

INSIDE THE
SKIN

Kurt Brindley

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This book is dedicated to anyone – regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, gender and all its breathless facets, sexual orientation, non-sexual orientation, sexual non-orientation, spirituality or lack thereof, religion or lack thereof, nationality or lack thereof, political affiliation or lack thereof, occupation or lack thereof, education or lack thereof, good looks or lack thereof, height, weight, shoe size, or any other ways we have identified and implemented as means to compare and contrast and separate and segregate and relegate and rank ourselves as humans – who has ever once regretted his or her or their identity.

This book, then, is for us, all of us.

REPORT FOR DUTY

I DIDN'T JOIN the navy to die. I joined the navy to become a sailor, a real sailor. But as I stood before the ship that was to be my home for the next three years, I had a sick feeling that dying was exactly what I was going to do. The ship, lurking dark and ominous behind long, dusk shadows, looked as if it were ready to kill me if I took one step closer toward it. With its lines and angles coming to such a severe point at the bow that it appeared to be an unsheathed, floating dagger, it looked as if it were ready to kill someone, anyway. Afraid to go any farther, I seriously considered turning around and going home.

Who was I kidding? I was no real sailor. Regardless of the uniform I was wearing, or of the sea bag full of navy gear I was carrying on my back, or of the orders I held tucked under my arm ordering me to report to the ship, I didn't have a clue of what I was getting into or of what was expected of me. My mom was right—how was I ever going to survive?

The problem with giving up and going home, though, was that I was standing pier side at a United States naval base in *Yokosuka*, Japan, and home, or what used to be my home, was on the other side of the world. Another problem was that as great as my fear was of the ship, my fear of going to the brig for desertion was even greater. So, as much of a precedent I had already set in my life for giving up on myself and quitting, I knew that eventually I would report for duty aboard the ship as ordered. But I sure did stand there for a while contemplating my options.

It would be hard to imagine the power that a warship displays without ever having stood next to one. Pictures, or words in a book, could never properly describe or convey a warship's overwhelming presence as does standing next to one and personally seeing, feeling, hearing, and smelling it could. My ship had guns, big guns, missile launchers, armor, antennas, radars, wires, fuel-smells, foul-smells, and various loud, industrial noises that all concocted together to form one massive, offensive threat.

Not only did it scare the hell out me, it also amazed me. It amazed me not just because of its raw display of power, but also because of its intimidating beauty. It was

as beautiful as it was threatening; it looked as if it could have been sculpted by an artist. It was nothing like the squat, landlocked simulation ship that I trained on in boot camp.

The simulation ship, the USS Bluejacket, was more like a ship that children play on in neighborhood parks than an actual naval vessel. Still, it served its purpose. On the USS Bluejacket, I learned the basics of everything nautical that one could possibly learn in two months: line handling, navigation, helmsmanship, firefighting, the manning of battle stations; but what I learned most while “sailing” on the USS Bluejacket was that boot camp was not the real navy.

While in boot camp, I was reminded by my company commanders at regular intervals, usually around the times when my arms were about to buckle from pushups, or after I had been running in place next to my rack non-stop for thirty minutes, that what I was experiencing at boot camp was a vacation compared to the real navy. They would explain in their language of scream how in the real navy, out in the fleet, I would be on board a real ship, in the middle of the ocean, at the mercy of Davy Jones and my commanding officer, with real life-and-death responsibilities. In the real navy failure is not an option. Quitting is not an option.

I was used to quitting on myself. That is what people like me do. In fact, I had quit on myself so often during my eighteen years of life that I eventually quit trying to stop quitting on myself. However, I was not used to my inabilities and ineptitudes having so much impact on others. In boot camp when I quit, the company commanders didn't just punish me, they made sure the rest of the company suffered for it, too.

“Recruit quit your crying,” they would spit into my ear as my arms gave out and I collapsed to the floor. “If this was the real fucking navy you wouldn't be able to cry for your momma because you'd be dead!” They both would be on their hands and knees with their faces inches from mine. “Do you realize you fucking quitter that you didn't just quit on yourself? You just quit on every other recruit in your company. And now, because of one fucking little quitter like you, they're all fucking dead!”

After about the third or fourth time of forcing my entire company to suffer because of one of my screw-ups, I had an important revelation: People like me – the weak, the losers, the quitters, the ones conditioned for defeat – believe that we are powerless, that we are insignificant; but actually, it's just the opposite. The winners need people like me more than we will ever need them. In fact, winners are completely dependent upon us. We enable them to win and to live their superior lives. Without us to dominate and conquer in their game of life, winners would be nothing more than mere participants.

