered to unpaid internships, graduate schools, and entry-level positions under faceless bosses, I flew to the Coast Guard Academy in Connecticut and learned a new way of dressing and speaking. For most of Officer Candidate School, I felt like a toddler in a world of adults, yet oddly, I felt stronger than I'd ever been. My ship-based fantasies hardened into goals that aligned with the Coast Guard's missions, yet I still yearned to feel the wind in my hair.

The U.S. Coast Guard first allowed women to join as regular members (as opposed to reservist or civilian secretarial roles) in 1973. The U.S. Navy followed a few years later. When I joined the Coast Guard in 2009, women made up 13.3% of active-duty members; I knew the statistics, but I didn't really care. Like Charlotte and Jacky, I wasn't trying to be a trail-blazer – I was only after my own adventure. Throughout Officer Candidate School, my gender felt like a non-issue until a group of us discussed renting a cabin in the woods for the weekend, now that we could earn liberty and leave the school's grounds. One of my classmates said that type of overnight seclusion would be a bad idea. I didn't know what he meant, so my classmate – red-

faced – had to explain that the men had been away from their wives and girlfriends for too long, and “things might happen.” When I finally understood that “things” included both consensual relations (prohibited in OCS) and those that crossed the line into coercion, the shock silenced me.

Women and men wore the same shapeless blue cargo pants and utility shirt, the same heavy-soled black boots, and the same white stitching over our left breast pocket that read “U.S. COAST GUARD,” and yet there were those who would only ever see women as something other than the norm.

After seventeen weeks of my chiming “Yes, Sir!,” reciting regulations by memory, and hitting the deck for another round of push-ups, the U.S. Coast Guard christened me with gold ensign bars and ordered me to a desk job in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, three-hundred miles from the nearest ocean. I’d asked for something with more adventure, with small boats that zipped through crashing waves, but those jobs went to ensigns who had years of enlisted experience and better scores on the shooting range. I was disappointed, but I’d agreed to a contract. President Obama had even signed my commission. What kind of person immediately breaks a contract with the President of the United States, even if her first duty station involves cubicles and memos instead of ships’ wheels and sea spray? My girlhood heroes of salty adventure, wouldn’t quit, so neither would I.

***

When my dad and I took the boat out on Lake Hickory, we'd race to Oxford Dam, which capped the long, skinny reservoir. Pine green water would blur beneath our bow, and when we'd turn and the boat would lean to one side, I'd skim my fingers along the water to feel its harsh, cool bite.

Along the way, my dad would point out another boater doing something foolish like cruising too close to a jet ski or venturing inside the dam's warning buoys. Sometimes, he'd let me stand at the helm while he guided me from the passenger seat.

Boats don't have brakes, Robyn.

The red running light is for port and the green is for starboard.

Ease up on that throttle so our wake doesn't slam the other boats into the dock.

Never assume others see you; give them a wide berth.

Avoid the shallows.

Older, experienced male figures in nautical fiction often play an important role as the "sea dad" for the protagonist. *Bloody Jack*'s Jacky introduced me to the term, and she explains: "All the ship's boys and all the midshipmen get with an experienced sailor to teach them the things they need to know, like how to splice a line. . .. These sailors ain't exactly told to do this teachin'. . .. If a man is the sort that likes to teach what he knows . . . [the] young ones can sense that." Away from their families, the "young ones" turn to their sea dads for unspoken rules among the crew too, such as people and places to avoid. Perhaps it's cheating since I didn't have to leave shore to find him, but I consider my own father to be my first sea dad.

During the Vietnam War, my dad tried to enlist in the U.S. Coast Guard. The ranks were too full to accept him, and a diagnosis of scoliosis later kept him out of all branches of the military. In the mid-1990s, one of his friends saw an ad in the paper for a local Coast Guard Auxiliary meeting. Dad immediately joined the volunteer organization for the chance to serve his community by teaching boating classes and performing safety inspections. I was too young to help him, but I remember how proud he was to wear the pale blue button-down, tie, and dark

blue wool slacks and blazer with a confetti grid of achievement ribbons pinned over his left breast and a white name tag pinned on his right.

Five years after he left the Auxiliary – after having risen to the rank of Flotilla Commander – the Coast Guard issued me my own set of Service Dress Blues. My uniform was nearly the same as my dad's old one, except his rank stripes were silver where mine were gold. When he came to my commissioning ceremony at the Coast Guard Academy and saw me, all brass buttons and spit-polished black oxfords, he grinned until his eyes crinkled. I was following in his footsteps, in spirit if not in the strictest sense.

***

During my years in the Coast Guard, the senior officers liked to gather a group of junior officers in a conference room at least once a year to talk at us about our careers. To be clear, these older, experienced (and almost always male) figures were no more sea dads than they were ballerinas. Some of the more "humble" ones were their own heroes; others read speeches cobbled together from collections of sterile books on leadership. The senior officers called these sessions "mentoring," though I always left feeling more mental than mentored. As a way of encouraging us to volunteer for extended assignments on aging ships with disgruntled crews and a dearth of resources, they'd say, "You can't gather sea stories if you're sitting behind a desk!"

Some crusty, old chiefs insist many of the *real* sea stories can't be made anymore, since the Coast Guard banned rituals that masked harassment as hazing. The best stories, they say, happened in the "old Guard," a mythical time with no exact dates (except that it existed before the listener joined the service) when men wore beards envied by Poseidon, beer flowed from shipboard vending machines, and initiates could look forward to being beaten with rubber hoses

and wallowing through rotten food scraps on their first trip across the equator. And there's always a layer of secrecy to these stories; telling the tales in full would betray their shipmates and spoil the fun.

For me, the sea story falls somewhere between the risky escapades of the chiefs and the classics of Herman Melville and Jack London, somewhere closer to the freeing, self-discovering journeys of Charlotte and Jacky. The water – from lakes to rivers to oceans – provides a platform for challenge and learning away from the safety nets and distractions of society. A sailor often feels alone until her crew reminds her that she cannot sail the ship solo. Unless she wants to be left ashore, she must also grow and adapt into a useful member of the crew. A ship's keel runs down its centerline from fore to aft and provides stability and a base for the rest of the frame. Sea stories, from early literary fantasies to earning my ensign bars, form my life's keel.

Six years after earning my commission, I left the Coast Guard. I'd be lying if I said I didn't have regrets. I should've tried harder to get on a boat; I should've bullied my way to claim what I wanted. I shouldn't have given up so easily. But as an officer moves up in rank, her job requires increasing amounts of time behind a desk. Ideally, she'll use her early years of experience in the field to enact and support policy, lead departments or units, and shake hands with public officials. I was moving farther from the water – and farther from myself – with each promotion.

As I planned my separation from the service, I worried that my dad would be disappointed with my decision. I waited until my annual visit back to North Carolina to tell him. We stood in the steamy kitchen of his girlfriend's house, rinsing shrimp and husking corn for dinner. The years had silvered his hair and softened the skin along his jaw. Seeing him age with

each visit was disconcerting. Perhaps he thought the same about me. Did I grow into the woman he'd pictured when the two of us skimmed across the waters of Lake Hickory? Was my decision to separate a sign of failure? Or worse, was it a betrayal of our nautical bond?

The end of a sea story leaves the sailor either damaged or stronger. I felt tired and ready for change, but certainly not broken.

The pot of water on the stove started to boil. I reached into the sink for the strainer full of shrimp, but Dad's hands swooped in front of mine. “I've got it. You pile the corn on a plate, so I can take it to the grill.”

Nearly thirty years old and still under my dad's protection.

As the shrimp flushed pink and the corn caramelized on the grill, I casually mentioned that the next summer, I planned to stay in New Orleans instead of starting a third tour with the Coast Guard.

He nodded. “Okay, Bobyn, what's next?”

Crossing an Ocean

> We are all salty sea sailors now, havin' just survived our first days at sea, if only just barely.
>
> -L. A. Meyer, *Bloody Jack*

Over Summer 2007, a leather-bound journal traveled with me eight hundred miles up the eastern seaboard of the United States and over twenty-six hundred miles across the Pacific Ocean. On the last page, there is a list:

Things Never to be Forgotten:

- *Post-lunch and -dinner and whenever-we-felt-like-it rummy breaks*
- *Feelin' it out*
- *Matt's random stretches and dance moves: "Reach back in time...What do you see? Robert E. Lee!"*
- *Being woken up at 2230 to scrub a greasy galley*
- *Being woken up at 0230 to count halobates and plastic pieces*
- *Turn off the MSD before net tows*

I must admit, when I re-discovered the journal and flipped through thin pages covered in ballpoint scrawl, the memories were slow to return. But my old words hooked into submerged moments and drew them up – the odd chill of June in Massachusetts, the calm of sitting cross-legged on top of a ship's cabin hundreds of miles at sea, the terror and thrill of embarking on my first true adventure. But one thing on that list has been lost to time. Was "Feelin' it out" a dance? A charade? Perhaps the world is better if some things remain unknown.

***

A knock sounded on the door of my dorm room. Before I even had a chance to take the half a dozen steps across the linoleum, the person on the other side rapped again like a wood pecker.

My friend Michelle stood on the other side with a wide grin and a pamphlet in her hands. Her eyes were wild, which wasn't unusual. Energy that bordered on mania charged her veins. “Robyn! I was at the study-abroad fair and I found the *perfect* program for you.”

“Thanks, but I know about the France thing, and I don't want to go.” French was the only foreign language I'd ever taken. Going to another country seemed like a lot of effort, and nearly halfway through college, I was already weary of the world. Everything was repetition and textbooks and drinking so much Hawaiian Punch and cheap Vodka on Saturday that I spent Sunday kneeling on the floor of a bathroom shared by the thirty girls on my hallway. Adventure only happened in fiction. Four walls in France would look the same as four walls in America.

“No, no – just wait.”

She bounded past me and stood by my desk, where a poster of sailing ships from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries hung on the wall. Several of the pencils on my desk wore rubber skulls with pirates’ scarves, patches, and captains' tricorn hats. DVDs lined the back of the desk, all arranged cover-to-cover like books on a shelf except *Master and Commander* and *Pirates of the Caribbean.* Those two lay across the top of the row; the disc of one or the other lived in my laptop.

Michelle snapped open the brochure and straightened her arms to show me a photo. A tall ship, sails full liked proud chests, carved through a sapphire ocean with white crests lapping at the hull. "*See?!*"

I took the pamphlet from her. White words on a dark blue background read "SEA," which stood for the Sea Education Association. The tall ship looked like the ones on my poster and in my movies. "I thought you said 'study abroad'?"

Michelle grabbed the brochure, flipped to the back, and pointed to the list of programs. SEA offered semester-long sessions, as well as ones that spanned the two months of summer break. "Can you believe *no one* was at their table? How cool would this be – you go on a *pirate* ship. And you earn college credit!"

The next summer session involved sailing across the Pacific Ocean from Honolulu to San Francisco. After I'd started to fill out the forms and write my admissions essays, I realized I should probably let my mom know how I planned to spend the next summer. Of course, I'd tell my dad too, but when I went home on breaks, I lived with my mom and she paid for most of my expenses.

Over the phone, my mom agreed that the program sounded neat. Then she said, "And how do you plan to pay for this SEA program?"

"Well, I don't know. I might get some financial aid. But *you've* been paying for my college."

"Robyn, this program costs almost twenty thousand dollars. That's almost two years of tuition, and you know scholarships and grants cover most of that."

Her words smacked me on the back of the head. I was so excited about the idea of standing on the bow of the ship with the wind tossing back my hair that I hadn't even considered money.

But she hadn't said I *couldn't* go.

By the end of the week, I'd finished the application and badgered two professors to sign the recommendations I had written for myself. During that time, I borrowed Michelle's wild-eyed mania. *I was going to sea!* Instead of returning to another long summer working retail! I only took breaks from filling out student loan paperwork to watch *Master and Commander* and reread the adventures of my favorite heroine in the *Bloody Jack* series. Previously, these stories had been daydream fuel; now, they were training materials.

"But Robyn," my best friend Molly said, "you don't even like science." She was referring to the oceanography component of the program. Molly felt like I was abandoning her to a summer working alone at the women's clothing store – she didn't seem to care about the *adventure*.

"I'll be fine! I've never *failed* a science class. There's just a little bit of oceanography – and I love the ocean."

As the summer approached, doubts nibbled at my excitement. I'd never traveled alone outside of North Carolina. Most of what I knew about sailing came from works of fiction. And while sail handling and maritime lore had lured me in, they only formed the backdrop for the main purpose of the program. Our SEA class would design, conduct, and then write about an ocean-based scientific study. While I'd gotten <u>A</u>s in literature, history, French, and so on, the best I could manage in the sciences was a <u>C</u>.

I'd known about the scientific study since the beginning, but I'd managed to ignore that aspect while imagining myself in the calloused bare feet of an eighteenth-century sailor. I also didn't pay much thought to the sixteen thousand dollars I had to take out in loans for the program. This "selective looking forward" is a pattern in my life – I later joined the Coast Guard, despite my irritation with uniforms and keeping my hair tidy.

But capable of the science or not, I'd already bought plane tickets and a pair of shorts embroidered with skulls and crossbones to wear on the ship. I was going to be a *real* sailor.

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June 5, 2007 – Falmouth, Massachusetts

First day of classes today – everything was out of order and shortened, so that was nice. I think I'll like Nautical Science best – it seemed like it'll be the most interesting. I'm a little worried about oceanography, but everyone seems super eager to help. I think my house is full of science majors, haha.

The sailors in my favorite stories kept journals, so I brought one to SEA. Out of the twenty-six students who had arrived for the summer session, most were majoring in marine science. A few had sailed for years and wanted to broaden their experience. And then there was me.

I'd driven my dad's motor boat and set foot on replicas of the *Discovery*, the *Susan Constant*, and the *Godspeed* at the historic Jamestown settlement in Virginia, but if you'd asked me how to jibe, I'd show you my best two-step (we'll cover what a jibe *actually* is later).

The SEA campus is in Falmouth, Massachusetts, a few miles down the road from Woods Hole. I thought "Woods Hole" was a funny name for an out-of-the-way seaside town until my

classmates corrected me. We were eating lunch at the picnic tables outside the two houses our class shared. Eric, a guy who once ate a pan of onions and then mercilessly cleared a room with his stink, said, “You know that's where the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute is, right?”

“Okay.” I took a bite of my turkey sandwich.

He stared at me for a moment. “You don't know what it is. The Institute is *the* largest research facility for oceanography in the United States. It's famous.”

“Okay.”

“Stop saying, 'okay.' You don't even know where you are, do you?”

“Of course I do.” I studied the flagpole in the middle of the grand front lawn. The staff had rigged the pole with practice lines to give us some hands-on lessons before we set foot on the deck of the SSV *Robert C. Seamans* in a month.

Twenty-six of us had gathered in Falmouth from universities strewn across the east and west coasts (except redheaded Sean, who had fallen in love with the sea despite being born and raised in landlocked Idaho). We lived in a pair of two-story houses with white walls, no doors on the kitchen cabinets, and mismatched cookware. I'd learned to play rummy in North Carolina, but I hesitated when my housemates suggested a game. My losing streak was unbroken. But at SEA, by some miracle, I managed to win almost every game. I'd entered some kind of upside-down world so very different and so very distant from home.

When we weren't playing rummy back at the house, classes took place in the main building a few hundred yards across the big lawn. In Nautical Science, we learned to chart courses, navigate based on fixed shore locations and markers, and account for wind speed and current. Elliot, who would go on to captain our ship, taught us. The back of my journal lists

everyone I met at SEA and a few notes; Elliot's reads, “dry humor; great one-on-one; intimidating but great.” He was tall and lanky and wore thick, black-rimmed glasses – not exactly one of the old salty sea captains I'd read about, but he could answer any question we threw at him.

Oceanography was, surprisingly, not as difficult as I'd feared. I scribbled what anyone – teacher or student – said in a thick notebook, and I studied earlier and more often than my classmates. If I failed oceanography, I was afraid the staff wouldn't let me aboard the ship. But our instructor Kara (“fierce brow; cheerful/peppy; knows what she wants”) pointed us toward SEA's small but focused library and promised cookies if we visited her office for extra help.

Dan, a middle-aged man with a goatee (despite which, I noted “reminds me of Dad” alongside “eager to help”), taught our final class: Maritime Studies. While my classmates groaned through assignments and failed quizzes, I glided through ships from Norse longboats to galleons, cartography, and reading James Cook's *The Journals* and Herman Melville's *Typee*. Of course, when my classmates struggled with Maritime Studies, I helped them. After only a few days, we were already calling each other “shipmate.”

