

# Drawing the Line

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I have never been seasick before, but the heavy smell of rancid fat in the galley and the fish guts that oiled every inch of beaten-up wood saturate the air. Even below deck, the wind roars like a freight train; the ancient Cummins diesel whines and vibrates the chipped mugs hanging over the sink. The bare bulb overhead flickers as the *JoAnne* pitches and heaves and rolls in the August southwester. The shovels in the empty fish hold thud hard, back and forth, on the other side of the bulkhead. I can't predict each sickening rise and bottom-out drop; I bend my knees and lean into the counter hard with my hips, and still I am slammed again and again against the stove and icebox and bolted-down table. I move three greasy milk crates of tools and used engine parts onto the bunks in the forepeak, their bare mattresses strewn with old Army blankets, and wedge myself into the cramped corner bench behind the table. I close my eyes; the surge of the sea is met with an answering surge in my stomach. Pots and dishes clatter in the filthy bins beneath the stove; sweaters and vests and jackets, stiff with salt and sweat and fish juice, grate back and forth on their hooks above my head.

A sense of dread, the seeping uneasiness, which has nagged me lately, rises again. It is late summer, 1971. I am twenty-two years old. Glenn and I have lived together for four years. We have owned the *JoAnne* for over a year, fishing out of Gloucester, Massachusetts, our latest escapade. But lately I have started to wish that things were different. I don't want to be here. I feel a deep panic rise as the boat heaves. So much is at stake between us, and none of it spoken.

I open my eyes, wishing for a long smooth horizon to define up and down, a clear and unmovable line to navigate by, to delineate me from this grimy and thundering boat.

I can hear Glenn and Jimmy laughing in the wheelhouse above. The sweet, heavy smoke of Bugle tobacco from Jimmy's pipe floats down the companionway and mixes with the smell of grease as I grill hamburgers for lunch. Gooey black fat tars the edge of the grill. I lift the hamburgers onto buns, squirt ketchup on them, and lay them on two paper plates. I let my legs roll with the boat as I reach for the chips stashed behind the sink. Balancing the plates, I hitch myself up the stairs to the wheelhouse.

It is a relief to be above deck, in the presence of these confident men and eye to eye with the storm. Outside the cramped, dingy wheelhouse, the sky is a dark gray dome clamped down close over us. There is no horizon; the chaotic sea and roiling sky meet and fuse, becoming each other. Green water breaks over the bow of the *JoAnne* every few minutes, thundering through her old wooden hull. Glenn stands rooted to the floor, his compact, athletic body negotiating with the wheel as he maneuvers the old fishing dragger into weather she shouldn't be asked to withstand. I stand behind him and wrap my strong, thin arms around his waist. He looks over his shoulder at me, surprised. We are buddies, *gumbas* like the Italian fishermen—loyal, dependent, saving each other's faces at every turn. We never hug.

Glenn eats his lunch as I wedge myself between the port side door and counter. He glances at me and laughs, "You all right? Told you you shouldn't come this trip." He has the thirty-inch wheel in both hands, legs straddled, his black rubber fishing boots tight around his strong thighs. The fishermen tell stories of filling their boots with stones if they get in trouble; unable to swim, the loaded boots take them down fast. Glenn likes to say he keeps a bucket of stones on deck, but I know he was ninth in the nation on Harvard's swim team.

Glenn likes to say a lot of things I know aren't true. That he is a Viking, destined to live and die heroically on the sea. That he is a simple man, a working man, uneducated, with animal smarts. That he isn't afraid. That he loves me and needs me.