In boot camp, through pushups, perspiration, and pain, I learned that it was I, not the winners, who had the power. I learned that through my weakness and my readiness to accept loss and defeat, I could dictate whether my company lived or died. If the winners wanted to continue being winners, which in boot camp meant surviving as a company until graduation, then they had to overcome their natural instinct to want to crush and defeat me and, instead, teach me, or at least convince me, not to be such a

quitter. For them to survive, it meant they had to relinquish some of their monopoly on winning to me to ensure that I, too, survived, which meant that I, too, was a winner. In boot camp, I had the power. In boot camp, I finally mattered. But, like my company commanders said, boot camp wasn't the real navy.

Bored with humiliating just one sailor, my company commanders would stand up and begin their dictatorial pacing around the berthing to better direct their threats at the entire company. As they walked away leaving me for dead, they would again remind the other recruits that they, the recruits, were also dead just because one little quitter (they would point down at me when they said this) gave up on them. And, since we all were now dead, we all shouldn't mind doing another fifty pushups. Boot camp may not have completely represented reality, but those pushups certainly did.

And so did the ship that was now before me. It was time for me to report for duty and enter its reality. To do that, I first had to find the courage to cross its brow and request permission to board. I was nervous. I was more nervous to have to cross that brow than I was when I had to report to boot camp.

Even then, the night I first reported to boot camp, when the doors of the bus folded open to let in a flood of screaming company commanders, I somehow knew that what I was about to enter was merely a gross simulation of what was to eventually become my reality. As hard and as intimidating as boot camp was, and as much as I had wanted to quit from the pressure, it all – all the screaming, all the marching, all the precisely ironing and folding of uniforms and underwear, all the pushups, all the brainwashing, all of it – never seemed to me to be anything more than a game, a two-month long sadistic game of Simon Says. However, I had no doubt that the brow, that long gangplank that bridged the gap between a life on land and a life at sea, was real and that the life it would lead me to would be no game.

There was no turning back, though. I had to cross it. I had to climb the steps that led up to it. I had to walk across it with confidence. I had to stop at the end of it, right before the ship's quarterdeck, turn and face aft toward where the national ensign flew, and salute the ensign to show my respect. No, it was after sunset, so the ensign would have been lowered already. I had only to face aft and briefly stand at attention to show my respect to something that wasn't there. I then had to turn back toward the quarterdeck and face the sailor on watch, the sailor who stood watch over whomever entered and exited the ship. I had to salute him and request his permission to board the ship while holding my military identification card next to my face so that he could verify that I was who I was supposed to be.

I stood on the pier before the brow and repeatedly practiced in my mind the proper way to board a ship, wanting to get the task done with, but not really wanting to begin it at all.

"Request permission to come aboard," I said, hoping that the sailor on watch, a real sailor, a sailor who held my immediate fate in his hands, did not hear the quivering in

my voice. The sailor – what was his title? Officer of the Deck? Petty Officer of the Watch? – turned to face me in a manner that completely expressed a lack of any concern for my existence. He slowly walked over to a podium that was stationed in front of the brow, leaned on it, and then stared at me without responding to my request. What was wrong with him? Why didn't he grant me permission to board the ship? Was I doing something wrong already?

My right hand, with its fingertips positioned next to my right temple in a salute, felt heavy and began to shake. The more I tried to stop it from shaking the more it shook, until it was shaking so much I was afraid it was going to break off at the wrist. Not only did I have to focus on trying to keep my saluting hand from shaking, I also had to hold my military identification card next to my face with my left hand while also focusing on not dropping the package that was tucked under my left arm. The package, a large, bulky sealed manila envelope, had my medical and personnel records and other official navy documents on the inside and a copy of my orders stapled to it on the outside.

While I stood there suffering, the sailor on watch did nothing but lean against the podium and stare at me as if I were an exposed bed sore. Was this a game to him? Was he having fun watching me stand there slowly dying from embarrassment? Perhaps I should have just dropped my salute, performed an about face, and run like I had wanted to do from the beginning? But I couldn't do that now because I was no longer a quitter. I was now a sailor and sailors don't run. Sailors sail. Sailors heave to and cuss and screw exotic women—many of them. That's who they are and that's what they do. That's who I was and that's what I would do. I was a sailor now and sailors don't run!