Outside of classes, we explored the surrounding area. A ten-minute walk would take us to a private beach owned by SEA. One afternoon, we traveled there as a group, and the first few to arrive darted into the water, only to shriek and sprint back out again. The ocean, even in June, was frigid. A few days later, I was running along the beach before classes, and I came upon the body of a seal, washed up on shore. The animal's head and tail were gone, possibly bitten off by a shark. More likely, though, a ship's propeller was to blame. Even though I had no direct hand in

the seal's death, I felt guilty. So often, ships in full sail look like birds gliding along the surface of the water. But they are made by humanity, not spawned from nature.

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June 27, 2007 – Falmouth, Massachusetts

Tomorrow is our last day of shore classes, and then Saturday I'm flying out to Hawaii. . .. We had our poster session for our research projects yesterday afternoon and there was this guy who's a SEA chief scientist who went around tearing my project completely down along with a few others, so that was more depressing than fun.

Although I'd started oceanography with low expectations, I'd fooled myself into thinking I might understand enough to design and implement a project that wouldn't immediately end up in the trash. I stayed up late at night, skimming the notebooks in the SEA library of previous student projects for ideas of what had and hadn't already been done, what was achievable on a ship and what failed. I chose a topic that probably seemed simplistic to my classmates but that I found challenging. I wanted to count and classify fish.

I focused on myctophids, also called lanternfish due to their bioluminescence. I planned to study the distribution of the fish – males, females, and babies – and the known ideal conditions for life compared to the environments we'd encounter on our voyage. To the chief scientist's credit, he probably didn't realize I lacked a background in oceanography and had no idea that my seemingly simple project was set up to fail. The part of the Pacific Ocean we'd cross lacked the conditions for diverse life. I'd find myctophids – but they'd all be the same type.

My ego deafened me to the solid advice beneath the chief scientist's criticism. He suggested I redesign my parameters; I heard, "What are you even doing here? You're going to fail at sea." But the poster presentations had come after we'd already submitted our formal project proposals – too late to make drastic changes. Besides, after I ranted to my shipmates (and was somewhat comforted to find that the chief scientist had frowned upon a few of their projects too), I set my sights on the next leg of our journey.

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July 4, 2007 – Honolulu, Hawaii

Yesterday didn't seem like we did much, but it was long. We got on the 8:15 a.m. bus to the USS Arizona *Memorial. When we arrived and got our tickets, we were told that our tour wouldn't start for over two hours – we were in group 21 and they had just called group 10. When it was our turn, we saw a little film about the Pearl Harbor attack and then were released onto a boat that motored us across the water to the USS* Arizona.

The Memorial is stunning and powerful. The structure we stood on was entirely white and arched over the sunken, corroded ship. Little circles of oil leaked out from under our feet and drifted away. At the far end, the wall had the names of all the Sailors and Marines who went down with the ship.

About half the class had arrived in Hawaii several days before we needed to board the SSV *Robert C. Seamans*. We did more that day, including a misguided hike from Diamond Head State Monument back to Honolulu thanks to misunderstanding closing times and bus routes, but the USS *Arizona* Memorial tour was on a different, deeper plane.

I've watched half a dozen movies about World War II, including that drawn-out, over-dramatized wartime romance *Pearl Harbor.* But those experiences feel one-dimensional compared to stepping onto the Memorial's deck, surrounded by an arch of gleaming white on all sides while the dark body of USS *Arizona* rests below water that is an otherworldly turquoise.

After the ferry leaves the dock to carry visitors to the *Arizona*, *g*uides are prohibited from speaking. The Memorial is silent, save for water lapping against the deck's pillars. The quiet has an eerie heaviness. The attack, which occurred almost sixty-six years before my visit, feels sudden and close. Though separated by generations, we are all connected – the more than eleven hundred lost souls of the *Arizona*; my Navy veteran grandfather, uncle, and cousin; my Coast Guard Auxiliary father; and me, a twenty-year-old realizing the weight of her country and family's maritime heritage.

We know the water holds danger, yet we continue to leave the shore.

***

July 7, 2007 – Pacific Ocean, approximately 100 nautical miles north of Hawaii

Today began bright and <u>early</u> at 0620 for breakfast, which consisted of crepes (the ones I had were strawberries and cream), fruit, yogurt, and cereal – and apple juice to drink. Then I dashed off to get my harness and then went on deck to begin the 0700-1300 watch. Although it seemed long at the time, I guess it did actually pass pretty quickly.

My least favorite part of deck watch = boat check. The upper deck isn't so bad – coil some lines (if nothing else then by the end I'll be a master rope coiler), pick up stray gear, make sure doors are secured, etc. The lower deck isn't so bad until the engine room. I hate it because

the ER seems really interesting, but I never want to be in there – tight and hot! I dash in and dash out, grabbing the numbers I need and moving on.

I have two favorite parts. The first is the first 30 minutes of standing at the helm. Getting a feel for the wind effect and trying to stay on the course ordered is interesting at first but soon becomes boring and hot and frustrating if there is no wind. Luckily, each shift change takes place on the hour (boat check every 30 minutes). I definitely like sail handling – maybe because it makes me feel more like a sailor than anything else? I don't know. However, by the end, I will have strong arms and calloused hands.

After reading about shoe-leather meat and biscuits so hard they broke teeth, I was surprised to find the food aboard the ship better than what I ate on land. On the first night, the crew welcomed us with a dinner of ahi tuna garnished with sesame seeds and seaweed. When my day to work in the galley came, I made chocolate chip pancakes for breakfast and nearly three hundred biscuits for snacks. (I over-estimated the ingredients a little bit and was titled "Biscuit Queen of the High Seas." Every Southern girl should be so proud as to earn such a moniker.) But my nautical expectations were not entirely dashed – I found weevils, a type of beetle that has plagued shipboard food stores for centuries, in the flour bin.

I flagged down the nearest crew member, Vicki ("3rd asst. scientist; funny impressions; direct; down to earth; medical officer"). She didn't even glance in the bin. "It's fine," Vicki said. "Weevils are a part of life on a ship. They won't hurt us."

The ship's steward, Laurie, paled when I mentioned them at the end of the day. "This isn't the eighteen hundreds! Throw out the flour – we aren't going to eat bugs!"

Although I would've gone along with Vicki's justification, I was secretly glad not to spend the next several weeks trying to pretend those little black shells were peppercorns.

The twenty-six of us rotated through individual chores in the galley and engine room, but for much of the day, we filled three watch sections. Each four- or six-hour shift saw us at the helm and handling sails on deck, gathering samples in nets and hunched over microscopes in the lab, or free to rest in our bunks or wander the ship. In the mornings and afternoons, the crew took control of the ship, and we attended classes on science, navigation, weather, and engineering. Despite all the focus on gathering data and samples of sea life, my gaze often slipped to the bowsprit jutting out from the front of the ship. As the horizon lay steady, the ship rolled just as brigantines and barques had for centuries.

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July 7, 2007 (continued)

We jibed (a turn from the stern that brings you around to having your back into the wind then through it) twice on that watch. For the first one, we had to strike the JT (jibtops'l). That left us with the mains'l, mainstays'l, forestays'l, and jib (a.k.a. the four lowers – a pretty standard configuration for a moderate breeze). The jibe puts the wind on the opposite side of the ship. Depending on what exactly we're doing, we tend to the port and starboard braces, as well as the mainsheet, heaving or easing depending on the circumstances. Whoo!

Longer stretches of time passed between journal entries at sea versus the ones written on land. Can you blame me? I was *on a ship*, with nothing but blue sky overhead and blue water all around. I never understood why people use “feeling blue” as synonymous with sadness.

Earth is “the blue planet,” nicknamed for the amount of water covering its surface. But how many people have the chance to touch that blue? For me, blue meant the peace of leaving the take-give-take of landlocked society and the freedom to skim waves aboard a vessel sprung from my imagination.

The SSV *Robert C. Seamans* is a one-hundred-and thirty-four-foot brigantine with a full complement of sails alongside a modern diesel engine and generators. I spent my free-time sprawled in the netting beneath the bow or learning to navigate with a sextant and celestial bodies. Although my fear of heights kept me from the topmost rigging, I strapped on a harness and climbed as far as I dared with my shipmates.

The watch officers who led our sections mirrored who we might one day become. Some, like Vicki, the medical officer, were in graduate programs for marine science. Others, like Jeremy, the first mate, brought years of sailing experience. He'd spent most of his twenties as an officer in the U.S. Coast Guard before joining SEA.

Although my dad had spent ten years volunteering in the Coast Guard Auxiliary, I mostly knew the active duty career branch from movies like *The Guardian* and *The Perfect Storm.* I'd toyed with the idea of joining the Coast Guard after graduating from college. The missions of helping people and protecting the environment combined with a chance to spend more time on the water appealed to me. The only problem was that I'd never even spoken with someone who had taken that path – until Jeremy took charge of my watch section.

Because I didn't have more than a vague idea of what joining the Coast Guard would entail (uniforms, boats, and of course, the coast), I mostly shied away from directly asking Jeremy directly about his experiences. Instead, I watched the way he stood back and only spoke

when he had carefully-chosen words to add. On deck watches, we forgot he was standing behind us, observing, until he stepped forward and suggested adjusting the helm. Jeremy studied the horizon, the sky, and the waves, as if he could see beyond our vision. He handled lines like they were extensions of his arms and hands. And when we messed up – which happened at least once every watch – he didn't have to say more than a word or two. We could see our fault in the downturn of his mouth and the curve of his shoulders.

Jeremy was one of those rare leaders who didn't claim his throne by shouting or justifying his position. He didn't demand our respect – he didn't even seem to care if he got it – but we longed to earn his approval. Jeremy set the example and trusted us to follow, no arguments or complaints. Elliot Rappaport, captain of the *Seamans*, did the same thing and earned our loyalty through his actions rather than his words. *This is what a Coast Guard officer and a sailor must be like,* I thought. *This is type of leader I need to become.*

I spent my free time on the top of the deck house, watching my shipmates run through sailing evolutions shouted by the watch officer at the helm. If an opening appeared, I'd jump on the line and haul or ease. I asked my more experienced shipmates to quiz me on the names and positions of the sails and lines. Jenny, my classmate who'd been sailing since she could walk, showed me with her hands as models how easing a sail too far would cause luffing, or flapping, and a decrease in speed. But as much as I focused on ship handling, I still put in my hours in the lab, counting microscopic pieces of plastic past midnight and classifying myctophids caught in the trawl nets. A Coast Guardsman would not let a second victim drown for the sake of teaching the first person they rescued to swim.

On one morning, my journal notes that I saw “three seabirds, mostly white with some black fringe” sleeping on the bow netting. By that point, shore lay more than three hundred miles behind us. I do not remember them clearly, but the description and distance make me wonder whether these three “seabirds” were albatrosses. This bird of ancient maritime myth and superstition is said to embody the souls of lost sailors. Some believe the albatross to bring good luck; others condemn the bird as an ill omen.

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July 10, 2007 – Pacific Ocean, approximately 300 nautical miles from Hawaii
It was a very windy night, a solid force 5. I was excited that I knew what to do – I stepped up to the JT halyard, ready to cast off (ease, then let free). It ended up easing me instead. I didn't even have it halfway off the pin (using my right hand, my left hand around the line above the pin – a mistake) when it jerked up and away, taking a nice amount of skin from my left hand with it. I let go immediately, minimizing the damage.

What did I do wrong? I've analyzed the situation and talked to my watch officer and we've settled on a number of things: I was hasty and went too fast, the weather, and the sail.

I was quite shocked when it first happened and stumbled into the lab to find Vicki, one of the medical officers. We went below deck to the main salon, where there was plenty of light to tend to my torn hand. I'm sorry to say I was in a pitiful state, all tears and talk of pain – it hurt A LOT.

The isolation of shipboard life from society brings tranquility, but that same isolation can cause minor incidents to explode into tragedies. Therefore, any time something goes wrong, a

responsible crew will retrace the mishap step-by-step and figure out how to prevent a repetition. Although my journal indicates confusion and an attempt to work through the incident, I know – and I knew then – exactly what happened.

The funny thing is, I wasn't even on deck watch that night. The 1900-2300 block had me in the galley on dish duty, but I'd finished early and headed up to the deck. I liked the quiet of night and the confetti-star sky overhead, and I also wanted another chance to handle the sails. At 2235 – less than half an hour before my watch would end and I'd crawl into my bunk – we set out to strike the jib topsail.

For the first time, I felt confident that I knew where to put my hands and which lines to maneuver in what order. But I was also tired; most nights, our sleep came a few hours at a time. I slipped into a fuzzy-edged dream and watched myself lay hands on the line, watched my right hand whip the halyard all the way off the pin with my left hand absently wrapped around the line. With nothing holding it back, the line ripped through my hand and tore the surface layers of skin off the top of my palm, the inside of my middle finger, and the tip of my ring finger. My index finger, though chaffed and sore, escaped the worst of the abrasions.

I feigned confusion out of shame. At a crucial moment, I'd chosen to be a bystander in my own life. I'd awaited the thrill of skillfully handling a sail, without consideration for actually going through the hard work. I was pretty sure Jeremy could see the truth, so I avoided his gaze. The Coast Guard wouldn't – and shouldn't – allow bystanders in their ranks.

While I stumbled below and cried in the mess, the deck watch reset the sail. That heavy canvas could've landed on someone. The loose end of the line could've whipped around and

caught one of my shipmates in the face. My injuries were as minor as possible but enough to keep me away from handling sails for days, and rightfully so.

My shipmates expressed nothing but concern for me. They also loved the manner in which my hand had to be bandaged. A Band-Aid covered the tip of my ring finger, but red gauze wrapped around the top of my palm and extended into a stiff cocoon for my middle finger, forcing the digit up in the air like a crimson beacon of rebellion.

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July 13, 2007 – Pacific Ocean, approximately 600 miles from Hawaii

Our next watch, 0300-0700, was pretty good. Although it's very peaceful standing lookout on the bow (especially during sunrise), if it's still dark, I always get pretty paranoid. Maybe a huge shark will jump across and bite me or something will crawl up the side of the ship. The ocean is full of mysteries, you know.

In the days after the accident, the journal takes a turn away from the lightness and energy in the first half. The change is subtle. Each page has fewer exclamation marks. In previous entries, brushes with seasickness are followed by tossing pills down my gullet, and then the story continues. Here, nausea lingers and reappears several times in the same day.

During the 0300-0700 deck watch, someone would spend an hour harnessed to the bow and scanning the horizon for other ships, pinpricks of light in the dark. Everything beyond our ship was so shrouded in blackness, only the sprinkling of stars near the horizon showed where the ocean ended and the sky began. Everyone not on watch lay below, tucked into their bunks

and rocked by gentle waves. The ocean lapped against the hull, but all else had quieted for the night.

My mind concocted terrifying sea monsters out of the blackness: tentacles crawling up the hull, eyes the size of life rings watching from dark waves. Leaving my post due to fear would mean trying to explain my imagination to Jeremy. But I didn't want to leave. Rather, some part of me wanted to draw the monsters to the surface. I could see unbuckling my harness and dropping over the side to be consumed by the ocean. I wasn't suicidal, only seduced. Between the star-filled sky overhead and the silent deck at my back, plunging into the waves felt like joining with something natural and ancient.

Before I had too long to consider, one of my watch mates would wander up with a ruby-tinted flashlight. Red light was said to impact night vision less. “Boat check,” my watch mate would say. “Any ships?”

I'd give the horizon another scan for far-off lights from other night voyagers. “Nothing.”

“Doing okay?”

“Yeah.”

“All right. Holly's coming on the next round to replace you.”

The red light and the familiar voice would disappear as if blown into the wind, leaving me alone once again with the terrifying, beautiful, tempting darkness.

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July 17, 2007 – Pacific Ocean, approximately 1,300 nautical miles west of San Francisco

Yesterday, Jeremy made me his "shadow" for deck watch. In lab and on deck, there will now be a shadow on each watch – someone who gives the commands, decides what needs to be done, gets things done, etc.

After helping Ashley wash the deck and go on a boat check, I came back and was told to think of what I needed to do to get the ship ready for being hove to at a science station. I knew we needed to strike the JT and the Fish and do a double-jibe (we were on a port tack and need to be on a port tack to deploy science equipment so that we don't run over it), but I wasn't sure of the exact steps of the jibe. Jeremy left me, Ashley, and Jenny alone to discuss it, and we came up with an answer, finally.

