

2. Ghostly Artifacts

It's been a harrowing day.

By the time Laura returns home from the city, evening has fallen. She's soaked through, chilled to the bone. She locks up the house, then drags her exhausted frame up the stairs toward the master bedroom.

Note to self: next time, don't dismiss the hired car out of spite.

Twenty minutes waiting in the rain for a cab – way to go, Laura!

She sighs, then reminds herself:

Except… there won't be a next time!

The weather has finally subsided, but the wind continues to whip through the trees out in the yard. Leaves rustle across the lawn, and the limb from a nearby poplar tree rubs furiously against the side of the house, as though trying to gain entry.

The house seems foreign now.

Darker, more malevolent.

Somehow less welcoming.

Laura sees ghosts everywhere. Memories of the family, of Martin in the days when they were all still together. Before Claire went away to college. Before her life became melodrama.

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She makes her way down the hallway, stopping to look at the grief-stricken widow in the mirror. She studies the face staring back at her and wonders if her own husband would even recognize it. Her hair is limp from the rain. Her features are drawn from the stress of her situation and the worry that comes from uncertainty. She runs her hands across her cheeks – tracing deep circles under her eyes from relentless crying and lack of sleep.

As she makes her way toward the bedroom, she pauses to close the hallway window. The faint smell of cigarette smoke lingers in the drapery.

Lillian was here…

Laura grabs the sash and lowers it – closing the latch for security. As she does so, she pauses to look out at the barn looming silently by the river. Guarding its secrets.

Something in the house seems to mirror her unease.

Water drizzles down the windowpane in streaks as though the house, too, were crying. As she stares out the window, a distant memory floats to the surface: an innocent moment, happier, buried deep beneath the weight of loss.

She looks around the room; her Davenport lies silent and neglected, waiting for her inspiration to return… *It has not.*

As she stands there musing, details in the bedroom begin to shimmer, like ripples on a pond. Her vision of the room is transforming into a scene from long ago. A pleasant memory of a spring morning on the estate.

She blinks, and the room seems to breathe…

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The golden sunlight poured through the window…

Illuminating the bedroom in soft, muted tones. Laura is seated at her writing table, a family heirloom with a patina resulting from generations of writers. She pressed the nib of her fountain pen into the creamy pulp of her journal, pausing now and again to look out the window.

Beyond the glass, she can see the barn. Its weathered wooden form emerging faintly from the long shadows cast by the early dawn. A silent sentinel that, for years, bore witness to their lives. Inside, Martin moved with the steady grace of a man engrossed in his work.

Her gaze lingered over him. His broad shirtless back, damp with sweat despite the coolness of the morning. The rhythmic sound of his plane shaving rough-hewn teak drifted faintly through the air, stroke after deliberate stroke. His movements were methodical, almost meditative, as he shaped the wood with a craftsman's precision.

Laura's pen hovered over the page.

What makes him tick?

She wrote, focused on the man in his element. Martin's passion for that boat often mystified her, but she couldn't deny its beauty. Though incomplete, the ample lines of the hull spoke of adventure, and the distant horizons he so longed to explore.

The smell of strong coffee from the bedside table mingled with the faint tang of varnish and wood shavings that clung to the breeze whenever she opened the window. The familiar scents grounded her, as did the soft creak of the old house settling into itself.

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She tapped the pen against her lips, recalling her father's words from years past. Of Martin's preoccupation he would wink and say,

"Every man needs an avocation. Something to shape with his hands. It's not about the outcome, Laura. It's about what he discovers in the process. How it transforms him – or, in some cases… her."

Martin, it seemed, had taken that philosophy to heart. She marveled at his ability to lose himself – to find joy in the simple act of creating. It was something she envied – his ability to submit to something entirely.

Her eyes fell to the journal again, where she scribbled.

Martin's hands are the key. They carry the memory of every tool, every cut and curve in the wood, every knot tied on the sailboat.

She watched him soak a bandanna with cool water and wipe sweat from his neck.

I wonder if they will rediscover me when his labor is done?

A pang of guilt tugged at her. She had teased him about the boat's meaning, calling it his "midlife crisis." But watching him, seeing the care he poured into each detail, she felt a swell of pride and something deeper, something more elusive.

Outside, Martin stepped back from the bench, wiping his hands on a rag before leaning against the boat's frame. He tilted his head as if sensing her eyes on him. For a moment, their gazes met through the window. He smiled up at her with that easy,

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boyish grin of his. The one that had won her over so many years ago.

Laura smiled back, a warmth spreading through her chest. She turned back to the journal and wrote:

He doesn't realize it yet, but this boat is a lifeline. I can feel it, deep down. One day, it may carry us somewhere we've never been – not just across oceans, but into a new chapter of our lives – together.

The barn stood steady, a stalwart guardian of their dreams. In that moment, Laura knew for certain that whatever lay ahead –

Martin's dream would be their compass…

She sits at her vanity wearing a sheer nightgown…

The one that was once Martin's favorite. She pauses to regard her delicate form in the dim room light. A cool breeze emanates from somewhere in the house, filtering through the material that clings gently to her skin.

For a brief moment, she imagines his hands touching her lightly on the shoulders. His fingers exploring the contours of her body. The hairs on her neck standing up with exhilaration as his breath caresses her behind the ear.

The sensations rush back in a wave of psychosomatic recall – immediate, vivid.

She drags a brush through her thick auburn hair and continues to catalog all the little details that she clings to now. They are all that remains of their interconnection and the affection they shared for each other.

These sensations linger like breath on the window pane – a thin wisp – a thread

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linking her to the past…

Laura sat at her desk, the leather-bound journal open before her…

The soft scratch of her pen marked the time as she watched Martin's devotion take shape. Through the window, his figure moved with purpose in and out of the barn. The words she pressed into the page formed a kind of deposition, recording the deliberation of a man innovating.

Martin always said the boat was his way of finding balance between work and the true meaning of life. But I think it was more than that. It was antithetical – his way of creating something tangible in a world of abstract legal tenets and litigation.

She paused, watching him like an ornithologist studies a speckled warbler. Martin stepped out into the sunshine, his hands busy mixing a small can of varnish with a brush. He glanced up at the window, catching her eye, and smiled. Laura waved back, her heart lifting as she took in the scene.

She wrote, *I didn't understand it at first. I thought it was just a distraction – a way to pass the time. Now, I see it was his way of holding on to something honest – hopeful. Something he could share – intimate and meaningful. A separate peace, like freedom consecrated in wood, brass, and canvas.*

Martin's intention is etched in my psyche, while his philosophy is inscribed in the wood. In his own words, he described it thus: "Something built out of love will

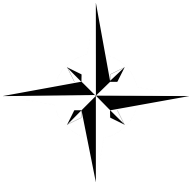
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survive long after we do."

There's nothing I wouldn't give for that to be true…

The visions begin to dissipate, like tall ships on a misty bay…

The enchanted light fades into a pale afterglow. Laura's hand falters, the comb slipping from her grasp. She looks up, her eyes reflecting the dim and drafty confines of the present. The room is cold, her journal closed and untouched. Laura rises, wrapping a shawl around her shoulders. She moves to the window, gazing out at the barn. The doors hang slightly ajar in the moonlight, revealing the unfinished hull of the sailboat within. What was once a place of inspiration and vitality now exudes an unfamiliar and unsettled vibe. In her lucid state, it occurs to her that the barn is no longer a place of warmth but something closer to a mausoleum – air thick with the residue of his passion.



Darkness swathes the room with a heavy silence.

The faint glow of the bedside clock reads 3:12 AM.

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Outside, the wind murmurs through the trees, rattling against the old house like bony fingers. Laura tosses and turns in bed, sleep shallow and troubled, her mind drifting through fractured dreams.

A noise stirs her senses – a sound just on the edge of consciousness.

She blinks awake, heart pounding, eyes adjusting to the dark…

Another noise – faint, but distinct.

A creak…

A scraping…

She leans toward the window and wipes away the condensation.

Through the frosted windowpane, she sees it.

A glow emanating from the barn, bleeding into the misty night.

Fear grips her, sharp and immediate…

She is alone…

There is no one to wake, no one to send downstairs to investigate. Martin would have gone – had he been here. He always did. She trusted him to face whatever waited in the dark.

But Martin is gone… isn't he?

She finds that intrusive thought disquieting and shakes it off, chalking it up to her languorous state of mind.

Swallowing hard, she pushes back the covers and reaches for her robe. Her fingers close around the telephone receiver, but she hesitates.

Who can she call? The police? The neighbors?

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Her fear of appearing foolish conflicts with any fear of what might be waiting for her outside. She moves quietly and cautiously through the house, her breathing rapid, shallow. Heart pounding.

On the way through the living room, she grabs a fireplace poker from its stand by the hearth. The cold metal feels solid in her hand. Heavy.

A makeshift weapon, if she needs one…

She pauses for a moment to consider the practicality of that.

Martin is not here to save her…

Not anymore…

She chokes on the thought.

Despite her mounting anxiety, she moves toward the foyer and the heavy portico that stands between her and her potential misfortune.

She pauses just long enough to give herself the opportunity to play it safe – call for help. But, she decides to follow through and face the fear head-on. Besides, if it turns out to be nothing more than a rummaging raccoon or wandering opossum, she will feel pretty silly and likely never hear the end of it.

Outside, the night is frigid, edged with the frostbite of winter.

The damp air clings to Laura's skin as she plods across the yard, her feet gliding

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over the frozen ground.

The barn stands cloaked in darkness against the moonless sky, save for the golden sliver of light spilling from within.