The truth is that he is Swedish, brought to the United States by parents longing for something more for him than the mills and shoe shops that support them. That he was on a full scholarship but hated school and barely graduated from Harvard last spring, almost a year into fishing the *JoAnne*, with a 1.8 in Scandinavian Studies. That he reads the *Eddas* in Old Norse for pleasure. That every half-truth, the long, rough red beard and wild, tangled hair, the fishing boots worn even to slop along the streets of Cambridge, the perpetual grin, the *JoAnne*—all of these are gestures to ward off his fear, images to create a character that will not, cannot, be ignored or diminished by anyone. The truth is that the *JoAnne*, a hard-used, forty-three foot Gloucester stern dragger we bought together for two thousand dollars, is just the kind of surprise Glenn likes to drop on his friends. The truth is, Glenn loves me and needs me, but after four years of living together, we don't know anything about each other. We are mythmakers. Vikings need fellow warriors, and I am the perfect fellow. But lately I am getting tired of our big stories. I am starting to understand that my own mythmaking is running dry, is keeping me tied to something not mine. I am getting lost in our myths, and feel as if I am missing something, something ordinary and very important.

“You okay?” he asks again, smirking at me.

“Yeah. Of course. Of course I'm all right,” I say cheerfully. I do feel better. I look from Glenn to Jimmy, trying to absorb their eagerness to be heading out for two days of fishing in twenty-five knot winds and eight foot seas. The truth is, I love Glenn. But the storm seems to be churning things up. I want to be at home, sitting in the gray light by the kitchen window, sorting me out from my stories, getting ready for what might be coming next.

Jimmy digs around in his pipe with his pocket knife, his small body leaned against the starboard door, grinning. His jeans and long brown ponytail and fingernails are all dirty. He is clean shaven, though, so his lean and tired face looks open and receptive, as if he is always ready for the next surprise. He relights the pipe with his Zippo, flicking the top of the lighter open and shut, open and shut before his hand finally obeys the command to be still. He wipes his knife on his oily Levi's and drops the lighter and knife into his pocket. I know that in several minutes his pipe, forgotten, will be out again, and he will repeat his lurching, spastic ritual.

Jimmy isn't one of Glenn's Harvard buddies. Twitching and jerking from years of too much cocaine, he drifted into Gloucester with a small wave of hippies whose lives had run out of control. He came strung out, jittering and earnest. He and his wife, Bonnie, twenty, large and soft-spoken, with dreamy eyes, sleep with their two-year-old daughter, Jessie, between them on a mattress on the floor in their drafty apartment on Portuguese Hill. The Hill is home to generations of Portuguese immigrants. It is a tumble of very old houses painted the bright colors of the boats in the harbors of their old Portugal and right here in Gloucester's harbor—white with red trim, yellow with blue trim, blue with red trim—houses squeezed together down the narrow, twisting streets. The old men and women on the Hill had grudgingly accepted this tenuous and mystifying family. Bonnie seldom leaves the apartment. Sometimes, on hot summer days, she and Jessie walk down the Hill to the new State Pier to sit on the boat while Jimmy works on the nets and gear. Sometimes, they walk up Main Street, past the old closed-up storefronts, to Goodwill, or to Sterling's Drug Store for milk shakes at the counter.

I used to sit with Bonnie and Jessie on blankets spread over the clean, bare floor, drinking tea and eating enormous fluffy muffins Bonnie baked. One May day, with the sun floating through the big, dusty window, Bonnie said, "Glenn was over yesterday. I think it's great you don't mind us fucking." She smiled, her wide mouth soft and easy.

I didn't speak. I imagined Glenn here, Bonnie's full white body, red hair and breathy laugh, and Jessie nearby murmuring quietly to her dolls. I went back to the apartment just once after that, when I had silent, retaliatory sex with Jimmy in Bonnie's bed among her quilts and soft pillows. I wondered if Glenn would imagine my small, strong body, my long blond hair, my eyes open in the bright, sunlit room. Since then, Bonnie and I always keep a careful distance, although Glenn and Jimmy don't seem to notice.

What I like most about Glenn is his ability to hold his show together. He is solid, in an irreverent and careless way. What I like is his ability to stay right on the edge, threatening to slip off at any minute, but never losing his footing in the end. So far, I haven't fallen off the edge, either, but I feel that it is going to happen some day. I never tell Glenn I am scared. I like hanging on that edge with him, anchored just enough to let me think I can do—and be—anything.