So, to get a ship hove to, you should have only four lowers (mains'l, mainstays'l, forestays'l, and jib) up – or in especially windy conditions, apparently you strike the jib as well. So we struck the JT and the Fish; that all went well. Then "Prepare to jibe! Square the braces!" Turn your rudder 20° to the right (or away from the wind), and pull the mains'l into midships. Have people on standby to pass the stays'ls and the jib. They'll look like they're blowing the other way a couple of times before they really mean it, and you pass them using the travelers (aka outhauls). Ask the helm to keep the wind on the quarter.

Now you've jibed, but the wind is on a starboard tack, so you have to jibe back to get the wind on a port tack again. Turn the rudder 20° to the left and ease your main to the right. During all of this, you should warn the galley before jibing, as it changes the heel of the boat, and we don't want soup flying out of pots and off stoves. Turn your braces back into the wind.

It went downhill from there. I felt like my watch members were working against me, and I kept having to say things like, "It's ten minutes late, but has someone done a boat check?" Jeremy was not impressed.

Halfway through our voyage, I was sinking. I'd had a few weeks to learn the lines, sails, and orders of maneuvers, and yet, when time came to call them, I forgot. I could remember at night when I wrote in my journal, but what good was that if I didn't know them while on the deck? I'd had even longer to become close to my classmates, yet when time came to work together, we clanged like misaligned pistons. Everyone was tired and frustrated with their projects, with scrubbing pots in the galley, with cleaning cabins on hands and knees every morning. Worst of all, everything I did earned a downward turn of Jeremy's mouth.

Biting winds chased away the tropical warmth. We'd sailed a thousand nautical miles more or less north from Hawaii before turning east toward San Francisco. Long pants and sleeves replaced tank tops and shorts. Gone were the days of spreading out like a starfish on the roof of the deck house, barefooted and drowsy. I had brought two pairs of pants, and I wore both of them, in addition to several pullovers, when I went on deck.

As the decks lost their warmth and my hand prevented me from doing much line handling, I spent more time shut away in the lab. I woke up in the middle of the night to watch the deployment of the bathyphotometer, which measured light and helped determine population sizes of bioluminescent organisms like my myctophids. We passed through a section of the ocean called the "Great Pacific Garbage Patch" due to the amount debris caught in the circular currents,

and I helped take water samples and count tiny pieces of plastic and halobates, a sea-traveling species of water strider bug.

Earlier in the voyage, everyone had written a letter to a hypothetical stranger, rolled the paper tight, and secured the message in a clean wine bottle. Now, at this turn of weather and spirits, Captain Elliot retrieved the bin with our bottled letters. Each paper had SEA's address printed on the bottom, and the hopes were that our messages would wash up on some distant shore. Kara, our chief scientist, said she'd received replies up to four years after dropping bottles into the sea – some from as far away as Micronesia and Japan. The idea of connecting with someone across the globe lifted our mood, even when two of the bottles collided mid-air and exploded in glittering shards before reaching the waves.

Captain Elliot also shook our malaise by reorganizing the watches and officers. Although Jeremy and I might happen to share space on deck, I would no longer be his understudy. If I failed to call the right steps in a sail handling evolution, Matt, my new deck watch officer and the ship's bosun, would be the one to correct me. That threat didn't weigh nearly as heavily as Jeremy's disapproval.

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July 26, 2007 – Pacific Ocean, approximately 400 nautical miles from San Francisco
I had dawn watch (0300-0700) in lab for the first time. I'm usually on deck for dawn, which is nice because I like to watch the sun rise over the ocean...

A few days later, for mid-watch (2300-0300) I was in engineering and given the quest to find the different types of interior lighting on the ship. I went around dismantling light fixtures, so

that was fun. It only took me about half the watch to do, so I worked on my oceanography project more. The end is so close!

But sadly, the end of the oceanography project and all that stress leaving means an end to the program as well. I will definitely miss the movement of the ship – it's very calming. I will not miss not showering and not being able to do laundry, except in a sink.

At our watch meeting today, we learned how to splice rope. It's really not that difficult. I hope I don't forget! My hand is continually improving, and people say they're amazed at how quickly it has healed.

For so much of the journey, the ship seemed like it would sail on forever. Although I never gained more than a basic appreciation for marine science, I loved *trying*. And I loved that no one needed money at sea; everyone rotated through chores and shared complaints but didn't stop scrubbing decks and dishes. Except for those few windless days, our efforts powered a ship across the ocean.

When someone's strength or will faltered, a shipmate would step in and help ease a line or compare the copepods found in the day's water sample to a typing chart. Sleep didn't come in the long, unbroken blocks found on land, but wakeups consisted of a gentle shake or a whisper instead of shrill, electronic beeps. Lubicky lightened the mood with invented songs and stretches when he saw the rest of us trudging. We sang as we scrubbed the deck, a chore that wasn't fun but was made lighter by our combined effort. We all helped each other along and developed the closeness forged only on long, isolated voyages away from civilization.

Sometimes, this closeness led to self-sacrifice fueled more by shortsightedness than courage.

During one of our last sample collections, Holly, Kim, and I hauled up the net using the ship's miniature crane. The net plopped over the gunwale and onto the deck, heavy with brownish-green sludge. Holly and Kim balked, but we needed to dump the net's contents into a bucket to be taken to the lab for analysis. I yanked up my sleeves, held my breath, and managed to slop the sludge into the bucket.

Eric strolled up as I wrangled the net. My clothes stayed mostly clean, but brownish-green smears ran up to my elbows. When I finished, I stood back from the bucket, triumphant and arms spread out like an eagle. Eric peered into the bucket and wrinkled his nose. “Did you forget to turn off the MSD?”

My face chilled, and I felt sicker than I had the entire trip. “MSD” stood for “Marine Sanitation Device.” In other words, the MSD was the machine that chopped human waste into sludge before discharging it into the ocean. Flipping the MSD “On/Off” switch in the engine room was one of the first steps to performing a net tow. We'd forgotten to turn off the MSD.

Holly and Kim stared at the greenish-brown stuff on my arms. When I finally felt like I could move without throwing up or passing out, I stumbled into the lab and scrubbed my arms raw in the metal sink. After about ten minutes, Holly came up to my elbow. “You're okay. Vicki looked at the bucket and said it's just an algal bloom.”

That evening at dinner, my shipmates gave me a little extra room on either side. I laughed off the bucket incident, but everyone still eyed my hands. Rumors hold just as much power at sea

as they do on land. Fortunately, the rumor had waned by the next morning, and no one shrank away when I passed them a plate of pancakes.

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July 31, 2007 – Pacific Ocean, fewer than 100 nautical miles from San Francisco

Land was sighted!! It was foggy and cold outside, but you could still see the outline of the Ferrel Islands off the starboard side. Eventually they disappeared but a new distraction took their place: wildlife! Whales were sighted a couple hundred yards off both sides – Kara had an i.d. book and thought maybe pilot whales? But that's not all! Seals (or sea lions?) jumped across our wake for a few minutes. And there were TONS of birds – most exciting of which were the pelicans.

After the wildlife excitement passed, you could begin to see a mountainous outline off the port side. I took bow lookout after the first pilot boat appeared and buoys began to show up. The Golden Gate Bridge's outline was just starting to be visible through the fog. Following rotation, I was on the helm, and I can confidently say that was one of my most stressful moments on board. Normally, I don't have a problem staying with 5° of course ordered, but precision was required.

Huge tankers and container ships surrounded us as we neared San Francisco Bay. Smaller boats carrying local pilots zipped to and from the massive vessels, dropping off or picking up special navigators hired by companies to help steer ships through a gauntlet of traffic channels and natural boundaries.

I stood at the helm. Captain Elliot ordered a course change every few minutes. That alongside the difficulty of sticking to a single course tired my arms. The currents tried to nudge

us to the side, and unlike most of our voyage, we had little room for error. The captain stood over my shoulder, and Jeremy watched the nearing land from the other side of the helm. I brought us within a few hundred yards of the Golden Gate Bridge before we rotated jobs. I would've loved to have taken us all the way into the Bay, but I didn't argue. We needed to strike the sails, and we were short-handed. Everyone except the four of us on deck watch had climbed into the rigging for the best view of San Francisco Bay.

We switched to the engine and motored into the Bay to set anchor for the night. The next day, we headed to our final anchorage, and we passed Alcatraz Island along the way. A sign near the dock warning mariners that the island is a penitentiary read “INDIANS WELCOME” and “INDIAN LAND” in red paint, a reminder of the 1969-1971 American Indian Occupation that had lasting impacts on federal policy. The graffiti was also reminder that our trip was ending, that we were almost within society's grasp again.

My journal also describes “a neat Coast Guard boat” speeding through the Bay, and “a CG helicopter that came over and flew around us too.” One afternoon early in the voyage, before things turned cold and hard, I'd mentioned to Jeremy that I might join the Coast Guard. He hadn't exactly cheered me onward – but he also hadn't told me to pick something else. Although I felt like a screw-up most of the time, Jeremy didn't dissuade me from taking on responsibility that could involve life or death decisions. He'd simply asked that I figure out why I wanted to join. Jeremy could guide, but he wouldn't direct. He knew that I had to figure out the next part of my life on my own.

The Test

> Anyone who aspires to be a seaman must begin by acquiring a firsthand acquaintance with the relentless forces of wind and sea. Only by starting with such an understanding can the sailor learn to recognize and respect both personal limits and those of the ship on which he or she must depend both for survival and the successful accomplishment of assigned missions.
>
> -Captain David V. V. Wood, Forward: *Eagle Seamanship*

One photo exists from my entrance into Coast Guard Officer Candidate School. I'm walking away from the camera – a phone, actually, so the image has a blurry, dreamy quality – wearing a dark teal button down tucked into black slacks. My hair is twisted into a bun, and I'm leaning forward under the black and gray duffle bag slung over my shoulder.

Past me is a stone archway that reads "CHASE." Beyond the arch, several rows of Coast Guard cadets in midnight blue operational uniforms and ball caps squat on a concrete quad. There is a lone man in his Service Dress Blues standing below the arch, watching me with his hands folded in front of his hips. We are the first two members of Officer Candidate School class 1-10 to arrive. Every part of me screamed to leave, that I didn't belong, that this would be more difficult than anything I'd ever done.

A month before the photo, a woman had called and offered me a spot in the next class.

A month before the call, a message on official Coast Guard letterhead had arrived placing me seventh on the wait list.

And four months before the letter, my recruiter had mailed a thick folder with personal essays, letters of recommendations, a resume, a background check, health records, and interview results to Coast Guard headquarters. Of the fifty spots available, class 1-10 only reserved six for

people who had never served in the military. Thousands of people applied from all across the country. My chances were negligible. The recruiter encouraged me to start working on my next application package.

The man under the arch introduced himself as “Bradbury.” We quietly watched the cadets squatting and doing push-ups while we waited for the rest of the class to arrive. Shouts of “One! Two! Three! Four!” and so on echoed around brick walls on three of the quad's four sides. I trembled. Alternating currents of excitement (“I can't believe I'm here!”) and terror (“I can't believe I'm here. . ..”) coursed through me.

The rest of the day only remains in flashes:

Dropping luggage in two- and three-person rooms with the same modular loft beds made of pale wood that had furnished my college dorm.

Staff officers in identical pale blue button-downs and dark blue slacks pacing in front of us and barking rules.

Trembling.

Standing in lines with shoulders back and eyes forward but staring at nothing.

Waiting in the hallway outside of the uniform shop to be measured for trousers and gym shorts and ball caps and a one-piece bathing suit, all in identical shades of midnight blue.

***

Early in the afternoon, half of us filled out paperwork while the others ate cold-cut sandwiches and chips off paper plates. Stern-faced men and women in stiff blue suits hunched over card tables and brushed crumbs off their lapels. I walked my questionnaire – emergency contacts,

allergies, leadership experience – to the man sitting behind the front table. Although he hadn't smiled once, this man's scowl didn't dig into his face as deeply as the other staff members' did.

"I'm done, Sir," I said.

The man held my gaze as he took my paper and rested it on the stack. His pale blue eyes matched his shirt, and his mustache mirrored the white of his hair. "Do you know the difference between officers and enlisted?"

"Yes, Sir." That wasn't exactly true. I knew there *were* officers and enlisted. I also knew that "Yes, Sir," was the answer that would get me yelled at the least.

He tapped the gold anchor pinned to his collar. "Then why have you been calling me 'Sir' all day?"

"I just – I don't know, Si– I don't know." My face warmed. If "Sir" was wrong, I didn't know how to address him. What else was there?

He sighed and dropped his gaze to the floor for a moment, probably realizing I'd try for a day or so, then flunk out. Could you flunk out of Officer Candidate School? My mind raced through all the manuals I'd read, all the novels tracing great Coast Guard rescues through history. I could remember the stories and all the bits of information about dressing neatly and writing respectfully and how fast I had to run and how far I had to swim. But I'd somehow vaulted over the most basic pieces of information. All the staff wore little metal pins in their collar, and I had no idea what any of them meant.

"You call me 'Chief.' If you address me as 'Sir' one more time, you'll owe me fifty push-ups."

"Y-yes, Si–*Chief*."

***

That evening, fifty of us huddled together on the linoleum floor of the barracks corridor as a few staff officers leaned against the wall in front of us. Their faces were new; the officers (and the chief) who'd prodded us through the day had gone home, likely tired from shouting at us for not moving fast enough or assembling into a straight line on the first try.

A woman with coffee-hued hair twisted into a bun and fake French tips on her nails introduced herself as Lieutenant Margita. “If you thought today was tough, I have bad news for you,” she said.

I chewed the inside of my cheek. My arms and legs felt detached; I'd spent nearly the whole day shaking. The last twelve hours had felt like twelve days, and, not for the last time, I wondered whether I'd made a huge mistake in bounding toward OCS.

The lieutenant crossed her arms. “After tonight, you will not talk in the halls. Your uniform will be lint-free. Your boots will always be shined. You will greet staff members as soon as you see them, even if they're all the way at the end of the hall. You will spend a lot of time face-down in the passageway until you learn to work together. But you will not be personally targeted.”

***

There were two phrases I clung to throughout OCS. The first was the lieutenant’s assertion that any discipline we met would not be personal. The second happened around four-thirty the next morning, after a sleepless night on a thin mattress. Six staff officers stormed the halls and screamed for us to get out there and line up. Our operational dress uniforms were still at the tailor shop, so we scrambled out of our rooms wearing PT gear: gray t-shirts, dark blue gym shorts,

and black sneakers. Nearly blind with exhaustion and panic, I scrambled for a spot on the line that ran down the center of the corridor. Ellerson, a tall blonde with a bright smile and a songbird voice, squeezed in next to me. “Doing okay, sister-pants?”

My heart pounded in my ears and my head felt wobbly, but I managed a nod.

I’d only met Ellerson the previous day, and we hadn’t exchanged more than a few whispered words. But she’d risked squats or yelling or whatever else the staff officers could throw at us to check-in with the pale-faced, trembling creature beside her. Even though Ellerson had done it in a playful way, she’d claimed me as a sister by virtue of us standing together before dawn on the cold linoleum.

***

In between shouting at us to do push-ups and burpees and to spout memorized facts from a booklet called “Spindrift” that covered Coast Guard history and maritime law, the staff officers told us how easy it was to quit. All we had to do was go into one of their offices three separate times and request to leave. One person left on the second day. No one talked about her; she just disappeared.

I thought about leaving every single night. As my head rested on the thin pillow, my scalp, finally free from the bun I wore for eighteen hours a day, ached. A Möbius strip of doubt looped through my head:

You don't belong here.

You made a huge mistake. You can quit, but everyone will know you're a failure. You'll disappoint everyone. What else would you do with your life? Dad's so proud that you're here. But he wouldn't

be if he knew that you don't know anything. You'll never memorize Spindrift and the Organization & Regulation Manual or recognize the staff officers from down the hall before they call you out.

Everyone else is doing fine. But you?

You don't belong here.

***

At some time in the fourth week, I felt particularly broken down and lost. I barely knew which way to thread my belt most of the time, and our responsibilities were growing. Our class was divided into two platoons, and everyone rotated through the leadership roles of platoon commander, executive officer, guidon, and squad leader. The staff had assigned the more experienced members of our class the first few rotations, but my turn would eventually arrive. I could barely dress myself; I felt entirely incapable of leading twenty-something men and women who had spent years in the military.