Her pulse hammers in her ears. She tightens her robe and steadies her breath. Reaching the heavy doors, she presses herself against the wood, listening.

Silence.

Then, cautiously, she eases forward, peering through the gap between the doors.

Inside, the workbench lamp is on, casting long, spectral shadows over the interior. The boat lurks in the half-light, its skeletal frame looming out of the inky blackness. The scent of pine tar and oil lingers in the air.

Laura's stomach twists.

Did she forget to turn the light off?

Her grip tightens on the poker as she nudges the door open – just enough to slip inside.

The barn is eerily still. No sign of an intruder.

The boat stands untouched.

Just the rhythmic creak of the rafters and the distant hush of the wind.

She exhales slowly, willing her heartbeat to settle. She must have left the light on.

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Maybe exhaustion is playing tricks on her. But the air feels charged, thick with something intangible – a feeling just beyond reason.

Then, from the workbench, something catches her eye – a smudge in the thin layer of sawdust that coats the surface.

A handprint?

She draws closer to examine the smear. She cocks her head this way and that. Holds her own outstretched hand over the mark to compare her form to the one lingering in the dust. Then, she catches herself.

"Get a grip on yourself, kiddo…" She waves off her anxiety – until she sees it clearly. "Could it be..?"

The *print* looks fresh – much larger than hers. And beside it, Martin's worn leather gloves, resting neatly as if just removed.

A chill crawls up her spine. Her throat tightens – her breathing becomes labored.

Her grip on the poker weakens.

She is alone. Yet… she doesn't feel alone…

"Who's there..?" She croaks.

A noise in the back corner snaps her to attention. She tenses, hefting the poker

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aloft and bracing for whatever might spring from the shadows.

She stands, trembling…

To her surprise – and relief – a rat meanders out from underneath a tarp. It rummages across the floor until she moves toward it, startling the tiny creature. She lifts the poker to strike, but the rodent scurries under a cabinet out of sight.

Laura grabs the cabinet and shakes it, trying to frighten the vermin out of hiding, causing the doors to pop open.

A dusty box falls out onto the floor with a solid metallic thud.

She bends down carefully to retrieve the item. It is coated with a thick layer of dust. She blows off the debris and carries it to the workbench.

The box is crude…

Not too heavy, but substantial. She places the box onto the counter and wipes off the lid, revealing an ornate inlay: three shiny, intersecting triangles.

She's seen this symbol before on scraps of paper pinned to the workbench. She assumes it must relate to whatever lies within.

She gently opens the lid…

Reaching into the shabby container, she withdraws an object wrapped in cloth. Carefully, she unfolds the remnant from around the relic — slowly unveiling a

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chunky brass object. Little by little, the features of a mechanism are revealed.

It's an antique brass sextant.

She holds it up, getting a better look at its details. It gleams under the lamplight, sending a warm quiver of exhilaration through her body. The mysterious instrument is vaguely familiar.

She's seen this contraption once before…

She studies it more closely. It is designed to be held in the hand – awkward but manageable.

An intricate device, engraved, with a radial arm controlled by a knurled knob at its base. A viewfinder sits atop the frame, its mirrors and smoky lenses clearly meant for observing bright objects.

As she studies the instrument, something about it tugs at her memory. A long time ago, on a blustery evening, she and Martin were relaxing in the den watching an old movie on DVD.

Martin paused the video over a scene, with a mariner using a similar device.

He attempted to explain its significance…

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"Imagine it, Laura – nothing but black water and starry skies…"

His eyes sparkled. "No maps. No GPS. Just the constellations. The ancients had to read them like a second language – the arc of the sun, the angle of the moon… fixed points above their heads."

He adjusted the sextant as he spoke, demonstrating its use, though Laura paid it scant attention, delighting instead in his boyish enthusiasm.

"It sounds like a headache," she teased.

Martin smirked, setting the device aside and nudging the book nestled in her lap.

"Maybe. But it's also mysterious. The sea is *vast*, but the sky is a *map* if you know how to *read it*."

Laura watched him, absorbing his passion as the fire crackled and the warmth of the moment settled into her bones.

Sensing the shift between them, he slid down into the soft confines of the sofa. It was cozy beneath her blanket – warm, inviting. A heady blend of firelight, brandy, and Laura's company.

The pull between them felt magnetic.

She reached out, smoothing his hair, her hand lingering against his stubbled cheek. He read her without hesitation and kissed her.

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As the fire continued to crackle in its hearth, they made love…

Forgetting about sailing, and sextants, and everything else…

Back in the present, Laura blinks as the cold barn swallows up the warmth of her memory…

The sextant remains, still in her hands, as though it somehow belongs there…

An artifact from the past? Or a mysterious clue meant for her to find?

She wanders out into the yard, pausing to stare up into the night sky. The Milky Way transits dimly overhead as if splashed across the void. The sight is beguiling, with millions of tiny points of light hovering – like a flurry of dazzling fireflies. Her breath crystallizes in the cold evening air as she cradles the sextant in her arms.

”When you wish upon a star…” she hums softly. “I used to sing that to Claire when she was a baby. Do you remember, Martin? Back when the stars aligned for us? We were younger then… more sure of ourselves.”

The moment is sublime; the sky, the barn, the spirit of the boat blur together, sowing the seed of an idea. At first, it seems a bit reckless and unattainable.

“Now the stars are different, and I must learn to read them… Alone.”

Her fingers tighten around the sextant. She can hear the chestnut trees groan in

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the chilly wind. As the breeze shifts, whistling through the cracks in the old barn like a banshee, for a moment – just a moment – the wind whispers a name…

Or so it seems.



The small shop is cluttered with coiled rope, bins of fittings, and the scent of teak mixed with the tang of stainless steel. Shelves are stocked with all the practical necessities of sailing – indulgent weekenders gaining access to hardware as well as a venerable source of wisdom. Dusty sunlight filters through the large front windows of the marine hardware store, casting long shadows over wooden counters scarred from years of rummaging.

Laura hesitates slightly at the front door before she steps inside, her eyes adjusting to the dim light. An antique doorbell jingles overhead, announcing her arrival. She enters, running a hand along a rack of books, taking in the organized chaos of the place. Further into the store, the smells shift; the scents of canvas, creosote, and solvent impose themselves upon the senses, masking a prevailing odor – the pungent aroma of the sea.

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Behind the counter, a grizzled old man – gruff and broad-shouldered, with a noticeable limp – looks up from a catalog he's been thumbing through. He squints at her, his face carved with years of sun and wind – decides she's out of place and resumes his work. Laura continues to linger, and after a moment, he speaks.

"If you're lookin' for tchotchkes and souvenirs, the tourist shop is two doors down." He grunts without lifting his eyes from his reading.

She chooses to ignore his remark and approaches him undeterred. "Thanks. I'm looking for some teak primer, marine sealant, and… maybe some advice."

The old man snorts, finally meeting her gaze. He takes her all in – the neat but unfamiliar way she holds herself, the lack of callouses on her hands, the slight uncertainty in her stance. His quick assumption is that she is a rich widow out of her depth. However, there is a sincerity in her request that gives him pause. He leans into the counter, continuing to measure her intent.

"Sealant is in the back with the primers. The advice is trickier, and it ain't free." He looks her up and down. She appears capable, though she wears comfort the way others wear calluses.

"Name's Laura – Laura Barrett." She extends her hand with some trepidation. "My husband used to come in here quite a bit. Martin was his name – Martin Barrett."

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He ignores her hand, pushing back his fisherman's cap thoughtfully as he drags his thick, greasy fingers over his balding scalp.

"Martin ya say?"

He hobbles out from around the counter, continuing to size her up as he struggles. His lazy eye is directed off to the left – his critical gaze coming from his good eye. Scratching his stubbled face, he asks her. "Are you the type who takes advice?"

"That depends on who is giving it." Her retort is good-natured, but she cuts to the chase. "I'll pay in cash."

The old man studies her a moment longer, then jerks his head toward the back of the shop. He moves stiffly, favoring one leg.

Laura watches him, wondering about the story there, following.

They weave their way past crates of stainless steel shackles, shelves stacked high with nautical books, and bins of cleats and pulleys. Laura absorbs everything, fascinated. The old man grabs a can of marine sealant off a shelf and thrusts it into Laura's hands.

"This'll do. Don't skimp on prep, or you'll be chasin' leaks 'til doomsday," he grunts.

She nods earnestly, "I'm refitting a boat. My husband started it – I want to

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finish it."

The old man pauses; he drums his stumpy fingers on the shelf, studying her again. Something unreadable flickers in his eyes – recognition, maybe.

Respect? Maybe. Pity is more likely… Hard to tell.

He inhales slightly, as if he is about to say something, then falls silent. He exhales, nodding as if conceding to forgetfulness.

"Well, you'd better learn to do it right then…" He turns, moving further down the aisle, rummaging through a stack of old manuals and pulls one free.

"Start with this...most folks do. It's a good resource." He flips through the pages and extends the manual, then pulls it back with an afterthought. In a tone that is gruff but not unkind, he adds, "Now I remember!" he says, snapping his fingers. "That fella who's restoring that old wooden hybrid?"

"That's the one. I mean… he was." She responded in a soft voice.

"He passed away last fall…"

The old salt's demeanor shifts with the news.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Good man, Martin. Used to come in here quite a lot. A little ambitious, but…" He stops himself from rambling. "Anyway, I wondered what happened to him. I thought maybe he had given up trying to restore that old boat."

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“Well, it’s fallen on me to either finish the work… or scrap the whole project.”

Whatever he thought of her before no longer quite fits.