We do odd and exciting things together, creating new identities every few months, one story always leading to the next, with my dropping out of college and his disregard for his grades at Harvard adding to our sense that we can make up the rules as we go. We ride our old motorcycles to New York and Montreal and Quebec, yelling, "Fuck you!" to men in Buicks and Lincolns when we stop next to them at red lights. We lived for a summer in a decrepit, tick-invested hunting cabin among the Ojibwe Indians on Red Lake Indian Reservation in far northern Minnesota, getting lost each day in the woods and celebrating like children when we came back across our little camp and fire ring. We argue utopias with black student activists with guns in dark, sprawling apartments in the Columbia Heights projects. We drive across the border to sell Glenn's steamer trunks full of homegrown marijuana in Montreal. We sit with strangers in put-together rock bands in run-down, dirty apartments in Roxbury.

Glenn and I are a good pair. We need each other, partners in mythmaking. I have my own image to make—aloof, solitary, hip—an angry and isolated girl struggling to create a new self that can hold its place in the world. I hitchhike fearlessly across the country alone, gone with no notice for weeks at a time, and again, and again, headed nowhere and then back. I ride my motorcycle on back roads, driving fast and recklessly, racing away from the past. I throw away my bra and learn the tough talk of the new feminism that fights for abortion rights and equal pay. I construct myself, the strong and independent young woman who breaks all the rules. Glenn and I are a perfect fit.

I take on Glenn's Harvard friends as my own, five men half in love with me. We move, and move, and move again, every new neighborhood, every dirty old kitchen affirming that we are brave and brash and ready for it all. I like to move, to make the decision that someplace else looks better. I love disconnecting; I can set up a house in two days, any place we go. We travel light. I box and unbox the blue-and-white dishes my grandmother earned with Green Stamps, and our books and cheap Indian bedspreads that cover windows and ratty couches and holes in plaster walls. Glenn says he doesn't care what a place looks like, but it is always our place and my food his friends gravitate to, and Glenn likes to watch his friends wishing I were theirs. "My old lady can ride a bike like a man and cook like a mama," he says appreciatively. Glenn expects a lot from me—to never ask questions, to make him look good, to keep up with his roles as he dreams them up, to prove I don't depend on him. Love is tricky with Glenn. But I expect a lot from him, too—to tolerate my long absences, my solitary and mysterious days, to confirm to the world that I am an independent and irreverent girl, to substantiate my own imagemaking. Maybe love is tricky with me, too. "Quicksilver Girl," Glenn calls me.

When Glenn came home one day and told me he wanted to move to Gloucester and buy a boat, I was game. I loved telling people what was coming this time, this round the best yet: "We're

buying a fishing boat. We're moving to Gloucester, and we're going to be fishermen." I loved owning the *JoAnne*. Glenn and I were seamen now, and mastered the new vocabulary as if we had been born on the water, as if it were the language we had always known and just recently recalled. We moved from the city to Annisquam, a tiny fishing town beside Gloucester. The old cottage with the oilskins hanging in the kitchen excited me, a little nest facing up against the moody sea. Glenn had instinctive skill as a fisherman—"I told you I'm a Viking," he said—and I knew my determination to be a good deckhand pleased him. This was a place I thought I would be happy to stay for a little while. I secretly wanted Glenn to change the name of our boat—the *Meredy Ann*.

I was surprised when Glenn told me after two months of fishing together that Jimmy was going to start making trips with us; within a few weeks, I saw that I was extraneous, that Jimmy was strong and fearless in ways I wasn't. I didn't tell Glenn how shaken I was. But I had a slip-sliding feeling, as if I were untethered. If we weren't fishermen together on the sea, if I waited onshore for the boat to come in loaded with fish, what was I? At first I stayed home, reading and putting in my first garden and driving my bike for hours every day, a restless wandering that quieted my ceaseless loneliness and grief. I started waitressing at a cavernous tourist place looking out on the breakwater. I waited, for the months or one year I imagined it would take for this life, this adventure, to peter out and give way to something new, the next big idea, something that would give me a name for the self I was working so hard at. But it had been more than a year, and the hovering, expectant sense which had bound us from the beginning—that things were in the making, ours to imagine, was suddenly gone. We grew up together, were good partners in imagemaking for four years, sticking to the scripts we wrote day by day. But I had started to feel out of step, as if something were tugging at me from the side.