An officer appeared from out of the shadows. When he saw me standing on the brow saluting, he gave a quick look of disdain to the sailor on watch, then returned my salute and granted me permission to come aboard. Seeing the officer, the sailor on watch immediately acted as if he had been making entries into a logbook.

"Jesus Christ Petty Officer Sinclair, didn't you see this guy standing there?" the officer asked in a way that indicated he knew that the sailor would answer with a lie.

"Sir, he walked up as soon as you walked out," Petty Officer Sinclair offered smoothly. "I was just finishing logging the eight o'clock reports." He had already begun reassuming his slouched position on the podium, as if he knew the officer could care less if he saw me or not.

I dropped my salute and put away my identification card. The officer walked up to me, slid the package out from under my arm, and said, "Go ahead and step down off that brow and set your sea bag down on the deck while we get you checked in." I was happy to obey his orders. My shoulders were numb from having to bear the load of the heavy sea bag for so long. As he flipped through the pages of my orders, he began speaking in a slow, monotone voice.

“You know what to do Sinclair. After you get our new sailor here logged in, find the duty master-at-arms so he can assign him a rack and issue him some linen.” He handed the package to the petty officer who tossed it on the podium.

“After that have the messenger help him find his rack so he can get some sleep. I’m sure he’s exhausted from the long flight over.”

The officer looked at me and said, “Congratulations sailor. You’ve just joined the crew of one of the fiercest warships in the west. Stand fast for a bit while Petty Officer Sinclair here gets you set up for the night.” He then turned and disappeared back within the shadows.

While Petty Officer Sinclair did nothing that the officer had just told him to do, I stood fast as ordered. I stood as fast and as proud as I could because, as the officer had just said, I was now a sailor on one of the fiercest warships in the west. I wasn’t a recruit or a dirtbag or a shithead or any of the many other derogatory names my company commanders used to call me; I was a sailor. As I stood trying to assume the demeanor one would expect of a sailor assigned to one of the fiercest warships in the West, someone stepped out of a hatch along the forward side of the ship’s superstructure and walked slowly toward the quarterdeck.

When Petty Officer Sinclair noticed him, he indifferently asked, “Well?”

The sailor, who I assumed was the messenger that the officer referred to earlier, replied that it was only a false alarm.

I looked at Petty Officer Sinclair, wondering if his response would give me any insight into what the “it” was, but his only response was, “Cool.”

I expected their conversation would shift directly to my fate, but Petty Officer Sinclair just continued leaning against his podium and staring off into space while the messenger walked over to the lifelines and looked out across the quiet pier. As they went about ignoring me, I continued to stand fast. Was it going to be up to me to tell the messenger what the officer had ordered Petty Officer Sinclair to do? Or, maybe I wasn’t being ignored. Maybe Petty Officer Sinclair had somehow managed to call the master-at-arms without me realizing it. Maybe the master-at-arms was already on his way to the quarterdeck. Maybe he would soon arrive and when he did, he would quickly assign me a rack, then the messenger could take me to it and I could crawl right in it and finally get some sleep.

Instead, in what seemed to be nothing more than an afterthought for him, Petty Officer Sinclair said, “Hey Jimenez, I need you to go find a rack for the new boot here.” Though he said nothing about finding the duty master-at-arms to assign me a rack or issue my linen, I was relieved that he was finally taking some action on my behalf. Without saying a word, Jimenez walked slowly up toward the forward part of the ship and entered the same hatch that he had exited from earlier.

Now what? Was I supposed to follow Jimenez or wait for the duty master-at-arms to arrive?

As I stood there redoubling my efforts of awkwardness, Petty Officer Sinclair picked up my package and, like a basketball player throwing a chest pass, he rifled it over to me and said, "Hey dickhead, if you want a place to sleep tonight you better stop playing with yourself and follow Jimenez."

INSIDE THE SKIN

I TOOK A deep breath and then off I went, unprepared for what the real navy had in store for me. My first challenge was immediate. I had to maneuver through the hatch that would take me inside the skin of the ship. While the hatch appeared to be the same as any of the hatches that I maneuvered through many times on the USS Bluejacket, this time I would have to do it with a full sea bag on my back, and, while Petty Officer Sinclair watched from the quarterdeck. First, I would have to grab the long handle and raise it upward to un-dog it, or unseal the hatch. Next, I would have to pull the hatch open and then simultaneously step over the knee-knockers while ducking and shimmying myself and the sea bag through the narrow, oval opening. Finally, I would have to turn, close the hatch, and then lower the long handle again to dog it shut. It was difficult, but I managed to do it without embarrassing myself too much.