“Someone once said, ‘A boat is a hole in the water you throw money into.’ You might be better served cutting your losses, ma’am. Restoring a boat is… complicated!” His tone is less condescending than simply lacking in sufficient detail.

She bristles, “Martin loved the water. We met one summer out on the Cape. That boat was his dream… our dream.” Her voice cracks a bit, and she mists up. “He died before he could finish it. So, now it’s up to me. You may not think much of me, but I am a quick learner. What I already know, I know because of him.” She wipes her eyes with the back of her hand while juggling the varnish and the heavy manual.

“I want to see this through… for him.”

Old Salty’s tone turns sage, “You don’t build a boat or go to sea on a whim,” he scoffs. “You’ve gotta feel it. Like it’s a part of who you are and nobody else. I suspect your man understood that. Hell, he must have to think he could undertake a project like restoring a wooden boat from a hull.”

“It was his passion – and now it’s mine,” she adds defensively.

“Aye! Passion and a pinch of luck!” He winks, leading her back to the register. Ringing up her purchases, he hands her the bag, cautioning her with a little

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tongue-in-cheek.

“Don’t screw it up!”

Laura exhales, half a laugh escaping. She picks up the book, running her fingers over its worn cover. She believes she can trust this man.

Even though he looks like he keeps a parrot in the back room.

”Do I look like the type who would screw it up…?” she asks coyly.

He rolls his eyes and blurts, “Lady, for all I know… you already have!”

As she pays, she catches sight of a faded photograph pinned to the wall – an old sailboat, sleek and battle-worn, cutting through heavy seas. The name on the hull is too faded to read, but she recognizes the look of a vessel that has seen storms and survived. She looks back at the old man, who is already turning away, back to his catalogs.

“What was her name?” She asks, keenly studying the image.

He looks up, “What’s that ya say?”

“The photograph.” She points to the wall. “There, behind you. What’s the story there?”

The old man sighs. For a moment, he hesitates to answer. He ascertains her curiosity about the woman but chooses to address the boat instead. Quietly, more as

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an aside, he speaks. “She's had a few names over the course of her lifetime, like all good boats do. But, you don't simply name a boat. She tells you who she is. A vessel earns its name – just as its captain earns the right to sail her.” He grunts, affirming that bit of wisdom. “Always been that way. Anyhow, any name is good, so long as it ain't Pequod!”

Laura nods, fascinated – wanting to know more.

Sounding a little nostalgic, he adds, “This one was the *Osprey*. She was a fine old boat.” His body language indicates he knows more than he is letting on.

She presses for more of the story, “Who is that in the photo standing at the helm?”

“That’s Ellen Babcock. We called her “Babs” for short. One of only a few women to circumnavigate the globe in her day. A hell of a sailor… and a very special lady.”

“Of course! I have a copy of her book at home. Martin had it in his collection. I thought she looked familiar.” She gives him a double take. “You’re the one who inscribed the inside cover?” Her tone softens, “You knew her?”

“Aye, ma'am. Is that so hard to believe..?” His tone is prickly.

Laura checks herself. “I… didn't mean to imply anything. I just…”

“You just meandered in here, with your curiosity and some cash – tryin' to fill a

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void. Hmph! You'd do well to take a page or two from her book. She was unique, fearless, and sturdy. They don't make 'em like her anymore…"

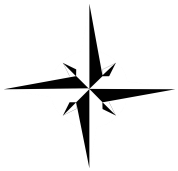
Laura nods, understanding more than she bargained for. She gathers her things and heads for the door. As she steps outside, the ocean air fills her lungs, and for the first time, in a long while, she feels like she's moving in the right direction.

Salty calls after her dryly, "Stay close-hauled," and "don't leave a sticky wake!"

Without looking back, "Thanks, I'll take it on board."

She moves with determination down the street. There is much to be done as the clouds gather overhead. She draws her coat in tightly, wondering if it will rain.

Now, she only needs to understand which way the wind is blowing.



As evening sets in, Salty is shuffling through the store, still noodling over Laura's synchronistic visit.

It is closing time.

He rearranges a few items behind the counter, drags a stained cloth over the glass cabinet, and straightens the pens and pencils in the cup by his register. He locks the

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cash drawer with the key. He pockets the little brass bob and moves around the counter toward the front door.

He pauses. Looks around for a moment. Scratches his stubble – listening. Then…

"Cat…?" he bristles.

Silence.

Salty grumbles something unintelligible and waves it off.

"Mrrr…ow!" can be heard emerging from a coil of hawser line nearby.

"There you are, ya' mangy freeloader." He smiles. "Mind the store, eh?"

"Mrrp!" is the response.

"Aye, me too…" Salty grunts.

The wind outside is blustery. The eaves of the roof creak under the strain of an offshore gale. He can see leaves blowing through the air as he approaches the glass. The lights flicker and go out briefly. In the dim afterglow, a sparkle catches his eye.

Was it his imagination?

Shadow play on the back wall from a nearby streetlight?

Or, the eerie moon dancing in and out from behind the clouds?

His gaze is directed toward the photo of Babs on the wall. It is as if she is trying to communicate with him from beyond.

He squints to see clearly.

The lights flicker again, attempting to reignite.

In the uncanny ambiance, a breeze wheezes through the windowpanes.

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Salty…

He snaps back in a surly tone. “What was that?”

Surveying the store, his failing vision strains to see in the dark. Then, his eyes widen as if acknowledging a response.

“Yeah, I seen it too.” He agrees. “She’s got a familiar cut to her jib, don’t she?” He grunts and shrugs to himself – caught up in an existential debate with some unseen spirit.

“Aye, but she has a lot to learn!”

Just then, a huge blast of wind envelops the small building causing the rafters to shudder and the windows to rattle. He continues the esoteric debate, almost pleading.

“I don’t know if I can go through that again.” He implores *her*.

“Those were different times then. Harumpf! I was different, and you were too!”

He aims a crooked finger at Babs’ image, as if he is daring any counterargument. But, his addled mind detects no responses. Only the blustery broil outside.

The costs are too high… and the stakes too grave…

He scratches his head. *Harrumph!*

Gathering his jacket around him, he slips out the door. While locking up, he takes a nervous look up the street as the wind blows more leaves and debris around the sidewalk.

“Is that you bringin' the gale?” he canvasses.

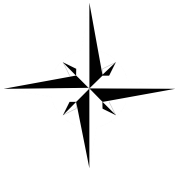
Gazing up into the clouds, he gives a dubious grunt.

No one is around – the streets are clear as he makes his way down the quay,

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headed toward warmer, friendlier confines.

No stars to steer by tonight…



The barn looms before Laura – the weathered red paint faded with time.

She hesitates at the door, breath visible in the crisp morning air.

Coming to the barn these days is a dreadful prospect.

She isn't sure if she is ready for this.

After a brief moment of apprehension, she reaches for the door with trembling hands. Forcing herself forward, boots crunching over scattered leaves and wood shavings, she pushes the heavy doors open.

They groan in protest, revealing the dim interior.

Dust motes dance in the sunbeams filtering through the high windows. The air is pungent – vibrant. The scent of sawdust, varnish, and ancient wood fills her lungs, stirring something deep inside her – something visceral.

Her heart is hammering as she steps inside. She approaches reverently, her fingers trailing over the familiar workbench, the edges worn smooth from years of Martin's handiwork.

Then, she sees it – the hulk of the boat, resting quietly beneath a canvas tarp. Like the Modern Prometheus in silent repose. It is larger than she remembers, its presence

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dominating the space. She hesitates for only a moment before gripping the tarp's edge and pulling.

A cloud of dust erupts – swirling in the golden light. Laura coughs, waving a hand in front of her face. When the air clears, she steps back to regard unfinished vessel.

It is breathtaking. The lines of the hull are sleek and strong. The wood is smooth, the grain running in elegant patterns. She reaches out, pressing her palm against the surface. It is cool and solid – confident in a way that feels real.

Her gaze shifts to the scattered tools on the workbench. His tools. Each one carefully chosen, worn in just the right places by his grip. A lump rises in her throat as she picks up a chisel, running her fingers along its edge. As she traces the bevel of the blade, she nicks her finger.

A small spot of blood appears.

Instinctively, she pops the finger in her mouth to soothe the sting and stop the bleeding. And then she sees it – a dark stain near a cluster of chisel marks. A small, dried smear of blood soaked into the wood. His blood – anointed the boat like a covenant. Her breath catches in her chest.

Her skin tingles in waves. Something evanescent, that once defined Martin, has returned – stirring, vivid…

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Martin stumbled through the kitchen doorway, shaking his hand, blood dripping onto the tile…

Laura gasped, rushing toward him.

"What happened?" Laura winced at his blood dripping everywhere.

Grimacing but amused, "It's the ecchymosis of my other significant relationship." He held up his hand, revealing a deep but clean cut along his palm.

Laura grabbed a towel and pressed it to the wound, ignoring his droll remark.

"Eccy – what?" she asked, focused on the wound.

"It's just a love bite from the boat. You know, my *other* significant other!" He air-quoted as she tried dressing his wound.

"You need stitches," she stated matter of factly.

"I need whiskey," he countered pragmatically. He opened the kitchen cupboard and retrieved a bottle of single malt and a glass.

She scowled, but he grinned, with that irresistible charm flickering across his face.

She guided him to a chair, tending to the wound with gentle, practiced hands.

He watched her expression soften.

"So, you're telling me you're having an affair? With the boat?" she chided.

He smiled at her. "Jealous?" There was mischief in his eyes. "You've always taken such good care of me!"