I started to badger Glenn. "This isn't what I banked on," I told him. "This is great for you, but I hate it. I didn't move to Gloucester to serve lobsters to tourists. What are we doing? Why

don't we sell *JoAnne* this summer and head out? You're done with school. We can do anything we want. Let's take the bikes south somewhere. Let's buy a farm in Vermont. Let's go live in the caves around Grenada."

"We will," he always said.

"When? You've been saying that since we got here."

His voice was playful, boyish, coercive: "I haven't caught that two-hundred pound halibut I promised you."

"Glenn! I hate that fucking halibut. Let's go."

"We will," he said, again and again.

After months onshore, I was excited when Glenn asked if I would make a trip with him. "Tell Jimmy to take the trip off," I told him. I was surprised when I woke up that morning to a whistling southwest wind.

"Still want to come?" Glenn asked me.

I felt that a lot was at stake, that this trip was part of our story and I had a chance to write myself back in. If the weather was a little rough, all the better. We were Gloucester fishermen.

"Absolutely," I said.

When we got down to the boat, there was another surprise: Jimmy was coiling lines on the deck, with the engine already running. Glenn told me to stow away the food.

I try to find the horizon as the *JoAnne* banks and rolls. My belly has quieted down since I came up from the galley, but I dread the long day ahead. I look at the clock over the dripping windows: 12:25. A noon as dark as nightfall.



We loaded ice and fuel at Tony Giuliano's dock at four o'clock this morning; it was still dark, and raining. The American flag at the end of the pier snapped hard in the warm, wet wind. Tony's was on one of the old, decrepit wharves in the inner harbor. Long low windowless sheds, the sardine factories that had mostly closed in the early 'sixties, tilted on the rotting pilings. Businesses like Tony's—selling ice and fuel, buying the fish that men lumped out by hand from the holds—occupied sections of the old factories that hadn't rotted beyond use. Old fish crates and abandoned nets and rusted lumps of machinery littered the narrow wharves.

“Goin' out?” Tony asked. “That's a good blow out there. What're you doin'? Cornerin' the market?”

The men hanging around the wharf all laughed while the ice shooshed from the crusher into the hold. The docks were noisy with engines running and men's voices yelling over them. But no one joined us when we untied the springline and shoved off. The harbor was lead gray, slapping at *JoAnne*. Our running lights fell dead in the air a few feet from the boat.

Jimmy hummed as he nosed the *JoAnne* east of Ten Pound Island and headed for the mouth of the harbor. Surf crashed over the breakwater ahead, sending plumes of white water thirty feet into the air. The massive granite blocks seemed to float freely in the tumult. I resisted my fear, leaning against Glenn's sturdy body, absorbing the boat's pounding through him. I wanted to question Glenn's decision to go out; I wanted to say what common sense said: This is crazy. Why would you do this? But I said yes, wanting to be part of the big story again. There was no common sense. Jimmy would follow Glenn anywhere, and Glenn had a townful of men watching him leave the dock.

The Gloucester fishermen are not the first people to criticize Glenn—or me. After every trip, Glenn and Jimmy sit at the kitchen table drinking beer, telling the same story twenty times to the parade of Gloucester men coming over for a first-hand account. I sit with them, the only

woman, serving thick, black coffee and cans of cheap beer and big pieces of pizza I make myself. “Mama Maria,” they call me as I serve them food. The Italian and Portuguese fishermen listen, laughing and shaking their heads. They disapprove of these two, and I know it. They all have families to support, boats to preserve for their sons. They are cautious men. The whole town is filled with families missing someone to the sea. Fishing is a living, a tough one, something they are proud of in a defeated kind of way. It isn’t anything to play with. Glenn and Jimmy are suspect here. These two always fish where they have no business going, but that isn’t the point. There are fifty other things Glenn and Jimmy could do to make a living. They act as if this is a thrill, a charge, a story to tell later. The men wait for the disaster they are sure is in the cards for these boys.