Ironically, I'd always been bored with the pace of learning in school. Less so in college, but even when I could choose more intense courses, I was always reading ahead. But OCS moved too fast – when I was just getting the hang of the types of ships, the rest of the class advanced to aircrafts. Wolves nipped at my heels as I struggled to stay in the pack. The staff seemed to wait in every shadow until I slipped up and whispered something to my roommate after lights out or moved my drill rifle to my shoulder a second after everyone else.

I went to the door of Lieutenant Tanksley, one of the staff officers assigned to my platoon, and slapped the wall as required. “Good afternoon, Sir. Officer Candidate Hoskins, request permission to enter, Sir.”

“Enter.”

I squared the corner, took two steps inside and onto the carpet, and kept my eyes straight forward even though Lieutenant Tanksley sat behind a desk two feet below my gaze. Suddenly, going to his office felt like a cowardly form of surrender. A few seconds of silence passed.

“Close the door and have a seat, Hoskins.”

I did as he ordered but kept my gaze over his shoulder. The staff called it “eyes in the boat,” and looking at someone without permission could earn an officer candidate “incentive exercises.” This type of punishment was initially doled out to the offending individual only; lately, however, if one officer candidate earned push-ups or burpees, everyone got called out into the halls to complete our shipmate's exercises. Sometimes, we didn't even understand the reason for the punishment. It was easiest just to fall to the deck, sweat, and move on with the day.

“You can look at me and relax. Are you doing okay?”

The personal nature of the invitation and question caught me off-guard. My gaze darted to Lieutenant Tanksley a few times before settling on his eyebrows. I remained on the edge of the chair, but I forced my shoulders down. “I'm . . . struggling, Sir.”

Lieutenant Tanksley leaned back, propped his elbows on the arms of the chair, and tented his fingers. “How’re your grades?”

I swallowed. “Not good. Sir.”

I'd made mostly As in college, but at OCS, I failed every other test. Military rank and structure were particularly challenging. Aligning strangers into a hierarchy with positions that innately demanded respect felt wrong. And how did it make sense that the abbreviation for captain was four letters (CAPT), but commander only had three (CDR)?

“But you aren't thinking of quitting, right?”

I chewed the inside of my cheek. “I don't think I'll ever catch up, Sir.”

Lieutenant Tanksley dropped his hands and bent forward. “You were a civilian, right? Straight from college?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“So you started out way behind everyone else. Nunez was on the list to make chief petty officer when he arrived; that guy's been around this stuff for fifteen years. Of course you're not going to know as much as him.” Lieutenant Tanksley dropped his voice. “Don't go spreading it around, but the Coast Guard put a lot of resources into finding the right people and bringing them here. They don't *really* want you guys quitting.”

“Am I ever going to feel caught up, Sir?”

“People who come in as civilians usually start to find their bearings around week eight. Can you stick it out that long?”

I'd made it halfway there. “Yes, Sir.” I stood and straightened my shoulders. “By your leave, Sir.”

Lieutenant Tanksley pointed to the empty carpet beside his desk. “Twenty push-ups first.”

I didn't mind; at least he hadn't called everyone out into the hall because I'd faltered.

***

My shipmates and I helped each other as best as we could. Canul taught the rest of us how to melt shoe polish with a lighter, though even with that tip, no one else could match the glassy shine of his boots. Duncan had the strongest lungs and led songs on our formation runs back from the gym every morning. I wasn’t exactly thrilled to find that my best skills lay in making

beds, but I helped my shipmates tuck their sheets into hospital corners, then layer the blankets on top exactly ten inches from the top of the bed and turned down to reveal six inches of top sheet.

The tips we traded didn't always work out so well. Several people nearly set themselves on fire while trying to get Canul's glassy shine on their boots. Someone told me the secret to a crisp operational dress uniform – which looked slouchy under the best circumstances – was starch. One evening, I spent all of study hour spraying starch on my uniforms and ironing them flat. There was no way the staff officers would find a wrinkle on me at the next day's uniform inspection.

The following morning at formation, Ellerson pointedly glanced at my legs. I was horrified to notice a streak of white, crusty starch on the thigh of my midnight-blue pants. It was too late to switch uniforms or even dash to the bathroom to wash off the stain. Lieutenant Boyd, whose glacier-blue eyes locked onto my biggest screw-ups with laser precision, had already started inspecting the row of officer candidates in front of mine. Jean-Charles, his shadow for the day, followed a step behind with a clipboard and jotted down the offenses he listed.

When Lieutenant Boyd paused in front of me, I kept my eyes in the boat. My posture was perfect; my wrists hung parallel to the side seams of my pants, and my fingers were curled to the exact size of a roll of quarters. My voice was impenetrable. "Good morning, Lieutenant Boyd."

The lieutenant leaned forward as if trying to catch my eye. I held my gaze a million miles away but steady. "What do you see?" he said.

"Sir, I see lights. Red over green, sailing machine; green over white, trawling at night; red over white, fishing boat in sight; white over red, pilot ahead; and red over red, captain is dead."

Lieutenant Boyd stepped back and studied my uniform. Normally, staff officers were quick to rattle off our failures, but his laser gaze rested on the crusty streak on my thigh for a few seconds. I desperately hoped that he would decide trying to name the messy substance would be too risky; the crust looked more like bodily fluids than starch. Maybe he would just leave me alone. We could both pretend this awkward situation never happened.

But OCS was not a place for hope.

"Dirt on trousers, right thigh."

Jean-Charles scribbled the note and moved with Lieutenant Boyd as he stepped to the next officer candidate. While he scanned and quizzed, Jean-Charles's gaze darted down to my pants. She pressed her lips together and her eyes arched with silent laughter. I bit my cheeks and held my breath to suppress giggles. The whole situation was so ridiculous. *Dirt?* And how would starch on my pants be disastrous in the real world? Would my messy appearance cause a ship to run aground? None of it really mattered. But at least something had finally happened to make Lieutenant Boyd pause.

***

Physical activity in the corridors and out on the concrete quad dominated the first couple of weeks. Later, we marched to class after morning uniform inspection and sat through lectures until shortly before dinner (with a break for lunch). Our studies included rates and ranks, military justice, and Coast Guard correspondence, and nearly every lesson came in the form of a Power Point presentation. We only got five or six hours of sleep at night and had no access to caffeine, so I fell asleep in every class.

At first, I felt awful for sleeping during a lecture; I'd *never* dozed in a class before. But eventually, I stopped caring about missing information or disrespecting our teachers. My grades already had me in the bottom ten percent of the class, and I figured that if the staff officers – who doubled as our teachers – wanted me to stay awake, they'd at least give us coffee that wasn't decaf.

My habits as a student weren't the only thing that flipped upside down. Following the stereotype of a bookworm and high-performing student, I was never in great physical shape. I'd spent four years on my high school's track and field team for the camaraderie, and fortunately, my coach never seemed to mind that I earned last place every time I threw shotput and discus. For most of my childhood, I couldn't even run a mile.

But while I screwed up my mental preparation for OCS, I'd adapted my body to running miles and miles every week. I'd swum thousands of yards in the public pool. I'd done push-ups and crunches and squats. I'd stopped flexing in the mirror and focused on the numbers, pushing myself harder each week. Every movie about training in the military emphasizes the physical rigor. I wanted to be *G.I. Jane*, minus the buzz cut.

Though I scrambled near the bottom of academic ranks, I sprinted toward the top in physical tests. On the mile and a half run, I glided past my panting, shuffling shipmates. I pumped up and down with our cadence push-ups until time had nearly ended. With each test, I improved my personal lap record in the pool.

Somehow, without even realizing what had happened, I transitioned from an intellectual weakling to a dumb jock. I looked forward to time on the track or in the weight room because no

one would be shouting in my face or demanding answers that I didn't know. And time in the pool meant returning to the water, where I'd always felt comfortable.

***

Every Officer Candidate School class takes a cruise on the USCGC *Eagle*, a three-masted barque. Some sail around Puerto Rico or cross the seas between tropical islands. My class boarded a school bus and headed a few miles down the road from the Coast Guard Academy, to a pier where the *Eagle* was tied up. We would spend a week off the coast of the Northeast, cutting squares in empty ocean.

Although the *Eagle* offered the adventure of sails to handle and rigging to climb, most of us were just relieved to spend a week out from under the constant glare of staff officers. A few of our wardens came along with us, but off the school's campus, they didn't make us brace against the bulkhead and perfect our barracks for inspection. Instead, our beds were narrow racks built into the walls below decks, stacked three high without enough head space to even sit up. The men, most of whom were around 6' or taller, complained of tight space and hitting their heads. I, at 5'4", and most of the other women, found them cozy. It was almost as if the ship were intended for a smaller-bodied crew.

On the first day, we toured all two hundred and ninety-five feet of the ship. Although the cruise felt like vacation compared to the daily routine at OCS, it wasn't. We were assigned to duty sections and would learn the handle the sails, plot courses, crawl around the engine room, and scrub dishes. I thrilled at the prospect of returning to sea, and my passions, dampened by a feeling of constant failure for the past month, re-awoke.

One of our stations that first day involved climbing a triangular net called a shroud to a platform (a “top,” short for “Fighting top,” where marines were stationed in battle) around forty feet high on a mast. We were supposed to haul ourselves onto the top, then climb down the shroud attached to the opposite side. But when I reached the end of the first shroud, I froze. The top had a hole near the mast, and climbers had to let go of the shroud and boost themselves through the hole and onto the top. Despite all those push-ups, my arms felt too weak to get me through the hole.

Half my shipmates had gone before, and the rest stood below and watched. I saw myself trying to boost my body through the hole, my arms shaking and faltering, my body dropping to the deck. The petty officer working the top to help us across leaned down and urged me forward. My shipmates were waiting. I'd climbed high before. Only a couple of years earlier on the SSV *Robert C. Seamans*, I'd strapped on a harness and scrambled up to stand on a yardarm and watch the sunset. I'd been afraid then, sure, but I'd still done it. Yet on the *Eagle*, the strength I'd worked so hard to build left me clinging to the shroud with white knuckles.

The petty officer softened his tone and extended a hand. I shook my head. “I'm sorry. I can't. I have to go back.”

My shipmates watched me climb back down the shroud. A few told me not to worry about it, but most focused on their own climb. I was the only one who didn't finish. I blinked away tears of self-hate and shame, and I moved onto the next station to learn the lines on a pin rail.

We weren't scheduled to pull away from the pier until the next morning, so that evening, we were free from duty and could explore and relax. Two of my friends, Geyer and Valadez, said they wanted to climb the shrouds again.

“Come on.” Geyer's eyes and mouth opened wide whenever she faced a challenge. She looked like the fun-but-dangerous sort of crazy.

My stomach twisted. “I'm good, thanks.”

Valadez stood to my right. With my back to the bulkhead, I would have to push past the two of them to leave. “Come with us,” she said. “Just try one more time.”

“Fine.”

Locked between the two of them, I trudged to the bottom of the shroud. From the deck, the top looked like a small, fragile cracker. Geyer shouted that we were coming up, and Cheney peered through the hole. She'd been my first roommate at OCS and had taught me how to dress myself as I fumbled with belts and blousing straps in the pre-dawn darkness. “Hoskins too?”

Geyer had already launched herself at the netting. Valadez nudged me forward. “Yup. Here she comes!”

Valadez waited for me to climb a few feet before she joined at my side. Geyer slowed her pace to mine. As we neared the top, the weakness returned, and my arms and legs trembled so hard that the shroud shook. Geyer boosted herself through the hole, disappeared under a rectangle of dimming, slate-blue sky, and then reappeared and grinned down. “You're there, Hoskins.”

The rope grated my palms and my fingers started to numb. “I can't let go. I'm going to fall.”

“If you do, we'll have a Viking funeral for you and I'll write a nice letter to your mom and dad. But you won't.”

Cheney's face appeared on the opposite side of the hole from Geyer. “Move slowly. Take your right hand off the shroud and put it on the edge of the hole. Good, there you go.”

My hand only brushed the top before it flew back to the shroud. “My arms are too weak.”

“Shut up,” Valadez said. As the shroud narrowed, she'd had to drop below me instead of beside me. I couldn't retreat without kicking her in the face. “You beat Geyer in push-ups, and she's up there.”

“I'm too heavy.”

Geyer pursed her lips. “I'm not even going to dignify that with a response. Now get up here before the sun sets and they make us go down.”

My right hand found the edge of the hole again, and this time, despite the trembling in my arm, my hand stayed in place. My left hand fumbled through the air and landed beside my right one. Geyer had moved to Cheney's side, and together, they held my arms, and helped haul me onto the top. My legs banged through the hole, and I collapsed onto my back, panting, and stared up at the dimming sky.

By the time I felt strong enough to push myself up to sitting, Valadez had joined us. The three of them watched the golden and orange glow on the horizon. They glanced back at me, probably to make sure I wasn't about the roll off the edge.

“We should probably climb back down now,” Cheney said. She scooted towards the hole then hooked her toes into the top loops of the shroud.

Valadez descended next. Geyer didn't look like she wanted to leave at all, but we all had to be back on the deck by sundown for safety. I inched toward the hole and her gaze darted between me and the deck, probably wondering if I was going to freeze up and she'd have to lash me to her back and carry both of us.

Though my arms still trembled a bit, my whole body felt stronger as I lowered myself back onto the shroud. My toes found each loop, and the rope's roughness no longer hurt my hands. I didn't stop moving until my boots hit the deck.

A sense of accomplishment overshadowed the embarrassment of the afternoon's failed climb. Perhaps even more than that, Geyer, Valadez, and Cheney had spent the time and effort to basically force me to the top. They knew I'd regret never making the climb; it would become a barrier between the rest of the class and me, if only in my mind. Those women refused to let me fall behind.

***

For the rest of the voyage, we hauled the barque's thick lines, drew diagrams of the engineering systems, and donned heavy jumpsuits and full-face respirators to fight fake fires. We were given hammers and blocks and had to stop the water from gushing out of a pipe in a simulated shipboard leak. We tracked our course on giant charts and made estimates based on the ship's direction and speed. I'd already learned how to navigate with a sextant during my voyage on the *Seamans*, and I helped my shipmates find a star and lower it to the horizon by adjusting the sextant's arm.

Although the wind didn't cooperate for much of the voyage, forcing us to rely on engine power, we occasionally had enough of a breeze to run through sailing evolutions. I had deck duty

on one of these afternoons, and I happened to be standing near the quarterdeck. One of the *Eagle*'s lieutenants asked me to come up to the bridge. I cringed and scanned my memory for what I'd done in the previous half hour. Mostly, I'd just stood on the deck. OCS had trained me to believe that officers constantly watched for faults and severely punished each divergence.

When I arrived on the bridge, the lieutenant handed me a megaphone and introduced me to Captain Teri Jordan. A few guests had come along on our voyage, but the ship was so large, the two of us hadn't crossed paths until that moment. Besides, I figured the higher the officers' ranks, the meaner they probably had to be to get there.

Captain Jordan and I would have the conn during the tack. Several of my classmates were assigned as mast captains (under the supervision of *Eagle* crew members) who would break down the conn's orders for each rail and line captain. Everyone who wasn't asleep or manning a critical station had gathered on the deck to help us tack.

The bluntness of the captain's silver bob mirrored her sharp nose and chin. She matched me in physical size, yet she held herself like a grizzly bear.

"So, what should we do first?" Captain Jordan crossed her arms and studied me.

"All hands to sailing stations, Captain?"

"Sounds good."

Through the megaphone, I relayed the order to the deck below. Sixty midnight-blue figures dispersed and settled at rails around the masts and along the deck edges. I turned back to the captain. "Helm's al-"

Her eyebrows drew together before I got the words out, and I back-tracked. "Ready about, Captain?"

“That's more like it.”

I shouted the order. Hearing my quiet, high voice echo around the deck was unnerving. I didn't like being in the spotlight, where everyone could see when I screwed up.

Calls rose from the deck as each mast captain readied his or her station.

As I passed the next order - “Helm's alee” - by the captain, I realized that this evolution *wasn't* all on me. If I screwed up, the only one who would know was the captain. And as fierce as she looked, she hadn't chewed me up for my mistakes.

When we finished the evolution, we passed the conn back to the *Eagle*'s crew, and I scrambled back down to the main deck to rejoin the mass of blue. I didn't give a second thought to the captain, other than getting out from under her gaze. I figured we'd never cross paths again. Of course, that's not the way the universe sometimes works.