She didn't respond, just focused on wrapping the towel tightly. Her hands trembled slightly at the sight of his blood. He noticed, reaching up to tuck a stray hair behind her ear. Their eyes met. Something lingered, heavy and warm.

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"Should I be?" she asked, gaming playfully.

A charge coursed between them.

"Oh yes! You should be *very* jealous, given the amount of time I spend with *her*."

He pulled her close.

She could feel her pulse racing.

"I didn't know I was competing." She kissed him tenderly. "What can I do to make you choose me?" She slipped her warm hand into his coveralls.

"Well, you're making a compelling argument already!" He kissed her warmly.

Grabbing the bottle off the counter, she pulled a second glass from the cabinet.

Then, with a wicked look, she led him upstairs…

Laura sighs, eyes closed – the memory dissolving quietly into the present…

The bloodstain remains – an echo of the past. She exhales nervously, brushing her fingers over the dried mark before straightening up.

"It seems we've both bled for this pipe dream!"

She looks back at the boat.

Martin's dream is now hers too – consummated with blood.

On a shelf, over the work bench, is an old boom box.

Laura wipes the dust off the cassette door. There's still a tape inside. An old recording – one of Martin's favorites. She presses play, and the smoky jazz of a trumpet fills the barn. The relaxed vibe of the music has a hypnotic appeal, making it

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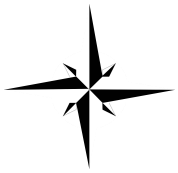
easy to understand how Martin could spend hours out here, focused, channeling his creative impulses. The entire essence of the improvised composition is about expression in the moment – exploring a pathway, searching for inspiration. That process of discovery reveals insight into the musician, the craftsman, or for that matter… the sailor.

She is starting to understand a lot of things more clearly.

She allows herself a brief moment to feel the pangs of loss as the music begins to console her.

"It's amazing," she speaks as though Martin were standing beside her. "Even in death, you're still revealing things about yourself," she sighs, determined not to let emotions take over. "Well, Martin, I'm still here – still listening." Squaring her shoulders, she reaches for a set of plans pinned to the wall and takes a deep breath.

Time to begin…



The next day, Laura places an order for materials from the local lumber retailer. By that afternoon, the materials have arrived, and she discusses her plans for continuing the project.

A soft, golden sun casts long shadows as it dips low toward the horizon. The crisp air is thick with the scent of raw marine lumber and seasoning oil. A work truck sits

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parked near the barn, the back filled with planks of teak and mahogany.

Laura stands near the boat, her arms crossed, listening intently.

Across the hull from her stands a rugged carpenter in his mid-50s, sun-weathered. A no-nonsense kind of man. He wipes his callused hands on a rag, eyeing the old hulk's unfinished interior through an open hatch.

He's the son of a shipwright.

The grandson of a cabinetmaker.

His endorsement is critical – Martin trusted this man.

"You sure about this, Mrs. Barrett? We're talking about weeks of work here. Lotta custom fitting," he rubs his chin, assessing the job. "Martin had big plans."

"I know. And I want to see them through." She pauses to add, "But, I can't pay you all at once. Not yet anyway. I have a few things I need to sell."

The carpenter exhales, nodding as he looks over the half-finished interior. He runs his fingers along the edge of an unfinished bulkhead, considering her position. "Lotta work was put in here. I'd hate to see it go to seed. I'll tell you what. I'll finish the interior on credit. You cover the cost of materials. I'll float the labor for a little while. I can do most of it myself in the afternoons, after my regular jobs, and maybe some weekends here and there. But I need to know you're good for it."

Laura glances toward the house, her lips pressing into a thin line. From the porch, Claire watches her mother negotiate – silently, arms crossed, eyes narrowed as she takes in the exchange. Laura shifts uncomfortably. A quiet resolve settles over her.

"I'm selling some things. A few antiques – maybe the piano."

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He questions her decision. “The piano? The one I repaired a few years back? I thought that was an heirloom piece?”

“It is… But this,” she gestures toward the boat, “this is my future. I can’t take the piano where I’m going. I can live without the rest.”

The carpenter studies her closely. He sees the look of determination on Laura’s face and gives a small nod. “Alright, Mrs. B. I’ll run the numbers and draw up the paperwork. We’ll start next week.”

Laura offers her hand. “If we’re going to do this, you’d better start calling me Laura!”

He grips her hand firmly, sealing the deal.

“Folks call me ‘Chip’ on account of my handiwork.” Then he adds, “Martin insisted on quality. He’d be proud to see this done right. We put a lot of time into the finishing. I’m glad we’ll see its faithful completion.”

“Yes. I spent many nights sleeping alone while Martin stayed up obsessing over details and plans.” She pauses to think back. “I wonder if his spirit knew he was running out of time?” She waves away the tears.

“Don’t worry, Mrs. B. We’ll see it through. She’ll be a fine vessel.”

She corrects him. “Call me, Laura!”

“Right. I’ll see you soon, Laura.” Chip tosses his rag into the truck, tipping his cap before climbing in.

The engine rumbles to life, and the truck pulls away, kicking up dust as it disappears down the road.

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Laura watches it go, exhaling slowly. The weight of sacrifice settling in. She directs her attention to the boat. It's long, graceful lines. The scent of teak oil. The gleam of polished brass. It is a symbol of something – a crucible, perhaps, waiting to test her resolve.

She loses herself in thought.

Sometime later, she would write:

Time… Does the universe really keep track? Or is it just an awkward convention we rely on to keep us from forgetting there is a natural rhythm to everything? The world needn't be reminded of itself, or the song of its creation. The very idea of time collapses in the context of a cosmos that ebbs and flows on its own tide. And we… if we are wise… surrender to its pull.

Her concentration is so deep and so engaging that she hardly notices her daughter. Claire steps off the porch, her voice soft and filled with sadness.

"You're really selling the piano?"

"I'll have to…" Laura concedes.

Claire nods, avoiding the discomfort of this. She glances at the boat, then back at her mother, finally beginning to understand. Without another word, she turns and heads inside.

Laura lingers in the quiet, resting a hand on the hull. The wood is haptic beneath her fingers. Herculean yet attainable.

This is happening.

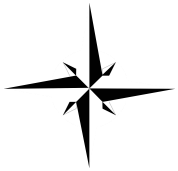
She looks up at the darkening sky, breathing in the evening air. The wind blows,

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cool against her skin.

There'll be loss in this choice, and she feels it.

But there's also hope and a promise of healing.



The downstairs study is dimly lit.

The soft glow of a brass lamp casts a golden halo over the worn leather chair and mahogany desk. The air is seasoned with the scent of aged paper and polished wood – tinged with the aroma of leather bindings conditioned with lanolin and beeswax. Outside, the wind murmurs through the trees, whispering against the windowpanes.

Laura hesitates at the threshold, reluctant to disturb the quietude. This was Martin's space – his sanctuary. The bookshelves are still lined with law books, nautical charts, manuals, and old travelogues. A heavy antique desk sits at the center of the room, a place of command and contemplation. She exhales slowly, stepping inside for the first time in weeks.

She returns a worn paperback to the desk – Ocean's Daughter: The Voyage of Ellen Babcock. The cover is faded, its edges curled from years of handling. The volume is now a part of her lexicon too. Salty's voice echoes in her memory:

"*You'd do well to take a page or two from that woman's book!"*

She willingly took that advice.

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Many late nights Martin spent poring over the wisdom inscribed in those pages. She flips it open, trailing her fingers over the first few lines. But her eyes drift, slowly down to the desk with its furtive drawers. Her curiosity dares her to test the resistance of a thick tarnished drawer pull.

Her fingers close around the hardware. She hesitates.

The desk is exactly the way Martin left it – as if he expected to return.

Opening that drawer feels like an intrusion. Once she crosses his domain, the illusion of Martin's absence is shattered. He will no longer occupy her world. He will have stepped away, and simply ceased to exist…

She draws a slow breath.

She gives the handle a faint tug. To her surprise, it relinquishes its claim easily.

Gently, she slides it open. Inside, a collection of loose papers, old letters, and odds and ends. She picks up a small mariner's knife. It's heavy for its size, stainless steel, and sharp. She accidentally slices her thumb. A sliver of blood forms on the skin.

She looks at it – sucks the wound clean, then pockets the knife.

Beneath the clutter, buried in memories, is a small wooden box. She lifts it from its hiding place. It's a rosewood coffer with beautiful brass inlays – three circles interconnected. Her breath catches as she lifts the lid. Nestled within lay Martin's wristwatch, gleaming in the lamplight. The glow reveals a chronograph, a knurled steel bezel, and a heavy stainless strap – its links worn to a dull patina from years of wear. Not unlike an anchor chain. She brushes a finger over the face, watching the

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second hand sweep in steady, measured time.

The sight of the timepiece brings a wellspring of emotions flooding back to her.

The first time she met Martin, he was wearing this artifact confidently on his arm. A totem of his audacious spirit. It was that same comportment that drew her to him…

Like a moth to a flame.

Her own words echo in her head.

A desperate appeal in a moment of grief:

I need more time… more time… more time…

The chilling response…

If only we all had more time…

The irony is palpable.

Was she being guided by unearthly hands? Shown another way?

She ponders that question for a beat, then fastens it around her wrist. It hangs loose, swinging like a bracelet. Too big. Too heavy. But she leaves it there, pressing her palm over it. The balance wheel ticks like a heartbeat; a steady, confident cadence, like a tether to the past. As she sits there, in the quiet of the study, haunted by the object, the lamplight flickers with a slight, vaguely unnatural rhythm.