I stay quiet as we head into the churning Atlantic Ocean. Here I am, scared and pretending I’m not, on a leaky old boat in a storm, the floor boards still smeared with oil and a sleeve from Glenn’s old blue shirt wrapped around the throttle where hydraulic fluid always leaks. I have never imagined Glenn belonging like this. I know he needs me to play my own big role beside him, whatever we are calling ourselves at the minute. The problem is, I am starting to realize that there is a line, a horizon between the inside and the outside, between who I am and who I say I am. The problem is, I am starting to understand that there is no such line for Glenn. The problem is, I am starting to understand that who I say I am doesn’t matter. The truth is, I love Glenn and need him, but we know absolutely nothing about each other beyond our made-up stories, and never will. Glenn seems happy with me as his *gumba*. But as the old boat rolls and pitches, our big heroic saga feels false and empty.

Jimmy stares out the side window, ducking just a little when a wave smashes against the wheelhouse. He turns for a second and catches my eye. The hull shudders. Jimmy snaps

his lighter again and laughs. "I think old man Neptune's ruining your old lady's day," he says to Glenn. Glenn turns from the wheel and studies me a minute; I feel obliged to smile at him.

"This?" he asks, turning back to the wheel. "This is just kiddie's playtime in the bathtub." He draws his words long and slow. Glenn always has a new voice, something surprising, playful, not his own. He is in profile to me, a self-conscious composition: his sharp, handsome face, the big red beard and wild hair, the seething ocean, cockscombs whipping off the tops of the eight-foot swells, the salt-sprayed cabin windows. The Viking at sea.

"I don't know what kind of kid you picture having," I say. "This is enough for me."

"Too much?" Glenn asks, turning again to face me square. There is a quiet pause; for a minute, the sea and the engine and the tinny radio and the constant roaring wind silence.

"Uh-uh," I say. My voice is tight, defiant. "It's never too much."

All of us, braced, legs apart, watch out the front windows as the boat heaves and shudders her way out to sea.

"Wanna check out Cashes Ledge?" Jimmy asks. "If this thing's gonna keep moving in from the southwest, there are gonna be a lot of pretty cod moving into the shoals. That's our kind of business."

Glenn whoops and laughs. "Jesus, McGee. The last time we swept the Ledge we spent four days mending the net."

But I can see that they both already know that is where we are going. Its shoal water means wild seas, barely submerged ledge, and a shot at huge schools of cod. We'll be one hundred miles offshore while the rest of the men drink beer down below on their boats at the dock. I know it is just the kind of game Glenn will want to play. And Jimmy knows it, too.

"Perfect," Jimmy smiles. "Let's go catch us some fish." He clacks the lid of his lighter back and forth, dropping it and catching it midair.

I feel fear rise, undeniable, tightening my throat. I look back over the stern. The low coastline is long gone across miles of heaving black sea.

“Want me to set the course?” I ask defiantly. I prop myself between the compass column and the chart counter, and pulled out the chart for Cashes Ledge.

“You want to take the wheel or work with me on deck?” Glenn asks me. It is almost dark, and our work is just beginning. I don’t want to do either. Making it through a night of working on the deck in this storm will require a degree of defiance and skill I don’t possess. And taking the wheel means being responsible for taking every single wave just right, not a single mistake, not a moment of forgetting or dreaming. I haven’t eaten and have been up since three. I reach up and snap off the crackling AM radio.

“No, I’ll--” I start to say, but Jimmy cuts me off.

“Are you serious, man?” he asks. “She’d be overboard in three minutes.” He pulls on his hip boots.

Glenn laughs as he zips up his oilskins. “She’s my old lady. She can do it. Right?”

I suddenly flare. “Not being nuts about spending two days on this leaky piece of shit in a storm doesn’t make me a coward. What the hell are you two doing? Do you think everyone’s going to think you’re heroes? They don’t. They think you’re just stupid. Stupid boys who should have stayed in the city. They think you’re crazy.” I turn around to Glenn, close to him, looking straight at him. He stops moving and stares back at me.