I turned around to look for Jimenez. Taps must have already sounded because the only illumination came from the flickering red glow of a darkened ship light mounted over the hatch. I strained to look through the darkness, but outside the perimeter of the glow of the battle lantern, I saw nothing but black.

As I stood waiting for my eyes to adjust to their new environment, sensations so different from any that I had ever experienced before enveloped me as if I had just entered a mechanical womb. The atmosphere was warm and moist and laced with strong, primordial smells of bodies, machinery oil, and food, something deep-fried. A steady, low hum that seemed to originate from deep in the belly of the ship gently vibrated the deck plates under my feet.

As my eyesight slowly faded in, I began to see globe valves jutting out threateningly and unpredictably from all directions. From my experience on the USS Bluejacket, I remembered how these valves created not only trip hazards, but hazards to the head as well. Also placed in places dangerous to my feet, head, and other unsuspecting body parts were emergency battle lanterns, first aid kits, fire hoses, axes, stretchers, and many other indescribable tools and equipment needed to guarantee the survival of the ship and its crew. In an attempt to prevent the gear from becoming deadly projectiles

during rough seas, everything was bolted or strapped down securely along the bulkheads. Various sized pipes ran everywhere. Their purposes were stenciled in color-coded block letters: FIRE MAIN in red; JET FUEL in purple; POTABLE WATER in blue. Wires, thousands of wires strung en masse, ran overhead in all directions, competing for space with the pipes. They reminded me of the transparent overlays of human veins and arteries in the encyclopedias from my youth. Even without the benefit of complete sight, I could tell that the passageway was long and troubling.

I heard noises coming from the farthest end of the passageway. This time when I strained my eyes to focus, I was able to make out a shadow of someone stepping through a hatch and dogging it behind him. Jimenez. He must have been waiting for me. I rushed to catch up with him. The heavy sea bag rolled from side to side on my back as I ran, making it feel as if I were running a zigzag. A valve grazed my head, warning me to take heed of the new terrain. Nothing for me was ever easy.

When I reached the hatch that my escort disappeared behind, I was breathing hard. I clumsily made my way through the hatch and on the other side found a silent, empty passageway and a silent, empty ladder well. I listened for signs of Jimenez, but I heard nothing that would tell me whether I should continue following the passageway or take the ladder down to the next level. I heard only the mechanical, respiratory-like sounds of a sleeping ship. The weak, red glow of the darken ship lights disappeared into blackness as the passageway took a turn to starboard. There was no light coming up from the ladder well. I did not know what to do. Should I continue down the passageway or should I take a chance going down a level? It was time for me to make my first decision out in the fleet.

On my last day of boot camp, just moments before I and the rest of my company boarded the bus to depart for our respective assignments in the fleet, out in the real navy, Senior Chief Benndun, the shorter and meaner of the two company commanders, screamed out his last bit of advice.

“Shipmates, whenever you find yourselves in a fucked-up situation where you don’t know what to do, just remember this: you are now sailors in the strongest, most feared navy in the history of the world. So, whatever you do, don’t EVER let your actions or your decisions bring discredit upon yourself, the navy, or the United States. And more importantly, NEVER, in any situation, act like a pussy. Leave that for the French sailors.”

I remember how proud I was when he referred to me as a shipmate and a sailor. And I remember how loud I laughed, louder than anyone else did, at him calling French sailors pussies. Even then, though, I knew that I would be placed in many situations where I would have to make decisions that I did not want to make. I hate having to make decisions. I hate the pressure and potential accountability. And to be honest, I felt offended and embarrassed at his French joke because, in the midst of the pride I felt and the laughter I forced, it was I who felt like a pussy, both then and, especially, now.

In the spirit of Senior Chief Benndun, I forced myself to make a decision. I made the decision to go down, hoping that, at most, if wrong, my decision would only bring discredit upon myself.