Five years later, Captain Jordan transferred to my unit and became my supervisor. I was a lieutenant and falling out of love with the Coast Guard. She had spent her career commanding ships and felt pinned-in and frustrated behind her new desk. I had been so quick to forget her face, but she instantly recognized mine. When my supervisor introduced us, Captain Jordan studied my face, smiled, and said, “Yes, I know Ms. Hoskins. She and I had the conn together on the *Eagle*. . ..”

***

At the end of the week, my classmates and I packed our dark green sea bags and trudged down the pier and back onto the school bus. Back to crisp hospital corners on sheets and pre-dawn runs to the gym. Back to sitting through day after day of Power Point presentations. Back to shouting and bracing and ever-present scrutiny.

But the voice in the back of my head that spoke up when the barracks darkened and told me that I didn't belong, that I'd made a huge mistake – that shout started to shrink. My grades rose a few points. The voice quieted to a whisper, and I fell asleep sooner. Though I remained in the bottom half of the class, and the voice never disappeared, I started to believe that I might just survive. Maybe I'd even go on to make a half-way decent officer.

At the end of the eighth week, we gathered in the officers' mess at the Academy for a special dinner. After we ate, Lieutenant Boyd called each of us up to the stage and handed us a gift bag. Inside the bag was a ball cap with the name of our first unit, where we'd go after graduating OCS.

Two weeks earlier, we'd each received a list of open billets and were told to pick our top ten. The assignment officers would consider our preferences as much as they could, but the needs of the service would ultimately decide our placements. I'd chosen a variety of billets that would let me train in the Coast Guard's response missions – operating small boats, investigating pollution incidents, boarding other vessels. We'd learned enough about those jobs in class that I felt comfortable committing my next few years to them.

I needed a tenth position and decided to pick one with which no one was familiar: Port Operations Chief. The title sounded very tactical, although it was at a unit in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Getting stationed that far inland wasn't ideal, but at one out of ten, the risk of getting assigned there felt small.

Guess whose hat said "Marine Safety Unit Pittsburgh"?

I shook Lieutenant Boyd's hand and returned to my seat, feeling a bit bewildered but still hopeful. A few of my shipmates, like Geyer, grinned widely when they saw their hats and

realized they received their top pick. Others were not so lucky. Several of my classmates who had spent the week-long *Eagle* cruise sick and miserable received assignments to cutters, which often spent months at sea. One woman, a divorcee, had pleaded with assignment officers for a billet close to her family near the Great Lakes so she could argue for custody of her children. She received a position in Louisiana and spent the rest of the evening sobbing in the bathroom.

Needs of the service.

***

In the last few weeks of OCS, the staff officers tightened their grip a bit. We could earn liberty on the weekends and address the officers in the hallway like normal people instead of throwing our backs against the wall and shouting greetings from thirty feet away. One of the lieutenants who had always insulted my salute eventually took the time to tell me I needed to stiffen my fingers more. Another staff officer bought me a cup of coffee for helping him with a side project. Seeing our wardens warm into humans was weird and unnerving. I kept waiting for traps to spring.

Leading up to our graduation, the Academy hosted a string of events for friends and family, including a formal dinner and a meet-and-greet breakfast. My mom and her boyfriend drove up from North Carolina, as did my dad, separately. Dad never stopped grinning, though he probably felt awkward sitting at the same table as my mom. They'd barely spoken in the past four years. Mom – who feared I'd get shot by pirates and drug dealers when I'd first decided to join the Coast Guard – kept tearing up and wanted to take so many pictures of me in my crisp uniform that we had to sprint to make every event on time.

After we shook hands with the Vice Commandant, crossed the stage, and received prop rolled papers (our commissioning certificates would arrive in the mail), we all headed back to the barracks to pack our things. One by one, my shipmates disappeared to their new lives.

Geyer had her twenty-year career planned out tour-by-tour, but after some bad run-ins with senior enlisted members on her first cutter, she left the service a year before I did.

Valadez rose from an engineering officer in training on a cutter to managing major construction projects for the Coast Guard.

Cheney worked her way up to a duty officer position in a Command Center, where she managed responses from search and rescue to vessel distress calls to oil spills.

And I headed to Pittsburgh with some small degree of that same nervous tremble that filled me on the first day of Officer Candidate School. I didn't know what to expect, but even if it turned out to be horrible, I was confident that I'd survive and come out stronger on the other side.

At the Helm

> To a person on land the sight of a ship's sails, bleached by the sun, stretched by wind, is the very image of airy lightness. In fact, a sail is made of very heavy canvas. When one gets tangled on a spar it must be pulled loose quickly or it can tear or burst, and in so doing, pull down rigging, spars, or even a mast. A sail out of control can flick like a wild whip and send a full-grown sailor into a senseless spin.
>
> -Avi, *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*

After a year and a half in the Coast Guard, I earned a promotion from ensign to lieutenant junior grade. "Promotion" might sound like I was doing great things – bringing honor to the service, helping people, saving lives – but the only ensigns who didn't rise in rank had made serious missteps like driving drunk or stealing unit funds. Arriving ten minutes late to work every morning was not enough to prevent my promotion, but once a month the department head, Lieutenant Preston, called me into his office to discuss my tardiness and the pictures of kittens I had printed out to cover the tan walls of my cubicle. I think he could tell I was unhappy, but the Command only saw my behavior as unprofessional.

The Commanding Officer and Executive Officer at Marine Safety Unit Pittsburgh didn't squash morale on purpose. They thought we should earn satisfaction through crawling around a rust-streaked barge during an inspection or shuffling around an engineering building with two inches of grease on the floor. We also had mandatory morale days a few times per year. These events – ranging from playing basketball to watching a baseball game – were well-attended by the enlisted and me. Occasionally another junior officer would come along, but the Command never joined us.

I'd joined the Coast Guard for a sense of belonging and camaraderie, but the enlisted members scrambled out of the door at four every afternoon without even a "goodbye." The officers had to stay, even if we had nothing to do, because leaving before your boss was viewed as disrespectful. I adhered to this policy for the first six months, trying to build a good relationship with my boss, before I realized I could stay an extra half hour and then slip out of the back door without Lieutenant Preston saying anything.

***

One afternoon, Chief Petty Officer Hall wandered into my cubicle. Though he had more years enlisted in the Coast Guard than I had on Earth – twenty-six to my twenty-three – as an officer, I was his supervisor. He moved a stack of binders and the *Code of Federal Regulations* from my spare chair to the floor and settled into the seat. Chief propped the rubber sole of his boot on top of an ajar drawer, careful not to smear black polish on the furniture. The corner of a blue-eyed tabby print waved in the breeze from a ceiling vent and tapped Chief Hall's graying temple several times. He leaned away and glared at the kitten. "Ma'am, they're breeding."

I turned away from an email to my division reminding them that their haircuts had to be faded, not blocked, at the napes of their necks. "You don't approve, Chief?"

I wanted everyone's approval, though the opinions of some mattered more than others. Seeing the grin on a petty officer's face when I used a glamour shot of Burt Reynolds in a vehicular safety presentation was worth another private talk with Lieutenant Preston on professionalism. The opinion of the middle-aged man slouched in my cubicle that afternoon mattered most of all.

Chief and I got along well. I trusted him and wanted his approval at least in part because he so strongly reminded me of my dad. He and Dad both wore their hair faded down the backs and sides, but a bit longer on top so they could part it. They also shared animated brown eyes and a passion for cars. My dad had taught me how to drive our boat back on Lake Hickory and to be wary of inattentive or inexperienced drivers. Chief had groomed me to balance the Command's orders with my division's expectations. For example, when the Command said, "patrol barge fleeting areas," I told my petty officers that making sure barges were properly tied off now meant fewer (or no) three o'clock in the morning emergency calls when one broke free.

"Oh, no, Ma'am. I approve. I hope they multiply their way to the CO's office."

I grinned. The commander would remove photos of beady-eyed chicks as soon as he saw them near his office, but he wouldn't punish me. At that time, I was the only female officer at the unit. The Commanding Officer toted me to meetings with our industry and local government partners. He told me we were there to network, but I couldn't help but feel like the CO's show pony – *You thought the military lacked gender diversity? Look; I'm grooming a woman for leadership!*

"Maybe one day." I returned to my email and read the words for a fourth time. How do you restate haircut regulations to a group of grown men in a way that doesn't come off as condescending? That's a trick question; you can't, but you'll never stop trying. The moment you say "XYZ needs to be done by tomorrow" instead of "Respectfully request XYZ at your convenience," someone will complain, and a senior ranking officer will leap from the shadows to eviscerate you. And he'll document the whole thing in writing to go in your record *forever*.

Chief borrowed a pen from my desk and drew Groucho Marx eyebrows on the tabby. Then he tap-tap-tapped the pen on the edge of my desk until I peered over my shoulder at him. “Karen's coming back from Florida in a few days.”

Relief washed down my back. Chief had asked for special work hours while his wife was visiting family so he could drop off and pick up his three kids from school. My supervisor had said granting Chief's request would show favoritism. But the three of us knew Chief had reached the point in his life and career where he'd do what he felt was best, whether or not he had permission. That behavior, while gratifying in an Old West Outlaw way, would eventually earn him forced retirement from the Coast Guard.

I swiveled my chair to face him again. “Good.”

“She's bringing my niece. Callie. Sweet kid with crap parents – alcoholic bums.”

“Okay.” The curl of dread I'd felt when he'd asked for special work hours crept back into my gut. Chief hadn't just stopped by to joke around at the end of the day.

“She's thirteen and has spent her life around adults whose idea of a good time is going to the gas station to buy lottery tickets. I'd like to show her some other opportunities while she's here. We're thinking spending the day at the unit would be good for her.”

“You want to bring her here? I'll have to ask the lieutenant, but that's probably fine.”

“No, Ma'am.” Chief set both feet on the floor and clasped his hands. “I was thinking she could spend the day with you.”

I gripped the armrests of my chair. “But *why*? I sit here and write emails and memos all day. She's not going to think going to meetings is cool. Meetings suck. Why can't she just follow you around?”

Officer Candidate School had trained me to parrot the right words – "Yes, Sir!" and "Respectfully request to go to lunch, Sir!" – but most days, I felt like a kid in her dad's over-sized uniform. I struggled to stop asking "But *why*?" and just enforce the rules I didn't understand. If I stumbled through explaining a mission or the reason why attendance at the afternoon meeting was mandatory, Chief stood up in front of the division and took over. He should've known I was no Inspirational Female Leader for his niece to shadow.

Chief raised a hand as if to coax my panic to the floor. "Relax, Ma'am. I've already talked to Lieutenant Preston about it. He's agreed to clear your schedule that day so you can check out a vehicle and show her the area. Take her out on a boat. Talk to her about college and why you joined the Coast Guard. You'll do fine. It's not a big deal."

But it *was* a big deal. It was a *huge* deal. I liked sneaking googly-eyes onto phones and monitors, baking cakes once a month for birthdays, and peppering my training presentations with pictures of Burt Reynolds and disco-dancing mice. I had spent so long grappling with "professionalism" that, without Chief by my side, I was sure his niece would declare me a fraud and add me to her models of failed adulthood.

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"So, uh, how does this compare to – where are you from again?"

The skinny teen in the passenger seat stared at the dashboard and remained silent.

We'd spent the morning touring Pittsburgh, and I'd shown her Market Square, the Convention Center, and a shopping district called the Strip. We'd grabbed sandwiches for lunch, and I'd told her how I graduated from a public university then went straight into Officer Candidate School. I left out how the OCS staff officers' insults still haunted my confidence and

how lonely I felt at the end of each day. Lieutenant Preston had warned me away from hanging out with my male or enlisted coworkers on the weekends because doing so would “look suspicious.” A year earlier, a captain in the Coast Guard had been charged with adultery involving several women, one of whom was a petty officer; the captain was demoted to lieutenant, fined, and forced out of the service.

Callie hadn't said more than two words to me since Chief introduced us, but she seemed average enough. Straight, ashy-brown hair in a ponytail, white t-shirt, faded denim shorts. But as another person whose middle school years had also been one continuous eye roll at authority, I could tell Callie thought this trip was a waste of her time.

I was afraid she was right, but I hid that fear behind a smile and the low brim of my midnight-blue unit ball cap.

Suddenly, Callie mewled and tensed back into the seat. My attention shot to the windshield just in time to notice the back end of a car sticking out of a parallel parking spot ahead of us. I jerked the wheel left, and the SUV swerved over the double-yellow line. A car coming in the opposite direction blared its horn, but I dragged us back over the line before our vehicles met.

“You're not a very good driver.” Callie remained huddled up against the door as if trying to escape the SUV. Or trying to escape me.

I opened my mouth, planning to spew some wisdom about having good reactions and paying attention, but nothing came out except a hiss of breath. What I really wanted to tell her was that every time I went out with an inspection team, I darted for the backseat. I hated Pittsburgh's narrow streets and the tunnels that sent some drivers mashing their brakes and

causing mile-long backups. But Chief had told me Callie needed some positivity in her life, so I kept my mouth shut.

Ten minutes of silence later, I parked the SUV on the marina's gravel lot, beside the boathouse's pickup truck and its empty trailer. Petty Officers Agzigian, Frank, and Johnston loitered on the weathered dock, where they'd already tied up the twenty-five-foot response boat. A metal cabin with windows on all sides stood six feet back from the bow, where the rounded, flare-orange fiberglass gunwale came to a point. “U.S. COAST GUARD” and the vessel number in white block letters ran down the side. I often daydreamed about alternate realities in which I'd enlisted instead of entering the service as a offer and could spend all day working on boats like that one.

Callie, on the other hand, didn't look like she cared about the boat one bit. As I got out and waved at the guys, she remained tense and buckled into her seat and stared out at the muddy river coursing past. Was she scared? Chief liked to joke around and test people, so I wasn't convinced he would've warned either of us.

The petty officers and I headed towards each other, and we converged at the base of the dock in a foursome of midnight-blue work shirts with rolled-up sleeves and cargo pants bloused over black boots. They rendered me crisp salutes, which I returned by throwing my hand up to the brim of my ball cap and back down in a blur. Most days I could handle my coworkers addressing me as “Ma'am” and “Ms. Hoskins,” even though I preferred to just use last names and no titles (chiefs always get exceptions), but receiving salutes always embarrassed me. I felt like I hadn't earned that kind of respect.

Johnston walked a few steps away to spit a wad of tobacco into the water. I looked away, but not quickly enough to miss the globs dribbling from his lips. His spit matched the brownish-green of the Ohio River before the tobacco dip disappeared into the waterway.

The odor of diesel underlaid with fish, though unpleasant, brought me back to summers on Lake Hickory with my dad. The boats, company, and environment then and now were different, but the low hum of excitement that grew in my belly every time I went out on the water felt the same.

Frank scratched the ginger-blonde hair at the top of his forehead then tugged his ball cap back down. His gaze shifted to the SUV. “She gonna come out, Ma'am?”

Callie clutched seat belt across her chest. I turned back to Frank. “Yeah, I, uh – I think she's just overwhelmed.”

I was going to kick Chief in the shin if Callie was afraid of water and he hadn't told me. Having to go back to the office instead of taking the boat out on such a gorgeous day would be cruel. Patches of soft ripples mixed with glassy calm on the water's surface and disguised the current that charged below. A handful of white wisps drifted across the bottom of a cornflower-blue sky. The beautiful weather was unusual; Pittsburgh sees more overcast days than not.

“We figured we'd cruise up the Ohio a bit, Ma'am,” Agzigian said from half a step behind Frank. He'd already put on his life jacket – the same flare-orange as the boat's gunwale – and had his hands casually clasped in front of his hips. “Maybe take her past downtown and onto the Monongahela. Just an hour or so.”

I stepped forward and lowered my voice. “*Please* take us out as long as you can. I have no idea what to do with her after this.”

Frank nudged the brim of his ball cap with a knuckle and gave me a lopsided grin. “Aw, Ma'am, I'm sure you're doing a great job.”

The SUV's door slammed shut. “She almost got us in a wreck,” Callie said. She stood by the vehicle's front axle and crossed her arms, then put them back down by her sides, and finally shoved her hands in her pockets. Her eyes kept darting between the gravel and the river, and she blushed and tilted her head away from us.

Callie wasn't afraid of the water, I realized. She was sneaking glances at Petty Officer Agzigian. He was a stud – tall, broad-shouldered, muscular without busting out of his uniform. Dimples on Agzigian's cheeks softened his physical toughness, and he had the strong jaw of a model. I had carefully trained myself to think of him like a brother, or to not think of him at all.