Jimmy pulls on his orange fish gloves, his back to us. *JoAnne* heaves. The surf out on the shoals roars around my words.

Glenn strokes his beard slowly and looks out the side window. “What happened to my old lady?” he asks the storm, his voice tight. Then he turns calmly back to me and says, “Okay. Look.

Keep her right here. If you feel her swinging off the wind, bring her up goddamned fast or you'll find us in the net." I move over to the wheel; it swings hard, pulling me off balance, and the boat pitches to starboard. Glenn grabs it, rights her, and I brace myself hard into the wheel again. He lights a cigarette, pulls his woolen cap over his hair, and grins at Jimmy. "Let's go catch us some feesh," he drawls, and he shoves open the door.

The storm roars into the wheelhouse, then beats at the door again as it slams shut. I wedge my hip under a spoke of the wheel and lean over to latch the door top and bottom. I flick on the deck lights. *JoAnne's* deck glows against the froth on the shoals; the darkening sky and blue-black sea merge, violent force meeting violent force, at the horizon. The diesel's pistons fire one by one in the dark heart of the boat.

I pull on one of Glenn's grimy jackets and draw the stiff wool closer to my chest. The wheel is alive, spinning slowly half a turn one way, then reeling back fast a full turn. I know I have to hold on tight, to command it, or it will whip my arm and break it. I spread my legs and plant my feet, leaning hard into the wheel. It is true; being busy helps. My stomach is quieter than it has been all day.

I turn sideways as far as I can and look out the small stern window toward the deck. It is a bad design; I can't see the deck or the men on it. Glenn and Jimmy have always talked about opening up the back wall of the wheelhouse with a larger window, but the engine has never been rebuilt, the sludge has not been cleaned out, and the window has never been installed. If there were ever trouble, the helmsman wouldn't know anything about it until no one came in after setting the net.

I can just see the tops of the gallows frame and the half-ton oak doors that hold open the throat of the net banging wildly from their cables. The net reel suddenly screams as the net is

released, drowning out every other roaring, booming, rattling noise on the boat. I hear the cable race off the reel, the hundred foot net running out and the huge doors thundering off the gunwales into the churning sea. I know that a dragger's deck is one of the most dangerous places a man can be, even on a calm summer day.

Gloucester is loaded with injured men—men missing fingers, arms, legs; men with furious red patches where hair used to grow on their heads; men who look fine but can no longer remember their wives' names or how to find their way home; men sitting on door stoops looking frightened still and embarrassed—men who have misstepped by four inches, or have forgotten to focus every cell on that net reel, or who have done everything they should have but remember that sometimes cables part and take off men's heads, that doors crash to the deck and crush hard-working men. The stories get passed around and around, the teller never the one injured. The other men listen, knowing it might have been them; they cluck their tongues, suck air through their teeth, shake their heads, tell their wives to take some food up to the family. But slowly the stories accommodate the pervasive fear; jokes are inserted, men dare to laugh; and pretty soon it is all the fault of the careless, dumb son of a bitch who doesn't know how to fish.

I can't see Glenn or Jimmy. The bright deck lights spill into the wheelhouse. I fight with the wheel, struggling to keep the bow at one hundred nineteen degrees east/southeast. I try to picture the men scrambling for a hold every time a wave buries the deck. The worst stories—the haunting stories—are about the deck awash with no man in sight, about men being hauled in with the cod, their boots and orange gloves mixed in with the shimmering silver fish, their mouths filled with salt water like unborn babies. My body is rigid. I know that if no one comes in off that deck in twenty minutes, I will never get the net in, the boat turned around and back to shore. I also know that if I let *JoAnne* slide just once under the lip of one of the million waves rolling at us from

Africa, we will swamp and go down too fast to call anyone, too fast, maybe, to fight over the two old survival suits stuffed behind Glenn's bunk below.

I suddenly think of the night light in our small, yellow bathroom at home. The light seems so brave, glowing away all night with no one home. I want a shower, hot and steamy and silent in the soft golden glow of the light. I picture our bed, my rough, blue wool cape spread neatly over the pillows; books wait for me on the table. The pale blue morning glories I have trained on the rickety old fence by the kitchen door will be closed up tight for the night.