My decision to go down meant that I would have to climb down a ladder. This brought with it another difficult maneuver because ladders between decks on ships are nearly vertical. I had a hard enough time going up and down the USS Bluejacket's ladders without having to carry a full sea bag. I looked down the well and saw nothing but black. I slowly turned, feeling for the aluminum rails and grabbing them tightly when I found them. Each step down was tentative and deliberate and I was certain that I would lose my balance and fall in the undefined blackness below me. The darkness rose about me as if I were stepping down into a pool of black ink. The underlying mechanical hum grew louder, and the atmosphere became denser.

After climbing down three deck levels, I found my escort leaning casually against the bulkhead. I made the right decision after all. When he saw me, he took off again at a pace that I was certain he knew I could only barely maintain. I used all my remaining energy to keep up and I was able to reach the next hatch only seconds after he ducked through it. He was playing with me, me the "boot camp," as all sailors fresh out of boot camp are labeled. He knew how much effort it would take for me to get through the hatch while carrying my sea bag. If only I could just keep going and leave the hatch open behind me I would be able to keep up with him. However, he also knew there was no way I would not dog the hatch. Through screams and spit and pushups, during boot camp it was thoroughly, deeply, and indelibly ingrained into my psyche that watertight integrity must always be maintained.

Properly maintaining watertight integrity can mean the difference between the sinking and survival of a damaged ship. If a sailor gets caught not maintaining watertight integrity, even in time of peace, even while the ship is pier side, even unintentionally, it means certain punishment. As I turned to dog the hatch as quickly as I could, it felt as if my company commanders were still right next to me rabidly screaming hot coffee and cigarette breath into my face to ensure that I followed their orders: "Dog the fucking hatch recruit! I don't give two fucks how much you're carrying. Dog the fucking hatch. I don't care if your goddamned arms have been blown off. Dog the fucking hatch or all of your shipmates will die!" My escort knew that I would maintain watertight integrity. He also knew that he could put much deck space between him and me as I stopped to dog the hatch. I knew he knew all this and I wished, even as I was dogging the hatch, that I had the courage to leave it un-dogged.

After rushing as fast as I possibly could through the hatch and dogging it behind me, I again began walking as fast as I dared, still wary about hitting my head or tripping over something. The passageway took a sharp turn to starboard and then back to port. Jimenez, to my surprise, was only about ten yards ahead, not walking very fast, but not walking slow enough for me to let up my pace.

Breathing was painful now and my legs could barely support me. It had been over five hours since I had last eaten; I could not remember how long it had been since I had last slept. I felt light headed. I wanted to stop the chase. I wanted to drop my sea bag, lie on the deck, and sleep. I wanted to sleep and then wake up somewhere else, anywhere but on this ship. In fact, I wanted to wake up to find that I had never joined the navy in the first place.

But I didn't stop. I didn't drop my sea bag and sleep. My legs kept moving. I remained conscious. Jimenez would not have the pleasure of losing me. I would keep up with him. I could see him, and I would not lose him again. He stopped to look back at me. Perhaps he finally realized that I would not be denied. Perhaps I had passed a test. Maybe now he would slow down and stop teasing me. Was he smiling? It was hard to tell from the shadows that folded around him. I slowed my pace, not wanting to appear too eager. Then, right before my eyes, he disappeared.

When I caught up to where I had last seen him, only seconds before, all I found was another hatch that would lead me forward and another ladder well that would lead me down. But no Jimenez. He had vanished. He could not have possibly gone through the hatch because I would have caught up to him in the time it would have taken for him to dog it. I was quite certain he could not have gone down the ladder because I would have heard the clatter of his boots on the aluminum steps. I looked around for hidden spaces. There were none. He had to have gone one way or the other because there were no other possible routes.

Once again, I didn't know what to do. Should I return to the quarterdeck and take my chances with Petty Officer Sinclair? I looked behind me into the blank darkness. I had come so far that I knew that I could never remember the way back. I was supposed to be being escorted to my rack, to my new home. But instead, I was lost, trapped, not knowing how many decks down I was and not knowing how many more decks down I was supposed to go. I was not sure if I was heading toward the aft or forward part of the ship. I was not certain of anything, except my uncertainty. It didn't matter which way he went because I could not go one step farther. I was much too tired.

I was awakened by a solid knock to my shoulder. Jimenez looked down on me and, for the first time, spoke. "Get up off your lazy ass ya fuckin' boot camp and try keeping up." Again, he immediately disappeared. This time I saw him drop down the ladder well. I could not believe my eyes when I looked down and saw him at the bottom of the stairwell impatiently looking up at me. How did he get down to the bottom so fast? I did not hear a sound. Without explanation, he opened a door and walked through it.