Fortunately, the guys all seemed oblivious to Callie's red face, so I feigned ignorance too. “You're cool with water, right?”

She nodded and shuffled down the dock behind us.

The rest of us strapped on life jackets, and we stepped down onto the boat deck. Agzigian offered a hand to help Callie down, and her face and neck flushed red again. The petty officer gave no indication that he'd noticed, and he directed her across the non-skid deck and through the low door below the windshield.

The response boat's cabin had four black, padded chairs, each with its own shock absorbers and seat belts. As there were five of us, Johnston volunteered to ride in front of the cabin, on the open bow. Callie claimed the port-side seat behind Agzigian, so I hopped onto the chair behind Frank, who stationed himself at the helm.

Frank radioed into our parent command to let them know we were starting a mission. At the word “mission,” I wiggled my eyebrows at Callie and grinned. The corner of her mouth perked up before she forced her mouth flat and half-closed her eyelids. Callie probably teetered on the edge of giving me an eye roll, but I didn't care anymore. The opportunity to work alongside charmers like Agzigian was a terrible reason to join the military, but maybe that line of thought would eventually lead her to consider a life beyond small-town Florida.

Johnston and Agzigian ran through a safety checklist to make sure the required equipment was on board and functioning, and then Johnston cast off our lines. The twin engines hummed behind us as Petty Officer Frank eased the boat away from the dock. The vibration traveled through my bones and sent my heart racing.

The response boat's engines operated with a tightness and intensity that the single outboard engine of my dad's boat lacked. The vessel also had an array of electronics that I'd only ever seen from a distance. In addition to his command of the chunky radio, Frank had access to a radar and several screens for GPS locations, headings, depth, and weather information. And I'd thought my dad's boat was high-tech when he'd added a single-screen depth finder that displayed fish in blocky pixels.

“*Coming up!*” Frank shouted through his cracked window. Johnston tossed his thumb in the air without even glancing back at us. Frank leaned into the throttle, and we shot forward.

The burst of speed slammed me back into my seat and a squeal popped out of me. Frank kept his attention forward, but the profile of his cheek lifted.

The roar of the engine and the wind overtook all other sounds. We skimmed along the water like a pebble instead of a seventy-two-hundred-pound vessel loaded with a thousand

pounds of gear and people. The chairs took the brunt of the jolts, but my teeth still clacked together when I relaxed my jaw. The wind from Frank's cracked window threaten to knock my cap off, so I removed it and held it on my lap. Hairs flew free from my bun and whipped around my face.

Callie gripped her armrest and braced herself into the chair, same as she had right before I'd swerved around the back end of that car. "*Hey!*" I had to shout a few times to catch her attention over the rush of engine and wind. "*You good?*" I held my thumb up and then flipped it down.

Callie wrenched one hand free, gave me a thumbs up, and slapped her hand back to the armrest. She stared straight ahead, but I doubted she had Agzigian on her mind. Her cheeks shared the whiteness of her knuckles.

A bridge topped by half-hoops of yellow ironwork spanned the river ahead of us. Frank said, "*Coming down!*" Up front, Johnston braced a boot against the hull.

The momentum of slowing threw me into my seat belt, and the boat rocked on our own wake as waves caught up to us and urged us closer to the bridge in lurches.

Agzigian shifted in his seat. "Easy on the throttle, man."

Frank peered back at Callie and me. "Was it too much?"

Callie shook her head and her ponytail whipped side to side.

Frank raised an eyebrow toward Callie. "I don't know, this one still looks scared. What do you say, Ms. Hoskins, should we turn back?"

"N–"

“–no!” Callie cut me off and stared at Frank with wide eyes. “Don't take us back. I'm fine.”

“Aye-aye, Ma'am.” Frank turned back to the helm, shouted a warning, and eased the throttle halfway forward. We sliced through the river with a firm bob that lacked the concrete slap of full throttle.

I was disappointed that we had to slow down, but I understood why. Flying up the river not only risked losing control and colliding with a bridge piling or a barge, but if someone reported our boat moving irresponsibly, the Commanding Officer would spare no one, not even his show pony. The previous December, a Coast Guard vessel en route to an emergency call had struck a pleasure boat near San Diego and killed an eight-year-old boy. The event had shaken all of us, from the Commandant to the new recruits.

Callie's shoulders relaxed in quarter inch increments as we approached the Point. When viewed from the air, Point State Park, situated to the west of downtown, looks like an isosceles triangle that fell to its left side. The Allegheny River borders downtown to the north and the Monongahela flows along the southern edge. The two waterways converge at the Point to form the Ohio River. If you're cruising down the Allegheny or Monongahela without a map, you might not even notice you've entered a new river. Heading up the Ohio River, though, we had both routes wide open in front of us. Frank veered right onto the less-trafficked Monongahela.

As we left the Ohio, I pointed out Heinz Field, where the Pittsburgh Steelers play football. After some games, barges anchored in the riverbed and technicians shot fireworks from their decks. We closed the river to marine traffic during the fireworks for safety, and part of my

job involved writing up the paperwork, including drafting a temporary regulation. “It's technically a type of law,” I said, trying to make the job sound important.

Callie gave me a dead-eyed stare.

“Yeah, that part's pretty boring. But the boat's fun, right?”

She offered a small smile and nodded. “Why don't you work on the boats?”

“Because I – well, I'm so busy with everything. . ..”

“Come on, Ms. Hoskins,” Frank said. “You can take some time away from the office to hang out with us.”

Agzigian twisted around. “Yeah, come be a boat crew member, Ma'am. We’d be happy to see you more down at the boathouse.”

“Thanks. We'll see.” I'd already talked about spending time on the water to both Lieutenant Preston and the officer in charge of boat operations. The officer welcomed me and had even given me a binder full of qualification checklists and manuals. Lieutenant Preston approved the request, as long as I finished my primary duties first. But the last few times I'd laid completed projects on his desk and hinted towards spending a day at the boathouse, Lieutenant Preston suddenly found a stack of resource binders that needed sorting or a file cabinet that had to be organized.

A few minutes and several bridges later, Frank put the boat in neutral and slid out of his chair. “Come on up, Ms. Hoskins.”

“What?”

“I heard you used to drive a boat with your pop. Let's see what you got, Ma'am. Hop in the driver's seat.”

“Are you – wait, really?”

“Yeah, really.” Frank backed up against Agzigian's chair and waved his hand toward the helm. “Show your trainee that you can do more than write a memo.”

“This boat's a lot more powerful than my dad's. . ..” I unbuckled my seat belt and scooted off the chair. My cap, forgotten, fell to the floor. “We aren't going to get in trouble?”

“I ain't telling anyone.” Frank looked at Agzigian. “You?”

“Nope.”

Frank glanced at Callie. “Trainee?”

Callie swallowed but shook her head.

I eased myself behind the helm, and Frank patted me on the shoulder. “Get yourself comfy while I call Johnston inside, Ma'am.”

As much as I loved being on the water, I lacked the qualifications and experience to operate a Coast Guard vessel. Back at the office, sticking googly-eyes on a phone earned me some grumbling at the worst. Out on the water, screwing up could mean damaging expensive equipment or the loss of life. Frank was obviously aware of the risk – if I couldn't control the boat, Johnston might fly off the bow – so everyone had to ride in the cabin. But we could break a few rules for the sake of fun.

Johnston claimed my old seat, and Frank stood by my left shoulder. I fastened my seat belt, and Frank pointed out the controls. “All right, so you've got your steering wheel and your throttle. Straight up is neutral. Push that button and ease it forward. Go ahead. There you go, easy, easy. . ..”

The boat crawled forward, and water slopped by the gunwale. The Coast Guard vessel had more weight and took more effort to steer than my dad's boat, but the engines were also far more powerful. The river's current nudged the boat a bit, unlike the calm waters of Lake Hickory, but after a few seconds, I figured out how to compensate through steering.

Callie watched me with interest. Maybe, I hoped, this would be what she'd take back to Florida: memories of someone who bumbled through military protocol and life on land but took opportunities and waves when they rose. Not quite a role model; more like a speed bump that shook up her interests.

"Faster, Ms. H," Johnston said from behind me.

"Go for it," Frank said.

I eased the throttle forward.

Frank put a hand on the back of my chair and braced himself. "Come on, Ms. Hoskins – lay into it!"

The pitch of the engines rose with our speed until we skimmed along the river. The wind whistled through the cracked window and sent my hair whipping around my face.

I was flying.

"*You should start turning!*" Frank shouted.

Our bow pointed toward the convergence of the shore and a bridge piling. How'd we suddenly get so close to a bridge? I tried to haul the wheel to the right, but the steering didn't respond. The engines felt wedged into position. Force had turned us into a missile headed for land.

Everyone on the boat probably shared my thoughts: letting me at the helm had been a huge mistake, and now we were going to die.

As we flew towards the shore and the piling, I kept trying to force the wheel to the right. Finally, Frank shouted for me to ease back on the throttle. Our speed dropped, and the wheel freed up enough to respond. I hauled the boat around and the deck tilted *hard*. Frank fell against my left side, and river water lapped over the starboard gunwale. When our stern faced the shore, I straightened out, shifted the boat into neutral, and dropped my hands to my lap.

Johnston cursed under his breath, and Agzigian wiped a palm across his brow. “The wheel wouldn't turn,” I said, by way of apology.

Frank grinned, though his cheeks looked a bit paler than usual. “Yeah, those twin Hondas have some power, Ma'am. You did fine. Might be time for us to head back, though, so Johnston can change his shorts.”

“Shut up, Frank,” Johnston said under his breath.

I slid out of the helm seat. “I promise I've driven a boat before.”

“Don't worry about it, Ma'am.”

But of course I worried about it all the way back to the marina. They’d never let me at the helm again. What had happened? Sure, our speed had made the water about as receptive to the steering as concrete, but why hadn't I thought to drop the throttle back? What would my dad think about the near accident? I could never tell him. I hoped everyone could pretend the almost-crash had never happened.

As Callie and I drove back to the office, I dreaded the interaction with her uncle. *Here, Chief. Your niece looks catatonic because I almost drove us straight into a bridge piling today. Aren't you glad you entrusted me with her future? I almost made sure she wouldn't have one! Hey, maybe we can do it all again to–*

"That guy was hot." Callie spoke quietly.

"Huh?"

She smiled at the windshield and leaned into her armrest. Her voice grew louder. "The tall one. He was really cute."

"Oh. Yeah, I guess."

Callie stroked the end of her ponytail. "Do you like him?"

"Um, sure. A lot of the crew sort of feels like family."

"No, I mean do you *like* him?" She studied me with eyes more alive than those of someone on the verge of a trauma-induced coma.

"Officers and enlisted can't date, if that's what you mean." The subject was becoming awkward, so I changed to one that Chief had specifically requested. "Any thoughts as to what you want to do after high school?"

She said she was interested in college but her family didn't have that kind of money. I spent the rest of the drive back to the office telling her about the G.I Bill and other education programs the Coast Guard offered to members. Doing so made me feel like a recruitment poster, and if any of the guys heard me talking, they would've joked about the Command's "Kool-Aid" running through my veins. Their imagined opinions didn't stop me, though, because sometimes

they were wrong. Maybe Frank was wrong to put me at the helm, or I was wrong to accept his offer. But I didn't regret the decision, only that I hadn't been prepared for it.

As Callie and I waited for the elevator in the parking garage, I asked her if she planned to tell Chief about the near miss on the river.

“No, I don't want to get you guys in trouble.”

I brushed a dusty boot print off the brim of my cap. Johnston’s, probably. “You don't have to lie.”

The elevator dinged. We boarded, and I pushed the button for the top floor.

“It's fine,” she said. “You guys are cool.”

The moment we walked through the main office door, Callie's shoulders slumped and she half-lidded her eyes. Now that we were back at the office where she knew at least one person, she had to be the cool, apathetic teen again.

We passed the lounge and the kitchen. Assuming Callie remained at my heels, I rounded the corner to our row of cubicles and stopped at Chief's desk. “We're back. No one died.”

Chief turned away from the race car message board through which he’d been scrolling. “So, did you leave my niece out on the river?”

I'd lost Callie. A glance back around the corner and through the doorway to the staff lounge revealed her sprawled on the couch, watching a soap opera. I reported the update to Chief. “Plus, she called me '*cool*' in the elevator.”

“And you were so worried about messing up. Sounds like you did great, Ma'am.”

I shoved my hands in my pockets. “You know, if she wants to talk more, you could give her my email address.” I leaned toward my supervisor's open door at the end of the hall. “Guess I'd better go check in.”

Chief held out a hand and snorted. “As much as I'd love to send you in there without saying anything so I can watch his reaction – Ma’am, your hair is a *wreck*.”

***

I don't know whether Callie ever managed to leave Florida, but Chief said she'd brought up the non-crash-related parts of the boat ride a few times during an otherwise quiet trip. It took me a while, but I eventually realized that Chief hadn’t just asked me to hang out with his niece for her benefit. Though he never mentioned it outside of jokes, he knew I’d struggled to grow into my role as an officer and the head of a division. Although the day with his niece hadn’t acted like some kind of magic cure to turn me into an Inspirational Female Leader, Chief had nudged me out of my comfort zone and would continue to purposely yet quietly do so until his forced retirement.

My desire to be a member of a close crew, which I'd experienced years earlier on the SSV *Robert C. Seamans*, had been one of the driving forces behind joining the Coast Guard. For the most part, I didn't find that kind of connection. My friends assigned to cutters that spent months at sea said they never found it either – most of the crew resented sharing cramped quarters for so long. But people like Chief and moments like those on the river gave me hope. Maybe the next adventure would help me belong and be free.

The Deployment

> One afternoon the wind ceased. And for days after the *Seahawk* was becalmed . . . Not only did the breeze vanish and the heat rise, but the sea lay like something dead.
>
> -Avi, *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*

In early Summer 2011, record snow melt in the Rocky Mountains converged with heavy spring rains to send the Missouri River rushing over its banks. Bridges closed, dams operated beyond capacity, and people evacuated their homes from North Dakota through Kansas. According to the National Weather Service, the four-month-long flood caused 5 fatalities and more than $2 billion in damages.

Almost a thousand miles away at Marine Safety Unit Pittsburgh, the Executive Officer called me into his office. My supervisor had arrived first and waited in the chair nearest the window. Our office was on the fifth floor and overlooked the sparkling green waters of the Monongahela River. Spring usually brought a slight rise in water level, but nothing like what the Midwest was battling.

“Lieutenant Junior Grade Hoskins, have a seat.” The Executive Officer let his hands slap down on his polished wooden desk. “You're current on your DART training, right?”

“Yes, Sir.”

DART stood for “Disaster Assistance Response Teams,” and they were the Coast Guard's go-to assets for flood missions. Each close-sided DART trailer came loaded with a pair of shallow-draft, flat-bottomed punts with outboard motors and all the tools we'd needed to repair

and maintain those boats. Crews at units across the Coast Guard received standardized training and a team could be deployed on a moment's notice.

My supervisor handed me a dark blue folder. Inside were orders to Sioux City, Iowa to relieve the first DART from their two-week deployment. My gut twisted. I didn't know yet whether it was excitement, anxiety, or both.

“Congratulations, Ms. Hoskins.” The Executive Officer clasped his hands together. “Bertocchi, Frank, and Johnston will go with you. Three reservists as well – I don't know if you remember Chief Truxal or Chief McMinn? Petty Officer Molinick too. Should be a good crew. I'm sure you'll make us proud.”

I wasn't worried about the first three. Bertocchi worked in my division; he'd rather spend his days playing video games and driving fast cars, but he did his job. Frank and Johnston were assigned to the unit's boathouse, and although Johnston had some unsavory habits like spitting tobacco, they both knew how to operate and maintain a water craft.

The addition of the other three – and me as team lead – made me wonder how the deployment would actually go. Molinick had proven herself quiet but smart when she'd accompanied my petty officers on facility inspections. What I didn't know was how much time she'd spent on a boat in the past year. I'd only seen Chief Truxal from a distance, and I didn't know much about him. That made me nervous, since we'd be relying on each other in a tiny boat on an angry, swollen river.