The boat pitches. I pull the bow through the trough, listening for any sound of the men working on deck.

I check the clock: 7:10. We have been out for fifteen hours. The boat noses into a deep black void. I struggle to hold her along the edge of the northeast ridge, listening to the depth sounder ping, fighting the sea moving in across the starboard beam. Glenn and Jimmy hauled in the net thirty minutes ago and reset it. I know they are awash on deck in glistening fish and sea water, sorting the catch into the fish pens and shovelling them into the hold. Straining on tiptoes, my hands locked on the wheel, I look out the side window trying to see more of the deck, hoping to see the bulky shapes of the men moving in their work. I can't see any movement.

Panic sweeps me, tightening my chest and throat. I think of risking lashing the wheel with the lanyard for just half a minute and stepping outside, peering around the edge of the wheelhouse through the driving rain, and seeing if they are both there, both busy with the work I know by heart. I think of peering around the wheelhouse and finding no one, the deck sloshing sea water and fish. I stand frozen, uncertain.

*JoAnne* suddenly pitches forward once and then heaves herself, bow skyward, out of the sea. Short, high barks erupt from my chest. The boat slams back down, her hull groaning and

shuddering. I throw my weight against the wheel, its spinning spokes slamming my chest and hips and arms, and the boat settles. The bilge pumps suck rhythmically below in a sudden eerie calm.

Faces appear in the window of the port door. I jump, then feel a rush of anger. When I unlatch the door, the two men fill the small wheelhouse with water and wind and a ferocious, wild energy.

“Odin and I just did battle and I won!” Glenn roars, his fists raised over his head.

Jimmy snickers. Grinning, dripping, he picks up his pipe and reaches inside his jacket for his lighter.

“Where the hell were you, you snakey little bastard?” Glenn asks him, grinning, pacing in the cramped space. “I turned around and was looking through five feet of green water. When I came up for air, you were nowhere.” His voice is tight with excitement, his eyes shining. He looks untamed, unconfined, too big and raw for this little boat.

“I couldn’t see either one of you,” I say, trying to sound matter of fact. “I thought you were gone.”

Glenn peels off his drenched oilskins and throws them down the companionway stairs and grabs the wheel as we pitch and wallow in a trough. “Well, you know what to do if we don’t come in from the next set, don’t you?” He is laughing loudly. “You get the net on board and hustle your little ass back to Tony and tell him you want forty-three cents a pound! Tell him Glenn said so!”

“Or jump overboard with rocks in my boots,” I say. My voice is hard, and it erases Glenn’s grin.

“Let’s tow for an hour,” he says to Jimmy, flicking on the depth sounder.

*(break)*

The sweet, suffocating smoke from Jimmy’s pipe tightens the space around us all. I lean over, holding onto the compass column, and push a filthy towel around in the water on the floor. I



want Glenn to tell me what a good job I have done at the wheel, and feel silly for wanting it. I don't tell him, after all, that he has done a good job out on deck. But there is a thick silence in the midst of the storm, a waiting, a pause, that tells me he knows what I want and is not going to give it to me.

He turns to face me. "Guess what?" he asks. "I have a surprise you're gonna like."

He is serious, the perpetual bravado gone.

I am caught off guard. The panic starts to rise again. "What?" I say quietly. "I don't like surprises."

"You've been wanting to sell *JoAnne*, right? Do something new? Well, I sold her. We're going to Alaska."

"Alaska?" Relief starts to rush in over all the waiting. I feel a sudden gratitude, and a lifting of the fear. Here is a next step, a move away from this story, a chance to find out who we each are beyond our big stories. "We are?"

"Yup. We found a boat for sale on Kodiak Island. Cheap. We're going in fifty-fifty."

I watch beads of water drop from Glenn's beard to the floor. The depth sounder blips green points of light. Jimmy holds his lighter to his pipe, a faint hiss and bubbling of intruding air.