The second hand moves – steady, precise. But for a breath of a moment, it falters. A murmur in the movement. Like a cessation in the fabric of time. Then it moves on, smooth, relentless.

A trick of the light? Surely...

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Laura sits deep in thought, while outside, the gusty wind swirls in a low moan.

The windowpanes rattle in their mullions.

The moment carries weight. There, in the sacred confines of Martin's study – witnessed only by the spirits in the photos that adorn the walls, the volumes on the shelves, and the strange indigenous mask peering darkly from a corner of the room…

Some symbolic torch has been passed.

Laura feels it.

A humming beneath her skin.

Her laptop chimes. She glances at the screen.

An article on Ellen Babcock?

A grainy black-and-white photo of a woman at the helm of her boat – hair wild in the wind, eyes sharp and fearless. Like the one in Salty's shop – superimposed across a map depicting her journey, traced across boundless oceans.

Laura slowly exhales, feeling the weight of the watch against her skin. The book beneath her fingers resonates. The woman on the screen is staring back at her.

Are there spirits trying to tell her something?

Offering some kind of ambiguous invitation – a way forward?

The moment is hair-raising. Outside, a damp northerly wind presses hard against the house, glazing the windows.

The lamp flickers again.

The scent of brine lingers on the air.

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Strange… a barber wind this far from the ocean?

Then, only silence.

It feels as though unspeakable forces are stirring here… like a cauldron.

Her future hangs in the balance – posing inescapable questions of faith and desire.

Will she reach the edge of something… outré?

*S*he must decide whether or not to answer.

The revenants have come calling…



Morning finds Laura back in the barn, sleeves rolled up, coffee in hand.

Whatever energy stirred the night before has slowly settled – not disappeared, only gone dormant – pressed down beneath the weight of impending work. The unease that lingers in the house does not follow her here.

In this place, she feels purpose, direction…

The quiet pull that once kept Martin in here for hours.

Laura starts inside the boat, hunkering in the salon rummaging through cabinets, wearing a long-sleeve flannel shirt and a face mask to shield her from dust and mold. Her breath wheezes through the filters – harsh, mechanical, almost alien.

In the V-berth, she is pulling things out of a cupboard that have been haphazardly stuffed inside. Plumes of dust billow up into the air and then settle on everything

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nearby. A collection of damp, dusty bags and boxes has been stowed there for a very long time.

She discovers two heavy-duty nylon duffel bags crammed into the forepeak compartment. It is a struggle to drag them out of the stateroom, then out of the boat. She tosses the two bags over the rail onto the barn floor, where they land with a sickening thud. She climbs out of the vessel panting heavily and stands over the two filthy bags. Examining them carefully, Laura runs her hands over some black markings. Strange symbols and pen strokes that Laura does not recognize.

Martin's handwriting, no doubt?

She decides to haul them out into the sunlight.

Slowly, she unpacks one of the duffel bags, revealing sailcloth inside. Several "rags" are stuffed into each bag. She decides to pull one out to inspect its condition. A clear parcel of the yard offers the perfect spot to unfold the enormous sails.

Laura pulls the great mainsail across the grass. It was white but has grown moldy from being stored for so long. The smell of musty canvas fills her nose. There are large mildew stains all over the surface and large cracks in the stiff material where it has dry-rotted.

While inspecting the sail, the rotten cloth has separated at the seams.

She repeats the inspection process with the contents of the other bag. In all, there are four sails lying on the lawn in various states of degradation. She surveys the damage, wondering if anything can be done to salvage them. The mainsail is a total loss, along with a larger rag made of a more delicate material. The bugs have feasted

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heavily on the fabric, leaving it worthless in terms of utility.

The two smaller sails appear to be jib stock. One is rotted in spots – dirty and ripped apart. The other appears newer and in better condition.

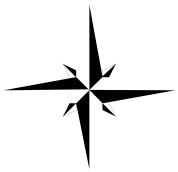
Possibly a keeper?

She decides to pack the mess back into the smelly duffel bags. She already knows the best course of action. Get a second opinion.

She stifles a sneeze. “I need to show these to Salty – see what he recommends!”

Eyes watering and sneezing repeatedly, she throws the bags into the bed of her small pickup truck. An antique step-side that Martin bought years ago. Another one of his restoration projects, long before the boat. It has a vintage charm and has come in handy for hauling supplies to and from town. Laura rolls up her sleeves and climbs aboard like an old hand. She cranks the stubborn engine until it turns over with a rumble. Then, she grinds through the gearbox – finds first gear – and slams it forward. With her discovery raising new questions, she hauls off toward town.

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Salty busies himself, thumbing through a catalog, when a filthy duffel bag lands squarely in front of him. He looks up startled. To his surprise, Laura is dragging another bag to a halt on the floor at his feet.

“Hey! Careful with the glass! These cabinets are older than I am, and I’m brittle!”

Laura saddles up alongside the counter to catch her breath. Panting heavily. "Check these out. I think I need new sails."

Salty waves at the air. The material is flaking into tiny feathers of rotted polyester that float down onto the counter like putrid snowflakes.

"Where did you find these useless rags? They're disintegrating!" he says, covering his nose with a handkerchief.

"In the v-berth. There was an access door to the forepeak up front."

She brushes herself off and takes a seat at the counter.

"Martin must have bought these years ago, and stowed them for use later." She hesitates, then adds more quietly, "It's a pity he never got to see them hoisted and trimmed," she sighs. "There's a painful lesson there for sure..."

"Aye, lass. Time and tide wait for no man," Salty whispers.

"Nor woman…" Laura chimes in.

"Indeed…" He mills through the bags, inspecting the material. "Not much here to salvage. You might be able to reuse some of the hardware, though." He sounds a little skeptical.

Laura watches with interest as he sorts through the trove.

"These clew bindings are still good. That'll save you some cash. The brass is fine. So are the shackles. You'll save a pretty penny on all these halyard clips." He scratches his beard, considering his advice. "You're gonna need new sailcloth, though," he says regrettably.

Laura looks despondent.

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She snatches up one of the halyard clips, scrutinizes it, before pocketing it. Then, she runs a hand over the brittle sailcloth.

"Another expense!" she grimaces. She pulls at the fabric, accidentally poking a finger through the material. "We can't save any of this?" Her mood has shifted to depression at Salty's unfavorable assessment.

"Your sails are the key to everything, Laura. You don't want to compromise on those." He grabs a pair of reading glasses and looks closely. "Let's see what we got here." He runs the weave between his fingers – grunts – holds it to the light to peer through.

Laura watches with keen interest as he formulates his diagnosis.

"You could probably use this newer-looking jib. It feels like P.E.T. – looks like it is in good shape, too. You won't know for sure though, until you test it on the water under load," he says, appearing cautiously optimistic.

Laura wrinkles her nose as she tries to process this.

"P.E.T.? What's that?" she asks.

"Polyethylene Terephthalate!" he replies. "P.E.T. for short. It is a very common synthetic fiber. Most sailmakers use it now. It's cheap to manufacture and stronger than traditional canvas."

He can see Laura's eyes glazing over as she tries to focus on his lecture on polyester.

"P.E.T. huh? So that's *good*?" She holds the material in her hand, trying to mimic examining it like he does. "So, this one *might* be usable?"

"Well, you'll find out when you try to set that sail. The first push from a

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seven-knot wind could rip that thing from leech to luff! Then, you'll be in a real pickle!"

He takes in a breath, holds it for a beat, then releases it with a whooshing and tearing sound. His performance is very dramatic – but effective.

She nods, committing every word to memory. For the first time since Martin's death, someone has told her the truth – and it didn't break her.

"Okay. So, what are a new set of sails going to put me back?" she sighs.

He taps his chin thoughtfully – scratches his stubble, and runs the numbers in his head. He snaps his meaty fingers and pulls a catalog out from behind the counter.

"I dunno. Let's have a look."

Laura flips through the volume. Dozens of manufacturers crowd page after page. Then, she stops on a page and slams her finger down on an image.

"Those!" she squeals with excitement. "How much for a set of those?"

Salty looks at her skeptically.

She found something awfully fast.

He checks out her selection.

"Oh! Those are actually quite good. How did you know?"

"Know what?" she asks.

"How did you know these would suit your needs?" he asks with an odd look.

She scrunches her nose again. "I didn't. I just like the logo! It reminds me of something Martin used to doodle on everything. There are scraps of paper pinned up all over the workbench with that logo on it!"

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Salty rolls his eyes. “Figures. Well, Martin had good taste! These could set you back a pretty penny, though.”

She winces. “How much is a *pretty penny?”*

He skims the page with his chubby finger. “Says here, six or seven thousand dollars – depending on the square footage.”

“Ouch! I don’t know about that.” She looks at him funny.

There has got to be a better way.

Salty slams the book closed, startling her. He doesn’t have time to waste on pipe dreams. “It’s like I said a thousand times, kiddo. Sailing is a rich man’s sport. Perhaps this is a sign that you are in over your head. Maybe it’s time to cut your losses and find a new hobby?” He starts to walk away.

She is not willing to give in so easily. She heads him off and attempts to argue, but he manhandles her out of his way and retreats behind the counter.

She stomps her foot. “This is not a hobby!” Then, she perks up. “What about used?”

Salty gets a sparkle in his eye at her suggestion.

He mills around producing a business card from under the cash drawer. He tosses it down in front of her. Then, he taps on it with a calloused finger.

“I thought you might say that!” He points to the name on the card. “This guy has a set of sheets he is looking to unload. You might be able to get ‘em cheap.”