I thought I'd never met Chief McMinn until one of the petty officers pulled up a photo. Turns out, I'd spent most of our annual active duty/reservist combined training staring from the corner of my eye at Chief McMinn and trying to figure out whether a mentally unstable person

had assaulted the real McMinn in the parking lot and assumed his identity. The chief's hair was cut at jagged angles instead of the regulation faded edges, and the version of the uniform he wore had been discontinued two years earlier.

***

Six of the seven of us stood by the ticket counter at Pittsburgh International Airport. Dawn's pinks and oranges streaked across the sky, but everyone had shown up on time – except Chief McMinn.

I paced in front of our pile of luggage. My first real opportunity to lead was going wrong from the beginning.

"Relax, Ma'am," Frank said. He wore his ball cap tipped back. "If he doesn't show, it's not your fault."

I stopped and stared out of the window at the drop-off lanes. Travelers scooted out of taxis and sedans, but none of them looked like Chief McMinn. "No, it is. I'm the team lead. I have to make sure everyone makes it."

Chief Truxal held up his phone. "He says he's on his way and for us to go ahead."

Why hadn't I thought to get everyone's phone numbers? Is that what a good leader would have done? I'd spent the last year and a half as head of an eight-person division, but I had a network of other junior officers and my own chief petty officer on whom to fall back. I'd never really *led* – not alone with a group of adults, most of whom were older than me and looked half asleep. Weren't they nervous about this trip?

I wiped my hands on the thighs of my jeans and grabbed the handles of my duffle bag. "Okay, then. Let's go."

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Sioux Gateway Airport in Sioux City, Iowa has two gates, only one of which is usually in operation, and it receives fewer than ten arrival flights on the busiest day. We touched down in late afternoon, and Frank and I left the others to guard the luggage while we picked up the rental car. Senior ranking members of the military are usually driven around by those of lower rank. That felt wrong – besides, the van was on my government credit card – so I slid into the driver's seat.

Frank and I picked up the others in the arrivals lane. He stayed in the front passenger seat and kept grinning at me until I asked him what the matter was. “Nothing, Ma'am. This is perfect. You look right at home behind the wheel of a mini-van. You just need a load of screaming kids.”

“Uh, no thanks.”

“Hey, turn on the radio!” Johnston shouted from the third row.

Frank turned away from teasing me to fiddle with the dials on the console.

Though only a few miles from the river, Sioux City had been spared much of the flooding. Driving through it felt like touring any smaller city in America. You'd never know that just a few miles away, the flooded Missouri River had forced residents from their homes. Cars flowed along the streets; people strode in and out of banks and shops. Therefore, finding the parking lot nearly empty at the hotel I'd reserved for us was odd.

We left the van in a spot near the front doors and hauled our luggage inside. A man in a suit behind the front desk explained that one of the hotel's wings was under construction. “But your rooms are on another hall,” he said. “You shouldn't be disturbed at all.”

I took that as reason for the deserted feel of the place. Maybe no one else wanted to bother with some noise and dust. We only cared about having a clean place to sleep that offered government rates.

The man handed us each a key card and directed us toward our hallway. We passed the glass doors to the pool and the plastic tarp separating the areas under construction and arrived on our corridor without having come across any other guests. A tired-looking woman hunched behind a cleaning cart, and she shuffled by us without meeting our eyes. The smell of pet-stained carpet permeated the hall, but I dismissed the odor as temporary – the cart probably carried dirty towels or sheets.

My crew and I split off into our own rooms to unpack and relax. The odor from the hall followed me into my room, and I turned the air conditioner up to try and blast away the smell. The odor only intensified.

After a few minutes, someone knocked on my door. I opened it and Johnston strode inside and sniffed. “Her room smells like piss too. This whole place reeks.”

Frank and Molinick stood out in the hall with their hands on their hips. “Ma'am,” Frank said, “we've got to find a new place.”

Check off another failure from the list. As team lead, I'd handpicked this hotel. Part of me wanted to insist that everything was fine and we should wait for the stench to dissipate, but I grabbed my bags and headed back to the van with everyone else.

The next several hotels we checked either didn't offer government rates – and we'd have to pay the difference out of our pockets, so they weren't an option – or they were booked. Weddings and family reunions had been relocated from flooded areas to the spared streets of

Sioux City. I was starting to think we needed to look outside of the city, although I wasn't even sure there was anything out there except farmland and water.

“What about that place?” Bertocchi pointed to a ten-story building that we'd passed at least twice. It was in the middle of Sioux City's minuscule downtown district and one of the tallest buildings in the area, so I'd assumed it was out of our budget. But we'd run out of other options.

I pulled under the drop-off canopy and Frank hopped out to inquire at the front desk. The rest of us listened to the radio and waited for another disappointment. But Frank trotted out a few minutes later with a grin. “Ma'am, we found ourselves a place.”

Frank directed me to a parking garage. We grabbed our luggage and followed the signs onto an elevator and down several floors to the hotel's main lobby. The furnishings looked like they had been nice once, but the maroon carpet and gold-framed mirrors were faded and chipped. I sniffed the air. Air freshener, with undertones of machine oil. No urine.

A man with a chocolate-brown mustache greeted us at a front desk of varnished wood with scratches at the base and the top. He introduced himself as the manager. “We don't normally do this,” he said, “but since you all have come here to help us, my hotel will honor the government rate. Now, we're busy, so you'll have to be on separate floors.”

“That's fine,” I said.

The manager extended his hand and shook each of ours. “Thank you so much for coming. We're so glad to have you. Really, thank you.”

I wasn’t used to that kind of gratitude, and the attention made me uncomfortable. Most people I met in Pittsburgh didn't even know what the Coast Guard did, nonetheless that we had a

unit situated downtown. They saw our uniforms like some type of glorified Boy Scout troop, or they ignored us altogether. The hotel manager, on the other hand, not only knew why we'd come, but he cared that we were there.

I'd planned for us to meet the off-going DART while getting some area familiarity, so we dropped the bags in our rooms and regrouped in the lobby a few minutes later. The other team leader had emailed me a map and directions to find the boat ramp, where we'd meet them around four thirty in the afternoon as they ended their patrols for the day.

Briefly refreshed, we all loaded up in the van in almost the exact same spots. Frank took the co-pilot's seat and held the directions. Although we had GPS on our phones, the off-going DART leader said there was no address. The boat ramp was at the end of a road that cut between two swaths of farmland. It wasn't supposed to be a boat ramp at all, but the floodwaters had risen to meet a sloped dirt road.

Confusingly enough, a fifteen-minute drive northwest of Sioux City, Iowa will take you to North Sioux City, South Dakota, where our boat ramp was located. We hopped on the interstate for a few miles, then exited and turned onto a two-lane country highway.

Spans of pasture with knee-high grass and herds of wandering cows and hunch-shouldered buffalo behind wood and wire fencing bordered the road. That little corner of South Dakota reminded me of where I'd grown up in western North Carolina, except up there, the land seemed vaster and open. No shadowed mountains rested on the horizon. Buildings didn't rise over the tops of trees.

. . . No supervisor would call me to his office and tell me how to rewrite the plan of the day for the third time. No Commanding Officer would note unkempt hair or loud laughter and whisper in the ear of the Executive Officer for our "issues" to be "addressed."

In South Dakota, I was the law.

My grip tightened on the steering wheel. I didn't feel ready for that kind of power, but I had daydreams of the petty officers telling everyone back in Pittsburgh how awed they were by my leadership. *Ms. Hoskins may act like a goof, but you should've seen her commanding those boats! I'd work with her anytime.*

"I think that was it, Ma'am," Frank said. He glanced between the directions and our back window.

"What was it?"

"That little clearing between the trees. I think we were supposed to turn there, Ms. H."

"Shoot."

With no parking lots or driveways in sight, I chose a spot where the ground rose to the road's edge, and the van bounced through a U-turn. A glance in the rear-view mirror showed everyone had braced themselves against seat backs and plastic paneling. Once our four wheels found asphalt again, their shoulders and faces relaxed, but only until we pulled onto the rutted dirt road.

The tall grass parted, and we passed a trailer home with rust streaking down the corners and an army of faded, half-broken toys in the front yard. "You're sure this is the way?" I said.

"*Deliverance*," Johnston muttered from the third row.

"We can turn around if it's not, Ma'am, but I think the ramp's coming up on the right."

We cleared another stand of trees, and a monstrous red quad-cab truck appeared on an off-shoot road that sloped down towards water. I parked the van on the other side of the ramp and we piled out.

A man in the Coast Guard's dark blue operational dress uniform stood near the back end of the trailer hooked to the truck. He tossed an orange life vest in the back of the trailer and strode up to us. The man had the world-weary gait of an old sailor who's never flustered by foul weather or the orders of officers.

“Lieutenant JG Hoskins?”

“Yes. Hi, that's me.” I gave a wave, suddenly feeling awkward for not being in uniform, even though it was expected that we'd arrive in civilian clothes.

The petty officer – the off-going DART leader – raised his hand as if unsure whether to go for a salute, but he ended up just returning my wave.

The rest of my crew mingled with the others, crawling through the trailer and inspecting the boats. All DART trailers were supposed to have the exact same equipment so that any crew could show up and take over, but sometimes tools get rearranged or winches need a special touch to operate smoothly.

Meanwhile, the petty officer opened the truck's passenger door and pulled a binder out of the dash. He flipped to a map. “Here's your operating area. We mostly stayed in this north section, because the river gets kind of strong further down and the boats struggle with the current.”

“So . . . what kinds of things are you guys doing?” I felt like I should've known this before we actually arrived on-scene.

“Mostly just wellness checks and keeping people off the water. There are a couple of campgrounds around here and if anyone tries to sneak onto the water – explore or whatnot – we've been turning them away unless they had an approved reason. Most people are gone by now, but there are a few folks who come every other day to check on their houses.” He pointed to the left bank of the river on the map. “That's Nebraska. Don't check on those houses or wander over there.”

“Why not?”

“South Dakota requested our assistance.” The petty officer narrowed his eyes at me as if I should've known that answer but had stumbled into the mission dumb and blind. Then he shrugged to himself. “It's a money thing – South Dakota's paying the government to have us here.”

After everyone had gotten acquainted and the boats were secure in their cradles, the petty officer's team locked the trailer doors and my crew piled back into the mini-van. The truck and the DART trailer stayed at the Unified Command location overnight, so we followed the off-going crew back down the highway to find the mission's other primary location.

State and local leaders had commandeered Dakota Dunes, a half-built master-plan neighborhood, for their command post. Smooth roads branched into driveways of empty parking lots, house foundations, and wood and metal skeletons. The off-going team leader led us into the shell of a building that would eventually be a casino, but with bare studs and beams showing, the structure reminded me more of a warehouse.

Every morning, the Unified Command would hold a situation briefing in the warehouse-casino, after which we would grab radios from the communications trailer. Then we'd go across

the parking lot to the Salvation Army trailer manned by an elderly couple. When the Salvation Army woman learned that Molinick was a vegetarian, she gasped then took Molinick's hands and said, “Don't worry, baby, we'll find something special for you.”

Over a steakhouse dinner that night, the off-going crew shared some crucial tips. The bugs were a nightmare, they said, but a menthol-based liquid meant to address congestion was the best method to keep the mosquitoes away. It had to be applied every five minutes, but it was worth the hassle. Although we'd mostly stick to flooded land, if we ventured out onto the river itself, we had to be wary of eddies. Sometimes large debris – mostly trees – would settle in the strong current, and water would suddenly swirl upstream and around the object. A large enough eddy could swallow one of our little metal punts.

As we parted, the petty officer shook my hand. “Good luck,” he said. The smile he gave me belonged to the tired and the ready-to-go-home.

We only needed to operate one two-man boat at a time, so I split each day into two shifts. Three people would work the morning, the other three would take the afternoon, and one person rotated through working a whole day. The woman behind the hotel's front desk agreed to make copies of our two-week schedule, and we met for the last time that evening in the hotel's tiny bar so I could hand them out.

I sipped a lager as my crew skimmed the schedule. Molinick and the two chiefs trickled back up to their rooms, but the other three joined me at the bar. No one disagreed with their assignments. I considered it my first success as team lead.

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The first morning, Bertocchi drove Chief Truxal, Frank, Molinick, and me to Dakota Dunes. Bertocchi and the rest would use the mini-van as needed throughout the day, then at midday, they'd come to the improvised boat ramp for the shift change.

By seven o'clock, the hanger-like casino shell had half-filled with people holding Styrofoam cups of coffee, staring holes in the floor, and making chatter about the day's weather. My crew and I got a few sideways looks until a short, rotund man with a few days of stubble called for our attention to kick off the situation meeting.

One by one, representatives from agencies – the National Weather Service, Fish and Wildlife, the National Guard, and so on – stepped forward and gave a report about what they'd done the previous day and what they planned for today. When the short man glanced at us and said, "Coast Guard?" I introduced myself and the members of my crew, stating that we were taking over the DART.

All the empty space and the bodies seemed to eat up my voice. I felt insignificant in this crowd of slouch-shouldered men and women with faces tanned by long days on levees and boats and too little time or energy to iron their uniforms. The sideways looks disappeared as wandering gazes found windows, work partners, or the dirt under their own fingernails. They probably all wished they could rotate out and leave the stress of the disaster – but at least half the men and women there were already home.

After the meeting, we picked up our radios and bagged lunches – with another covering of Molinick's hands by the old woman at the Salvation Army trailer – and loaded into the huge red truck with the DART trailer. I happily relinquished the responsibility of driving to Frank,

who was used to maneuvering a diesel beast with a boat trailer attached to the hitch through narrow Pittsburgh streets.

Once we got on the highway, I clicked on the radio. The last crew had left the station set to country, and Jason Aldean's "Dirt Road Anthem" had just started. My fingertips brushed the dial, but Frank halted me. "Do you mind if we just leave it here, Ms. H?"

Every time I got in the truck during that two-week deployment, Aldean's song came on the radio. *Yeah, I'm chilling on a dirt road, laid back swervin' like I'm George Jones. Smoke rollin' out the window, an ice-cold beer sittin' in the console.* The guys told me that George Jones had a drinking problem, and he'd once been so desperate to get to a liquor store after his wife took his car keys that he drove a riding lawn mower there.

Although the drinking and driving and smoking aspects of the song didn't exactly fit, Aldean's "Anthem" became ours. Away from Pittsburgh, we relaxed to a chill once our tires found that dirt road. Even my own tense shoulders eased. I thought less and less about what a "good leader" might do. Although I was still in charge of submitting daily reports and answering to local officials, when the boats came out of the trailer, I was just another member of the crew.

On the water, the stiff over-blouses of the operational dress uniform came off. Our dark blue cotton t-shirts were easier to move in, and as the day warmed, they kept us cooler. A couple of the guys wore thigh-high gators over their pants, and once we started moving and the wind picked up, we tucked our ball caps under our legs.

We spent most of our time cruising around the flood zone, an area that in non-emergencies was part-state park, part-agricultural land. Despite practicing back in Pittsburgh, I was clumsy and unsure of myself at the helm, perched on the stern bench with my hand on the

throttle. I tried to avoid the obvious obstacles – dark gray and brown branches reaching up from the water like bony fingers – but the skiff kept finding submerged trees to bump and clunk over. A twist of the throttle would shoot us forward and out of the trap.

Frank was most vocal about having me at the engine, even though it meant a slower, bumpier ride. Maybe he remembered how much I'd wanted to spend time on the response boats back in Pittsburgh, and when I'd finally gotten the chance, I was so unpracticed that I nearly drove us aground.

Most of the time, we remained silent while patrolling the floodwaters. Unless we were making plans – to head towards a certain landmark, to avoid a submerged fence post – there wasn't much need for talk. The silence was nice, calming. We were all the sort of people who would be at peace hiking into the woods alone and gazing at the world from a mountain peak.

However, the silence also held a deeply sad undercurrent. The world was so quiet because a shroud of water and mud had smothered it. We motored past houses that were submerged to the tops of their windows and motor homes with only the flat metal roof above the water. Green rectangles of street signs peeked above the flood. Someone had wrapped bright yellow “Caution” tape around one that lay in the middle of what appeared to be a clear channel. Those swaths where treetops didn't emerge from the water meant a road lay somewhere below.

We didn't see many people. When we cruised out to the actual river, we'd occasionally come across the Fish and Wildlife guys on their boat, and we'd exchange waves. Most of the residents had left in the weeks before our arrival, but there was one couple who trekked through the waters every other day to check on the sandbags and sump pump that protected their house.

We stopped there a few times a day to check in with the couple if they were there or to clean muck out of the pump if they weren't.