"What about me?" I ask. "What am I going to do on Kodiak Island? You two are doing this? What about me?"

"You're coming."

"To do what?"

"I don't know. Whatever you want to do."

"What could I do on Kodiak Island, Glenn? Why didn't you talk to me about this?"

"I don't know why you're pissed. We never tell each other what to do."

"I can't go there!"

A flicker of hurt or fear moves across Glenn's face. He glances at Jimmy and back out the window. "Do whatever you have to do."

He adjusts his feet to take the pitch and roll of his boat, edging her along a hidden ridge of submerged granite, hunting. A wave breaks over the bow and she shakes. I stand beside Glenn, my body tight, withheld. I see that my future is not rising up to meet me in ways I have ever imagined. A rush of the unceasing sadness and loneliness sweep over me. I follow his eyes out the window into the chaos of churning water.

On the third set of the night the net catches on the ledge and we lose the whole catch. Luckily, we get both doors back on deck with the wrecked net. At dawn we head home, the hold half full. Glenn is happy. The wind dies down as the light rises over our shoulders, the horizon slowly smoothing, marking the world of sky from the world of water. The boat is a mess. I clean up the wheelhouse around the men's feet, mopping salt water as best I can. I cook all the eggs and bacon and canned hash Glenn bought for two days out, and we eat it all. I wash up the dishes and put them back in the cluttered cupboard, turning the latch to be sure nothing falls out the next time the boat rolls and heaves on a chaotic sea. Jimmy climbs into one of the grimy berths, his boots still on, and is asleep before I finish the dishes. I climb back up into the wheelhouse and lean on the counter. The sun feels good on my back, but I feel heavy, weighted. The storm is over and my fear has passed, but a different kind of dread is settling in. Glenn smokes, the wheel slipping more easily now through his hands as he helps JoAnne lift and rise over the silver swells. "After Midnight" crackles thinly on the radio.

"I'm not going to Alaska," I say quietly.

"Yep. I could tell." He flicks his cigarette out the window and closes it again. Salt crusts his long beard and hair. In the sun, it looks like gray making its way into his thick,

coppery hair. He adjusts the wheel, holding JoAnne with her load against the roll of the deflating storm. We don't speak for a long time.

"So you're going anyway?"

"Yep. We already put a deposit on the boat."

"You thought I'd just go with you."

"Yep. You're my old lady. We do all this stuff together." He is very serious. His eyes are guarded. His voice is softer than I have ever heard it. We stand two feet apart, neither of us moving. He lights another cigarette.

"You're not really a Viking, you know. You're just a guy figuring out what kind of life you want. You're scared to death and you make a lot of noise to hide it. But you can't just keep making up who you are."

He turns suddenly and grins at me. "Why not? Watch me. What the hell do you think you're going to do that will be half as good as moving to Kodiak?"

"I don't know. But I don't think I can keep up anymore. I don't think I want to. This one is yours, not mine." I am afraid I am settling for something small, ordinary. But maybe ordinary is going to be a relief. Maybe inside ordinary there will be a horizon, a line between what I say I am and what I really am. And maybe on that horizon I will find some calm finally, a release from the losses that have held me to this made-up life.

"Yeah, well, you do what you need to do." Glenn looks like a photograph, or an old etching in a children's book—the sun flashing through his wild beard, his strong body tired after wrestling with his Odin, his restless eyes looking out to the distance, ready for the next ordeal. I want to go home. I want to pack up my things again and move. The truth is, Glenn and I love each other. The old boat slogs back to Gloucester. We'll get a great price on the fish. The stories will already be

running. Later, Glenn will sit at the table with the Gloucester men, cigarette held between his teeth, his eyes squinting against his own smoke, and laugh loudly as he tells his good story.

I imagine myself alone after Glenn leaves for Kodiak, an ordinary young woman with a big history. The myths are done. They have helped me step from day to day for four years. I cannot picture what is coming next, how I will delineate the past from the future. The old boat makes her way steadily home in the shimmering morning sun. The land comes into view finally, a low, dark, uncertain line on the western horizon.

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