Laura nods with enthusiasm.

“I can make a call. He might be willing to deal.”

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Laura squeals again with delight at this hopeful solution. She reaches across the counter and hugs Salty around the neck–ruffling his appearance.

He recoils, blushing slightly.

“Hey…! Okay, take it easy. It’s not a done deal yet!”

She jumps up excited and makes for the door letting out a victory whoop.

“I knew you would come through with a plan! I just knew it!”

Salty jams two chubby fingers into his mouth and lets out a shrill whistle.

“Hold on there swab! Before you go running off, get these sorry rags off my counter and into the trash!”

Laura returns, gives Salty a hasty salute, and hauls her sack off the counter onto the floor with a thud. She struggles with the load, trying to make it look as if there is no problem moving them.

Salty watches, frowning playfully.

“Oh, never mind!” he billows. “I’ll take care of it…”

“Call me?” she grins, then bolts for the door.

“Will do! Take it easy, though. There’s bound to be more expense with that sailboat. This is a small victory. There’s always somethin’ waiting to drain your wallet!” He follows her to the door.

“Don’t worry. I have faith! But, I have to go home now. I have money to raise!” Laura hops into her truck, cranks it over, and slams it into gear. Then, she calls out the window. “Time for a yard sale!”

Salty watches her drive off, in her rickety old step-side. “Go on then,” he calls

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after her, “You’ll find what you’re after – if you’ve got the wind for it.”

All he can do is smile. This is her first real sense of hope in a long time. He pauses for a moment to take a deep breath and appreciate the day. Then, he looks up to the sky and gives a wink.

“Yes, ma’am, I do remember! It’s been a long time since I saw that look in someone’s eyes.” He pauses as if listening. “Yeah, this one needs our help alright…” He smiles – nods in agreement. “We’ll see… If the sea wants her I’ll do what I can.”



The next morning finds Laura on the front lawn with a cardboard box at her feet and the house yawning open behind her. She stands there, a moment longer than she intended, one hand resting on the box’s rim, the other over her heart, anxiously beating – waiting for the day to begin. Inside the box – remnants that make up a life…

Knick-knacks and keepsakes.

Ornaments and odds-and-ends.

... things that once had a place.

She exhales, bends, and sets it down among the others already staged in the grass. Folding tables wait to be filled. The lawn feels suddenly exposed, as though the inside

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has turned itself out. Somewhere between the front door, and the front lawn, the house feels less like home, and more like a memory.

With Claire's help, Laura begins carrying furniture through the front door and into the light. A lamp. An umbrella stand. An old armchair that still makes her think of Martin. Each trip lightens the load and tightens something deep in her chest.

When she shoulders two golf bags at once and staggers into the yard, breathless and laughing despite herself, she understands what this really is.

Not a yard sale…

A sort of cleansing.

By mid-morning the yard is full of casual browsers.

Claire gets into the act as she emerges from the house wearing an outlandish hat and carrying a tray of freshly made lemonade. She'd stayed after helping with the piano sale, curious to see what else her mother might decide to part with. Now, armloads of Martin's old clothes, still on the hangers, a men's mountain bike, and Laura's old exercise machine have taken their place at the sale.

The two women come meandering out of the house, carrying a rolled-up carpet, and collapse in the yard – laughing in spite of themselves.

Back in the study, Laura sifts through the volumes on the shelves.

One pile for the sale, and the others to keep.

She chooses to be practical, keeping books about sailing, maintenance, and topics to entertain the mind on long passages.

Claire enters, breathing hard, offering her empty arms, to which Laura loads a

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precarious stack of law books. She laughs, watching her daughter stumble blindly out the front door – just as Davey Jones decides to dart outside under foot. Claire stumbles down the steps, books cascading everywhere.

"Dammit, Davey!" Claire curses as she pulls herself up from the jumble of books scattered on the grass. "I swear, cat…"

Minutes later, one of the neighbors shows up to peruse the inventory. Laura is showing the woman an antique chest of drawers featured prominently amidst the rest of the furniture.

"This was my mother's," she explains – knowing every good sale needs a story.

"How could you sell an heirloom like this?" the woman asks suspiciously.

"My daughter is in college and probably will be for a while. She has no space for it, nor need of something so opulent. College life… you know?" Her tone reveals a touch of irony. "And I won't need it where I'm going either."

"And where's that?" the woman asks out of curiosity.

"Some say crazy!" Laura smirks.

"Well, you'd have to be to sell something this fine!" she says, keeping a tight grip on her purse.

Pangs of guilt rise in Laura's throat. "You want it or not?"

"I'll give you two-fifty." The woman offers slyly.

"Now who's crazy? This is worth a grand if it is worth a buck!" Laura counters.

The woman huffs. "Fine. I'll give you five hundred – and not a penny more!"

"Cash?" Laura demands.

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The woman holds out five bills.

Laura hesitates – hands trembling.

"No success without sacrifice," she says quietly. "Sold!"

She snaps up the cash and stuffs it in her pocket.

Little by little the sale is a success.

A curious older gentleman is poking around the golf bags. He pulls out a club to check the swing.

"How much?"

"One-fifty," Laura offers.

"Why, I can buy the same set in town for two hundred," he says without reservation. "How about one-twenty-five?"

Laura can see he is primed to buy. She sweetens the deal. "I'll tell you what, give me two-fity and take both sets?"

"Lady, you got a deal!" He whistles happily, counting out the cash into Laura's hand. "Pleasure doin' business with ya!"

It is a bittersweet moment.

It's for the best… Martin would understand.

It turns out – every sale was a goodbye she hadn't anticipated…

Here and there, small items are spirited away by happy rummagers.

Laura is standing at a card table counting a fistful of cash. She looks around surreptitiously for somewhere to stash it. As she scans the remains of the yard sale, she spots a cigar box on a pile of old records. She dumps the contents onto the card

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table to make room for the money.

A dozen silver tubes come tumbling out of the box and onto the table.

Laura struggles to keep them from rolling onto the ground. They skitter around, making metallic clinking sounds as she gathers them together.

Suddenly, a hand emerges with a wad of bills in it.

Laura reads the gesture and follows it, from the thinly muscled hand, up the arm, to greet the owner. It belongs to an older neighbor, Bill, one of Martin's friends.

"I'll take those!" he says calmly. "How much?"

"Make me an offer!" Laura says, testing him.

"I got sixty bucks here – if they're still moist!"

Laura looks confused. "For these?" She picks one up and sniffs it suspiciously.

"You know what these are?" he asks. He removes one from its tube to take a long whiff. "Romeo and Juliet. My favorite!" He rolls the cigar between his fingers.

Laura looks surprised. "You don't say?" She examines one of the tubes. It reads: Romeo Y Julieta cigarros. She makes a quick decision. "I'll tell you what, Bill. I'm going to keep one of these for a special occasion." She clutches it thoughtfully. "You can have the rest."

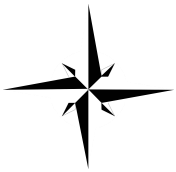
"Deal!" He scoops up the cigars greedily – tosses down the cash and saunters off.

She takes his cash and adds it to her canvas fund.

What started as a heavy task… has ended in a good way.

Nothing ventured… Nothing gained.

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The drive to Salty's Hardware is a mixture of anxiety and excitement. The wad of cash tucked in her bra presses against the lump in her throat. The truck hums along the backcountry roads tracing the river, while her mind drifts.

Wind filling new sails, winches drawing tight.

She stomps the clutch and jams the shifter into gear, rounding the bend into town.

She enters the shop to the customary jingle of the doorbells. Salty is roosted in his usual spot, catalog flipped open, hunting for some obscure accessory. Cup of coffee in hand. Cat snoozing nearby.

Without looking up, "Door's open."

Laura pauses mid-stride. "I know… I thought…"

Salty flips his page. "Well… close it."

Laura smiles, back-tracks, and shuts the door.

The cat just yawns and covers his eyes with a paw.

Salty doesn't look up until a tight bundle of cash lands on the counter, disrupting his train of thought. He lifts his eyes to see Laura beaming – windblown, flushed, unmistakably proud of herself.

"Let's buy some sails!" A gleam in her eye.

"That-a-girl!" Salty grins. "I made some calls. That guy's ready to deal. I think we can get you set up for around twenty-five hundred."

"Really?" Her relief breaks through. "That's great! I'll have a little left over for

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some smaller things." She high-fives him.

Salty stiffens, then blushes awkwardly.

"I'll get started." he says, clearing his throat. "Give me a couple days!"

"You got it!" She says skipping toward the door. "And – thanks, pal!"

Salty glances around the shop. "Easy now. People will talk." Then, he chuckles. "I've got a reputation to protect."

Laura grins, gives a playful wink, and heads back out into the afternoon.

Feeling a few miles ahead of her dreams…



Salty checks the address on the small slip of paper tucked in his shirt pocket.

He comes to an inconspicuous bend in the road, marked only by a pair of cobblestone pillars and a mailbox marked BARRETT. He turns onto the gravel and proceeds through a small grove of maple trees, up the winding driveway that snakes toward the house.

The barn is situated out behind the stately home sitting mostly empty, down a lazy slope of crab-grass dotted with daffodils, along the embankment of the Cape Fear estuary. It looms in the dapple of old poplar, and hardwood trees. Its doors gaping open like the maw of some great lumbering beast. Its skin beet red and weathered – seasoned by southern sun and angry storms for generations on the river.

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Inside, the hulk lies motionless. Emerging nearly completed in its cradles.

He pulls up to the barn in his single-cab Cheyenne pick-up and honks the horn announcing his visit.