One population that didn't seem overly disturbed by the changed landscape was the birds. Fist-sized songbirds with dark tails and heads flitted between branches a few feet above the water. In the morning, they twitted us away from the dirt ramp, and in the evenings, they whistled us back in.

As things began to drone into routine, the Fish and Wildlife guys pulled up alongside and pointed downriver. They had to shout over the rumbles of our engines. “You guys see the eagles yet?”

We hadn't.

“A family of 'em on the Nebraska side, just past the power lines. At least one baby up there.”

We finally saw the eagles after a few passes, and then we added them to our welfare check rotation, alongside the couple with the sandbagged house.

Around the time I got over my nervousness about ruining the mission by losing someone or accidentally destroying equipment, the crew loosened up and joked a bit more. Frank teased me about wearing sporty sunglasses and offered to buy me a pair of girly ones the next time we went to Walmart for sunscreen. Johnston, to no one's surprise, sometimes took his comfort a bit too far.

After we’d motor out into the middle of the Missouri River, we'd tie the two punts together, turn on some music, and let the current carry us downstream for twenty minutes or so.

I'd been gazing at the trees and half-submerged houses and phone poles on the South Dakota bank. Mosquitoes pricked my bare arms, and the stinging smell of menthol had all but left my skin. I shifted forward to dig in my bag for the tube of congestion rub.

Chief Truxal, my partner that afternoon, cut his gaze behind me to the other boat. “Don't look that way.”

Of course, when someone says, “don't look,” I have to look.

Johnston stood with his back to us, peeing off the side of the boat. He'd given no warning. Molinick, his partner, sat at the bow and hadn't seemed to realize what was happening at the other end of her boat. The rush of the river swallowed up smaller trickles. But at Chief Truxal's warning, she looked too and quickly turned back to the bow.

I clapped a hand in front of my eyes. “Dude!”

“What?” Johnston's uniform rustled as tidied himself and eased back onto his seat. “I was downwind.”

“That doesn't matter – you can't just *do that* when we're all sitting here, three feet away.”

Johnston rolled his eyes to the side like I was ruining his vacation.

Chief Truxal shifted forward. “Use some common sense and decency. You aren't out here alone. Next time, hold it until we reach shore.”

Johnston scowled at the grassy Nebraska bank and muttered, “Fine.”

When I'd received the crew list back in Pittsburgh, I'd thought it odd that the command had selected two chiefs. The other DART crews were composed nearly entirely of petty officers. I could have been insulted that the command perhaps didn't think I'd be able to control the crew on my own, but instances like that one with Johnston made me glad to have the chiefs.

Sometimes a young guy like Johnston, who will find a reason to rebel against anyone in authority, won't listen until someone who looks or sounds like his dad speaks up.

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Off-duty, we were free to do whatever we wanted. Pretty soon, exploring the hotel and the surrounding streets by myself got lonely. I had small hopes that maybe Molinick and I could become friends. Back in Pittsburgh, I'd been warned away from getting too close to petty officers to avoid the appearance of favoritism, but South Dakota felt like the Wild West. I invited her to come on a walk to the store once, but she politely declined. I gave up quickly, not wanting to face further rejection.

Eventually, I heard that several of the guys had started spending evenings at the hotel bar or exploring the nearby drinking holes. I was insulted that they hadn't invited me. I was a member of the crew too.

Bertocchi shrugged. "It's not really planned. We just sort of head down there sometime after dinner."

We'd pick up pre-packaged dinners at the Dakota Dunes Unified Command after dropping off the truck and trailer at the end of each day. That night, I ate my dinner in my room and emailed the daily report back to the Coast Guard Command Center in St. Louis, like usual. Then I wandered down to the bar.

None of my crew ever showed up. I spent the evening chatting with a pair of guys my age who were in the area to work on the railroad. A couple of beers later, my new acquaintances begged me to come along with them as they traveled to the next bar. I gave up on waiting for a

familiar face, so I pleaded an early wake-up in the morning, paid my tab, and scurried to the elevators.

I spent a day or two feeling like an outcast in the high school cafeteria before I realized that *of course* they wouldn't invite me. No matter how much we joked around on the water, I was the boss, and you go out to bars to escape your boss. They could never speak entirely freely around me. That realization didn't help my loneliness much, though. I'd joined the Coast Guard to become part of a team, but something always stood in the way: my gender, my rank, my job. I was always standing just outside the crowd and looking in.

But the Fourth of July was different. We were all stranded a thousand miles from home on a holiday usually spent with family. The woman behind the hotel's reception desk told us the casino boat was a nice place to watch fireworks. Molinick was tired and wanted an early night, but the rest of us left in search of a celebration.

The weather was nice, dry and warm enough for a t-shirt and jeans. We planned to drink, so we walked the two miles to the water. That part of the Missouri River had seen an initial rise, and though it was still a bit higher than normal, the river had subsided to manageable levels by the Fourth.

I'd never entered a casino before joining the Coast Guard, but visiting one on every trip became tradition. When a couple of us went to St. Louis for pollution management training, we visited the Arch and then spent the rest of the afternoon in the Lumière Place Casino, overlooking the Mississippi River. In Louisville, after a day spent at a Junior Officer Leadership Conference, we headed down the Ohio River to the Horseshoe Casino. And back in Pittsburgh,

we'd attended meetings with local officials at the Rivers Casino, where the Allegheny River ends and the Ohio begins.

The Argosy riverboat was one of the smaller casinos I'd visited. A metal gangway painted flashy yellow led to a platform on the water with a narrow green, yellow, blue, and red building front. To the right of this building, a lighthouse stood tall and the rotating beacon of light drew in gamblers and drinkers instead of warning ships away from danger. The actual casino, docked behind the building front, filled three cramped decks of the riverboat, one of which was closed off to everyone but high rollers. Cigarette smoked filled the air – same as any casino – but the cramped space made the air even thicker. I grabbed a drink and spent most of my time out on the balcony. When the fireworks began, my crew finally joined me. After a display that felt too brief, we wandered back to the hotel and parted ways.

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After we'd found all the little hidden campgrounds and bird nests, the deployment had grown numb. Boredom replaced the peacefulness. A four-hour shift felt like a long time; a two-week mission would never end.

And then another team arrived at the dirt boat ramp, with their own mini-van and Johnstons and Franks, looking forward to two weeks out from under the Command's eye. We warned the on-coming team about the eddies and the submerged fence posts. We told them where to look for the family of eagles, and we handed over the rest of our supply of that menthol-based congestion medicine, the only defense against swarms of mosquitoes on the river.

Sioux Gateway Airport opened for us. Our late morning flight, though full, was the first of the day. None of the guys joked or chatted as we waited in the lounge, slouched into seats and

texting friends and significant others. We perked up when the airline attendant got on the loudspeaker and called us to her desk for drink vouchers as thanks for helping with the flood. I accepted the slip of paper and slunk back to my seat.

We hadn't saved anyone from an overturned boat. We hadn't fought off looters or blocked speedboats from illegally zipping across the river. We'd spent most of our time floating down the river and staring at the trees. On occasion, we chatted with worn-down people who had been working for weeks to save their property. I'd wanted to do more, but there wasn't more to do. And although I was ready to sleep in my own bed, the idea of walking back into my cubicle weighed down my belly with dread.

I wondered, not for the first time, if I'd made a mistake in entering the Coast Guard as an officer instead of an enlisted member. The people at the helms of boats crashing through storm waves to ailing vessels or wading through floodwaters with a child in their arms were nearly always enlisted. Officers stayed in dry Command Centers and planned missions. Perhaps my Command had sent me to South Dakota because I'd pressed my supervisor for time at the boathouse. Maybe they'd thought this big adventure would satisfy me and stop my fidgeting and daydreaming in morning staff meetings.

But I *wasn't* satisfied. If anything, the deployment made me even more aware of the gap between the office work I did on a daily basis and the field work that I wanted to do. I could write a thousand memos and still feel unproductive. Though *I'd* wanted more from the deployment, the people we'd come to serve were happy and felt safer with us there, which gave me a sense of satisfaction entirely absent in my cubicle work.

***

At the next unit meeting in Pittsburgh, the Commanding Officer called our team up for applause. The unit's parent command sent us each a letter of thanks, and our semi-annual evaluations bragged on our mission. On the surface, everything looked shiny. Lieutenant Junior Grade Hoskins had her little adventure, but the office was glad to have her back drafting temporary laws and writing permits.

I started quietly asking around whether the Coast Guard would get better, or if I would be doomed to forever serve the memo deadlines of senior officers. The petty officers and junior officers in whom I confided advised me to stick it out one more tour. They seemed certain that anything was better than a tiny unit in Pittsburgh with a limited set of missions. I just needed to experience a coastal tour. I told them I'd keep an open mind, but my thoughts had already begun to wander towards what existed beyond the service.

Turning the Page

> Come on, girl. Up the ladder and out now. Head high, flags flyin', that's the way we does it, but I knows it ain't gonna wash 'cause I'm half blubberin' already…and I'll try to be brave but I never was really very brave…
>
> -L. A. Meyer, *Bloody Jack*

"The growing season never ends!"

That was the primary argument I gave to one of the guys who worked for me in Pittsburgh as to why he should request assignment to south Louisiana instead of Texas. We both liked to garden, and although I used to kill more than I cultivated, my little vegetable and flower plots thrived in New Orleans sun and soil. The sprouts were quick to send threads into the earth, and those roots swelled and strengthened into deep anchors.

Perhaps that sun and soil had the same effect on me. When I was planning to leave the Coast Guard and scanning the horizon for the next great adventure, I didn't see a ship. The idea of leaving home for more than a few weeks at a time had lost its appeal. During my time in the service, I had managed to accumulate a house, a pair of cats, and a quartet of chickens. And New Orleans felt like the last bastion for dreamers like me, who lived with one foot on solid ground and the other in a story.

I was also in a serious relationship with a man who turned green when the gentlest wind nudged our canoe. I never even noticed the motion, until I glanced back to see his eyes glazed over and fixed on a tree or some other immobile object. He had an adventuresome spirit, but that kind of seasickness ruins a would-be sailor.

But what kind of sailor was I to turn my back to the sea and say, “No, thank you, I'd rather keep my feet on the land, if you please”?

My final tour with the Coast Guard took place on the top floors of a federal building in downtown New Orleans. Although my main job involved planning construction and maintenance projects across a twenty-six state District, I also filled in as the District Commander's aide when the normal one was sick or had a family emergency. The Admiral introduced me to a variety of officers in positions that loomed in my future, from senior policy advisers to commanders of engineering units. Their eyes skimmed over me as they rushed to shake hands with the Admiral or borrow his ear for as long as possible. Although I met some senior officers who took the time to greet the Admiral's staff, they were few. I imagined that was how Headquarters, where I would certainly be stationed one day, operated – all rushing around, pressing low-ranking employees to create more documents than anyone would ever need, kissing rings and pleading cases.

I'd wanted to be elbow-to-elbow with a crew, but every promotion removed me farther from that possibility. What good would leading my ideal department or unit – one with motivated personnel, high morale and mission accomplishment – be if the men and women who worked with me shut their mouths when I entered the room? I haven't spoken to Jeremy, first mate on the SSV *Robert C. Seamans,* since he wrote me that letter of recommendation, but I wonder if a similar sense of growing dissatisfaction urged him out of the service too.

My best friend's dad, a retired Air Force officer, had been the one to nudge me away from basic training and toward Officer Candidate School. He'd told me the pay was much better – it was, no denying that – and even though my chances of acceptance were slim, I should at least

try. He presented the application and training as a challenge. I wanted to see if I was good enough to pass the test.

On paper, my decision to separate from the Coast Guard looks fast and easy. In reality, leaving the service broke my heart. I had dreamed of a career with the Coast Guard, full of nautical adventure with a closely-knit network of shipmates. Leaving meant surrendering that dream and feeling like a failure because reality hadn't met my expectations.

And where were those expectations born? In the pages of my favorite girlhood books, *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* and *Bloody Jack*. Striving for a life resembling Charlotte's and Jacky's adventures was foolish, but years earlier, the SSV *Robert C. Seamans* had brought me close. The camaraderie between my shipmates and me as we hauled lines and cleaned the deck that summer had given me hope of finding that sense of belonging in the Coast Guard, alongside meaningful work that helped people.

My dad has always been interested to hear my adventures, even if they failed to meet *my* standards. He wanted to hear how I'd traveled across the country, driven boats, watched admirals negotiate with generals, and directed everything from teleconferences to a deployment. I'd flown a helicopter simulator and co-commanded a sailing evolution on the USCGC *Eagle*. He asked questions about the twenty-five-foot response boats and the flat-bottom flood punts; I couldn't always recite the horsepower or structural details, but I told him how each one felt compared to our old boat on Lake Hickory.

“You know, Bobyn,” he said, “your classmates didn't get to do any of that.”

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At some point in the previous years – I couldn't remember exactly when or why – I'd abandoned my fictional heroines, Charlotte Doyle and Jacky Faber. As my end with the Coast Guard approached, I escaped back into books *hard*. I visited the library on a weekly basis and walked out with a stack of everything from horror to autobiography. Having unwittingly starved for so long, I gorged myself at every opportunity. And when I was full, words leaked out, and I began to create my own stories.

Soon, I was sneaking books into the office and rushing through my actual work to find time to write. My brave, young heroines confronted mismatches of reality and expectations as they battled sorcerers and monsters from other dimensions. The stories were clunky and contrived, full of fight scenes with too much detail and life-changing realizations with too little motivation, but through them, I found a place to work out and understand my frustrations with the previous years.

When I was a kid, stories helped me figure out the world, and they continued to do so through my adulthood. I could combine my love of stories with the satisfaction I got from serving others. I wanted to teach, to guide others in navigating an understanding of the world and finding adventure along the way.

Geyer, one of my closest friends from Officer Candidate School, had left the Coast Guard the previous year. As I finalized my application for graduate school, she was entering her final semester toward an M.S. in Organizational Performance and Workplace Learning. “Don't do it,” she said. “Grad school is too much work – have you ever seen a happy grad student?”

But it was too late for her to dissuade me. I'd already started on the second rewrite of my Statement of Purpose:

From a young age, I've struggled with a serious affliction: impractical life goals. I don't mean the "earn a million dollars by age twenty" type. Rather, I set my focus on targets such as "become a pirate" (the ship-sailing, rum-swilling type) . . .

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My father – my first sea dad and a man who sometimes slips into a pirate accent when we're being silly together – isn't much of a reader or a writer, but he has a handful of sea stories in his past. One involves a teenager who'd taken his father's boat out after a nighttime party; it ends in tragedy. Dad will only tell that story after some prodding; he prefers to laugh.

His favorite tale centers around a trip where things didn't goes as expected. My uncle Perry, a retired Navy Senior Chief, visited us after my dad had gotten our rescued boat running again. The two of them decided to take the boat out on the lake without realizing the previous owner had installed a racing propeller.

"So Uncle Perry and I got out there. I pushed the throttle forward, and my goodness, that thing flew. We went all the way down Lake Hickory, and we turned around to come back. The propeller had over-revved the engine too long – it made a hole in the pistons. The engine locked up."

Dad was upset. I wasn't there, but I can picture his slouched shoulders and the crease in his brow as he unlatched the hard, black case and studied the outboard engine. He's the type of person who turns inward when things go wrong.

"Uncle Perry wasn't fazed a bit. I had a big umbrella, and he took two lengths of rope and tied it to the gunwale on both sides. He put the umbrella up forward of the windshield like a sail,

and he laughed and said, 'It's the all new Viking Two Improved Sail!' It was slowly moving us forward, and I thought, 'You know, if he's not upset, I'm okay too.'"

Some nice people later came along and towed my dad and my uncle back to the dock.

Back when I'd decided to separate from the Coast Guard, I waited as long as possible to tell my dad the news. He was always so excited to talk about the experience at different types of units and on Coast Guard boats that I felt like there was something wrong with me for wanting to part from that life. Dad wouldn't be as interested to hear about the paper I wrote on father figures in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* or my presentation on utopia in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*.

Oddly enough, my dad and I have more conversations now that I'm out of the Coast Guard. He still mentions my brief nautical career to anyone who will listen, but now the two of us discuss everything from home projects to travel. If Dad is disappointed that I left the Coast Guard to pursue books, he hasn't let it show. Sometimes, the old guilt creeps back in, whispering that I gave up too soon, but Dad is quick to remind me to laugh and keep my face toward the sky.

And you know, if he's not upset, I'm okay too.

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Vita

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