Laura is inside, hard at work when her delivery arrives. She dusts off her coveralls and ties a moistened bandanna around her neck, then wanders out to greet Salty. Davey Jones lopes out behind her in close company.

From his vantage point inside the truck, He can see she already walks with the swagger of someone growing comfortable in their new occupation. Her sleeves are rolled up, hair pulled back, T-shirt soaked through with the essence of hard work. She smiles when she sees him. A quiet, weary kind of grin that speaks of the soot and toil of a fiery ordeal.

She approaches the truck – clearly pleased to see him after weeks of renovation.

He steps from his truck, and immediately reaches into the bed to retrieve his burden: a bag full of new hardware, adhesive, and turpentine – and something else, conspicuously wrapped. In his other hand, he produces a six-pack of cold beer.

He winks at her knowingly.

“I came prepared for some thirsty work!” he says, offering up the booty.

“Ahoy there, matey! Come on aboard, and I’ll toss those into the beverage cooler in the lazarette.”

She leads him into the barn and onto the support scaffolding.

He follows her up the ladder into the cockpit and hands over the beverages.

Laura quickly stows them in the thermal compartment next to the pilot's station.

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Salty inspects the newly fitted brightwork and the positions marked where the new rope clutches and mooring bollards will be installed.

Salty and Laura discuss the fit and finish of a teak plank in the salon. He gestures at the overall boat design, discussing the shape and possible sail configurations.

“This is top-notch work, Laura,” he says, suitably impressed.

“Well, I can’t take credit for that part. It was Martin’s design and Chip’s handiwork that made it what it is.” She is visibly proud of the overall results. “It was a little more expensive than I expected, but I think it will prove worthy in time.”

“Well, if you’re going to live aboard, then don’t skimp on the living space. It is where you’ll be spending the bulk of your time on a long passage.” He stretches out on the salon bench seat – letting out a contented sigh. “It pays to be comfortable!”

She gestures at the bag. “What have you brought me?”

“Aha!” He spills the contents of the bag onto the salon table.

Laura is giddy. “Oh, the cleats came in!” She picks one up to examine its shape.

Salty arranges the different types on the table and shows Laura the sizes and shapes. He picks up a cam-clutch group and shows Laura how to secure a line through the block. Then, he demonstrates the locking action that holds the line securely in place.

“You’re gonna love these new designs, Laura. They’ll make some of your changeovers quicker and easier. That’s something you’ll appreciate when sailing alone.” He compares the clutch block to a conventional cleat. “The difference is huge when speed is of the essence.” He demonstrates on a standard cleat. “A line is

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wrapped around, over, and under, then locked with a hitch. This is the most secure – when you have time, free hands, or a crew." Then he points forward at the headsail rigging. "But on a jibe, or a fast tack on a close haul, you'll enjoy how quickly you can secure your sheets, adjusting trim when the sea is rough." He shows her how easily the rope can be released, then 'jammed' fast using the locking lever.

Laura is taking it all in. This is the gold Salty brings to the conversation. His knowledge and experience were deeply valued by Martin. Now the same wisdom is being passed to her. She holds the hardware in her hand – feels the weight of it – examining it from all angles, then looks to the rig deep in thought.

Then, he points out places where some of her new cleats will be of most use. He shows her where to position them on the scupper bead.

"All along the length of the hull."

He walks along the side deck, observing her markings indicating placement.

"I see you have your spots chosen on the toe rail. Those will do nicely." He nods approval much to Laura's relief. "A boat this size – you'll want five on each side." Then, he points to the coach roof.

"Here is the best place for the triple-cams." He points to a spot off to one side, then traces his finger down to a spot marked WINCH. "The main sheet, jib sheet, and Genoa are all grouped together – nice and tidy, feeds quickly to the winch. That saves a lot of time."

As they relax in the cockpit, cold beers in hand, Salty grabs a length of rope off the sole and begins to tie a complicated-looking knot into it.

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“Look here, Laura. Hold the rope like this.” He grips it at one end with one hand. “Now, imagine this is a tree.” He points along the line in his hand. Then, he makes a loop in the middle of the line as he picks up the free end in his other.

“This end is a rabbit.” He pushes the end of the rope through the loop and wraps it around. “The rabbit comes out of his hole, runs around the tree, and ducks back into his hole.”

Salty is showing Laura a standard bowline.

“Then pull it tight to form the knot.” He tests the knot and shows Laura what the finished product should look like. “This is one of the strongest knots you’ll ever tie.” He looks at her in earnest. “When you need it to hold – it won’t let go.”

He pulls his work apart and tosses the rope to Laura.

She tries and fails – again, again, and again.

Salty just rolls his eyes.

“Don’t worry. Nobody gets it on the first try. Keep practicing – you’ll get it.” He quickly changes the activity. "Five bucks says you can’t tie a proper cleat hitch."

He shifts his seat over to one of the bollards mounted nearby.

Laura starts tying… fumbles. Done.

Salty cackles. “Do it like I showed you a little while ago!” Then, he shows her a trick. “Check this out. If you’re tying up to a dock and you need a quick and secure point, do this.”

He takes the end of a jib sheet, ties an overhand loop into the end of it and pokes it through the eye of the cleat. Then he bends it over the shoulders and pulls it tight.

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“Tah dah! A quick dock loop for tying up solo. It’s good for tying off bumpers too!”

She tries it and does it flawlessly the first time. Salty grumbles, handing over a crumpled bill.

“I better quit while I’m ahead.” He sits back in his seat and offers her a toast. “Cheers.” Then he takes another long pull from his beer.

Laura beams back at him. “I learned from the best!”

Then, he produces one more item from his tote bag.

“I’ve got something else for you.” He pulls out a large book and lays it on the table. “Just a little ‘housewarming’ present.” He spins the cover around so she can read the title.

“Dutton’s Nautical Navigation, by Commander Benjamin Dutton, USN.” Laura grins with satisfaction at the sight of a large sextant featured on the cover. She jumps from her seat with a hearty whoop.

“Be right back,” she says as she hops down into the galley.

She emerges with Martin’s sextant, still housed in its wooden box. She opens it to show Salty. “This was Martin’s. I found it one night in a cabinet in the barn.”

“That’s a beauty, Laura.” He hefts the brass instrument in his hands. It’s a heavy piece of history. “Did Martin show you how to use it?”

“He tried to explain it to me once...” Her tone gets a little withdrawn.

“Well then! My gift is going to come to good use!” He smiles at her and then begins to instruct her in the lost art of sextant operation.

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Laura clutches Martin's watch, dangling loosely from her wrist, as Salty instructs.

He shows her how the index bar operates, turning the micrometer drum to demonstrate how fine adjustments appear in the index window – and how to lock it down.

She follows along, using a diagram in her book, as Salty discusses angular measurements and their relationship to time and distance.

His voice fades into the background…

Easy does it, kiddo. They're just numbers. Just a little math – no mysteries.

In her mind's eye, she sees Martin, holding the sextant, smiling at her.

... That night in the TV room.

A lifetime ago…

She swallows the lump in her throat as Salty continues to go over the details of calculating global position. She allows herself to be swept up by his enthusiasm.

His coaching makes it feel possible.

He goes on to show Laura how the index mirror is adjusted and how the shader glasses are used to protect the eyes from looking into the sun.

Laura frowns, squinting through the eyepiece. She adjusts it awkwardly.

Salty sighs but allows her time to gain confidence.

Laura adjusts it again. This time – clarity. She grins.

Salty nods, trying to downplay his delight.

Laura sits cross-legged in the cockpit. Book in her lap, the huge sextant in hand.

He smiles at her enthusiasm as he takes an ice-cold swallow from his bottle.

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The two of them relax together in the cockpit, while the boat sits in its cradle. Meanwhile, outside the barn, the sun is setting in a blaze of red, yellow, and orange fury. Overhead, the sky transitions from deep blue to the black void, as the first stars of the evening begin to twinkle, and the moon begins its slow rise from the depths in the east.



Time goes by, as Laura concludes the restoration.

Days turn into weeks, and she finds herself becoming a regular at the store. Many of Salty's customers begin to notice how Laura has grown in knowledge and skill about hardware and the mechanics of sailboat rigging. She's made many friends along the way who offer support, advice, and the occasional distraction from the rigor of Salty's lessons.

On this particular day, Laura is sitting at the far end of the sales counter. She is tying a triple-stranded eyelet into a hand line with a tool known as a Swedish fid. The work is tedious, but Laura is becoming adept at tucking and pulling hard laid strands into yacht line.

Salty hobbles over to inspect her work.

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“You’re getting better at that.”

She offers him the knobby eye splice proudly.

He examines her work closely – grunting his approval.

“Give me a shout after you’ve rolled the lumps out,” he says with a wink. “You’ll wanna lock-stitch it to keep the loop from coming loose.”

She is a good student, but he is careful not to overpraise.

Out on the ocean, false confidence can kill.

He hands it back to her, then wanders over to greet a patron at the next counter.

“Hey, Salty! I need your help!” The man greets Salty with an exasperated look. It appears he has been grappling with his boat’s electrical system. He holds out a part. Salty examines it using his typical brand of scrutiny.

The two men move to another part of the store, leaving Laura to her work. From where she’s sitting, she sees the interaction between the two men. She cannot hear what they’re discussing, but it’s clear the man respects Salty’s opinion.

Watching him work, Laura understands something she hadn’t considered before.

Salty never rushes anyone who needs his help.

Not with his time – never with the truth.

Salty rings up his sale and wanders back over to where Laura is whipping the end of her splice. She is beaming at him as he returns to resume his instructions.

“What are you grinning about?” he blushes. “Let’s see what you got there.”

Laura hands over her work. As he examines her braid, she tries to decide how to ask a burning question. She opts to blurt it out – awkward but direct.

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“I have a question I’ve been meaning to ask you…”

He doesn’t look up from the eyelet.

“…Shoot.”

“Why do they call you Salty?” she asks. “Because of your brackish personality?”

He stiffens. “I’m not – that.” He scowls, then sighs. “I’m just… intense.”

She grins.

“Brackish?” he mutters. “Like pickles?” He shakes his head. “We sailors are like *fine wine*. We improve with age.”

“Seriously,” she laughs. “Why Salty? What’s your real name?”

He scratches behind his ear, eyes flicking – checking the shop for witnesses.

“Alright,” he exhales. “But if you ever repeat this, I’ll deny it.” He wags his finger. “It’s Timothy Pringle.”

Laura freezes.

“You mean like…”

“Yes,” he grunts. “Like the potato chip.”

She bites her lip. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to laugh.”

He snorts. “Would you trust sailing advice from some guy named Pringle, or prefer Salty the sailor man?” He shrugs. “There’s a persona to consider.”

He pauses, then adds, almost defensively, “I wanted Ismael. Or Starbuck. But the coffee people beat me to it.”

Laura laughs softly. “Salty does fit.”

He glances around again, then lowers his voice.

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“Truth is, I’ve had the nickname since I was a kid.” He twists his cap in his hands. “Kids heard my name… Potato chips are salty… It just stuck.” He settles the hat back on his head. “There it is. Happy now?”

Laura smiles. “So it’s not about the sea?”

He huffs. “Shucks, no. But most folks don’t ask so many questions.” He leans in, conspiratorially. “Don’t blow my cover. I’ve gotten away with it for fifty years!” Then, he lightens up. “Anyway, what they don’t know…”

Laura mimes locking her lips and throwing away the key.

“Don’t worry,” she says in a staged whisper. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

“It better be,” Salty grumbles. “Or I’ll start charging for all these quality lessons.”

Laura considers his response, then comes the inevitable follow-up.

“So, if you’re ‘Salty,’ then what is the name of your cat?” she asks playfully.

Salty shrugs casually. “He’s a cat…” he says flatly.

“Yeah, but you’ve given him a name… haven’t you?”

“Cat…” he grunts. “He just waltzed in here one day, like he owned the place. I never got around to naming him… I didn’t know if he’d stay… I guess he did.”

“I wonder where he came from? He must’ve had a name at some point. Maybe?”

“Well, if he did… he didn’t answer to it.” He scratches his head. “Anyway, names aren’t what’s important. It’s what’s inside that counts.” He makes his point with a harrumph.

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Salty glances around the shop. The last customer is gone.

“What do you say we call it a day, kiddo?”

She gives him a salute. “Aye aye, Mr. Sal…”

“Don’t,” he warns, already laughing. “That guy’s nuts! It’s just plain Salty.”

“Like ‘Cat’,” she smirks…

Laura gathers her project while Salty shuts off the lights. They step out together, the door locking behind them, still laughing as they part company.



Laura emerges from the dark, pulling open the doors of her pantry. She tugs the dangler hanging from the light fixture to reveal a well-stocked larder. The shelves are carefully arranged. Dry goods have been repackaged in resealable containers. Larger, heavier items are arranged on the bottom shelves, smaller items sit up high.

All the canned goods are stripped of their paper labels – the contents marked on the lids with black ink. As she searches for something to eat, she recalls a bit of advice that Salty gave her while discussing provisioning a vessel for a long voyage:

“A sailor must stay vigilant, Laura. Pests will hide in your stores – contaminating the food you eat. Strip away paper packaging. Seal everything airtight. Mark the contents clearly so you know what you have.”

He added, “*Canned goods get stored in the bilge compartments. They help with*

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ballast and make use of the spaces beneath the floors. But, be careful. These spaces can become inundated with seawater. This is normal. The boat drains itself of condensation and spray into these spaces. Food labels become sticky sludge when submerged in the bilge for weeks at a time – clogging moving parts, and fouling systems that are located under the sole. So, beware!"

She took his advice to heart. Everything done as instructed. All provisions get prioritized by bulk and importance. She takes a moment to survey her handiwork.

Silver cans glisten under the pantry light. Tupperware containers are stacked neatly atop one another and marked. She runs her hands along the shelves. Everything is clearly visible and accessible. This is good – turning theory into practice.

Laura scans the shelves looking for a late-night snack. Her fingers trace every item. She sighs with relief when she finds the container marked microwaveable popcorn.

Butter flavored!

She selects one pouch from the container, replaces the rest carefully on the shelf, and snaps off the light.

Back in the kitchen, she stands patiently by the microwave oven, watching the bag rotate as the snack pops like fireworks inside.

Davey Jones has meandered into the room, led by the delicious smell of warm butter. He rubs against her legs, making figure eights at her feet as she takes a moment to read the packaging.

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“Smells good, huh?” She examines the nutritional information on the wrapper. “This would make a good staple for the sea voyage,” she tells Davey. “The packets are slim. Easy to store. Just what we’ll need!”

The bell signals her snack is ready.

She pours the contents of the bag into a large festive mixing bowl – dropping some on the floor. Davey promptly devours the tasty spillage – licking his lips with satisfaction.

“You’ll make a good cabin boy, Davey!” Laura laughs.

She shuffles into the living room to settle down for an evening of television. She is bundled up in Martin's bath robe, complete with an oversized t-shirt, slippers, and her bowl of popcorn.

Davey Jones trots in close behind.

She stands at the entertainment center, scanning the jacket titles, looking for one in particular. She spies her choice on the top shelf.

As she reaches for the DVD, she catches a whiff of Martin’s aftershave still trapped in the fabric of the robe. A wave of emotion hits her as the scent registers – forcing her to catch herself.

“Here it is, Davey. An oldie, but a goodie,” she says, biting back the tears.

Davey Jones purrs with approval, as she scoops him up.

She reads the cover and recalls fondly, “This was Martin’s favorite film, Davey. Remember? It’s full of swashbuckling pirates, Spanish galleons, looting, and peril on the high seas. It has everything a buccaneer could want in a movie!”

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She pops the disk into the player, then cozies up on the sofa with Davey by her side. The title card splashes across the screen in black and white Baroque lettering:

"*The Sea Hawk*," bleeds into, "*starring Errol Flynn*"

Her eyes glisten as she takes in the opening scene of the *Albatross* under full sail, setting a course for Spanish waters, intent on looting and plundering the child queen's armada. Laura's memory wanders to an evening with Martin, his eyes glued to the set, shoveling gobs of popcorn into his mouth and repeating the dialog.

Word for word…

He sat at the other end of the sofa in his PJs, popcorn at the ready…

Repeating the script verbatim, while gobbling handfuls of hot, sticky popcorn.

Butter flavor of course…

Laura watched him with curiosity and affection as he landed all his lines with precision, then rewarded himself with more freshly popped snack.

When he saw her watching him, he tossed popcorn at her mimicking the action on the screen.

"For England and the Queen!" he would carry-on, and "Aloft..!" to the screen. All night long, the flickering TV illuminated them both.

Bathing the couple in an innocent, cool-blue light…

Laura sits deep in thought…

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Davey is in her lap, as the television echoes in the back of her mind. She has a flash of insight. Images of Babs: in the photograph at Salty's shop, on her computer screen, on the cover of her book. She senses a chilling connection.

"Babs's boat was named *Osprey*," she mutters. "And the word 'Osprey' is another name for a Sea Hawk…" The correlation hits her like a bolt of lightning.

"In this film, the Queen refers to Captain Thorpe as a *Sea Hawk*..."

A tingle runs down her spine. She jumps up from her spot and lunges for the window – popcorn flying everywhere.

Davey Jones hisses as he scurries out of the room.

Laura peels back the curtains – peering into the gloom. There, down through the mist – inside the barn – the ghostly namesake lies silent. As she gazes out the window, more of Salty's words come flooding back to her.

"*You don't simply name a boat, Laura. She will tell you who she is… in time…"*

She places her hand on the icy window pane – her breath crystallizing on the glass. Her stomach quivers in response to the strange connection. The feeling is unsettling, uncanny – as the goose bumps erupt across her flesh.

Something radiates from the barn…

"Are you trying to tell me something?" She whispers – trembling.

She looks toward the television, then back to the barn – *the idea coalescing.* Meanwhile, on the screen, the pirates are boarding a vessel with cannons erupting, muskets popping, and swords clanging in furious conflict.

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Her eyes remain fixed on the barn, but in the background, Captain Thorpe can be heard engaging his foe…

He thrusts with his sword. “Your ship is sinking, Captain!” He grins triumphantly.

“Then we shall drown together!” the Spaniard sneers, as he blocks and parries.

“Bold but impractical,” he cries. “I have no intention of drowning with you!”

The action continues behind her, as Laura stands transfixed.

Outside the window, the wind rushes through the treetops, and the stars seem to twinkle wildly in the night sky – as if the universe has chosen this moment.

A chill wind wraps itself around the eaves, moaning with approval. Meanwhile, the full moon, once hidden by thick clouds, breaks through to shine brightly down onto the barn, the house, and through her window.

She stands bathed in silvery moonlight, acknowledging the mysterious tidings.

Her pulse races when she speaks the words.

Deep inside, Laura’s heart flutters.

Her voice trembles.

“Your name is… *Sea Hawk!”* she whispers.

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