I struggled down the ladder and then walked through the same door into a dark compartment. I couldn't see much but I could tell that it was a big space. It smelled of bodies and dirty laundry. The sound of sleep was heavy. Jimenez pointed toward something that I could not see. I walked in the direction that his finger indicated and found an empty rack. I was so happy at finally reaching my destination that I

immediately forgot all the torment that he had just put me through. I wanted to thank him. I wanted to shake his hand and offer him my friendship for life, but when I turned back to him, he had already disappeared.

WELCOME ABOARD

MY NEW HOME, the only space on the ship that I would be able to call my own, was a gray, seventy-two inches long by twenty-eight inches wide by eighteen inches tall, rectangular rack. It was a bottom, middle rack, only inches off the deck, and two identical racks were stacked directly over it. The bottom of each rack served as the top for the rack below it. I did a quick count and found there were nine racks in all on each side of the aisle. My rack had a nightlight to read by, a hook to hang things on, a two-inch thick mattress, and a wool blanket balled up in the back corner. Missing, however, were a pillow, sheets, and a privacy curtain. The rack, itself, was a storage locker. Its top could be lifted and set to stay open with a metal bar. Inside were a drawer and several six-inch deep compartments of various widths. With the top of the rack set open, the locker resembled a coffin.

I opened the coffin locker, quickly emptied the contents of my sea bag into its various compartments, closed it again, and then locked it with a padlock I had been using to secure my sea bag. Next, I stripped to my underwear and crawled into the rack, relishing all the comfort the thin mattress was able to offer. I unfurled the blanket and pulled it tightly around me, writhing like a snake, scratching its coarseness upon my dry skin. A bed had never felt so comfortable. I passed out immediately and slept undisturbed until the arrival of my welcoming committee.

Their distant conversation and laughter, their clumsy, heavy feet on the ladders, and the constant scraping of hatches being un-dogged, opened, slammed, and dogged shut echoed throughout the slumbering ship. As the sound from the slow procession of their decent got closer and closer, it gradually invaded my sleep-state and attempted to pull me back into an unwelcomed state of consciousness. I fought off the attack as hard as I could but ended up losing the battle when I was suddenly and completely awakened by a loud, extended banging that sounded as if a bowling ball had been rolled down a ladder well.

Cries of both pain and laughter erupted from the descending party. After a brief panic, I remembered that I was on board my ship. Cold air from an overhead air

conditioning unit seemed to be blowing directly into my rack. I found my blanket down by my feet and quickly pulled it over me. Shivering, I followed the sound of the advancing procession and wondered what impact it was about to have on me. When the door to the berthing compartment was flung open to let the drunks stumble in, the air pressure in the compartment seemed to drop directly upon my chest.

The drunks became hushed and respectful of the silent, darkened room until one of them walked into a metal folding chair. The chair flew into a bulkhead and the drunk crashed to the floor. The other drunks burst out in laughter. Sailors shouted from behind closed-curtained racks, calling for quiet and threatening violence if they didn't get it. The drunks countered with their own threats and more laughter while they helped their fallen shipmate up from the deck. Their task was made more difficult by the fact that the drunk on the deck had passed out.

"Asshole's out."

"Shit! Wake the motherfucker up."

"I said he's out!"

"Wake up asshole."

"Goddamn it, stop kicking him and drag his ass to his rack."

I could hear feet dragging across the deck, accompanied by grunts and curses. Their progress was slow and ominous, like a determined monster in a horror movie as he lurches toward his helpless victim. They dragged the passed out drunk down my aisle. I cursed Jimenez for giving me a rack without curtains. Desperately wanting to hide behind something, I wrapped the blanket around my head, curled myself into a ball, and pressed myself against the back of the rack, trying to disappear.

I became one of those animals that instinctively responded to a threatening situation by simulating its death. I tried my best to appear dead. I wanted to appear so dead that I would trick the unknown forces of the afterlife responsible for the disposition of the soul into passing judgment upon mine and disposing of it as they saw fit, just as long as the drunks would not notice me and would pass by my rack without incident.

They stopped next to my rack. One of the drunks from the back said that they had gone down the wrong aisle and that they had to turn around. The drunk who was doing the dragging said that he wasn't carrying the son of a bitch another inch. To make his point clear, he let go of the passed-out drunk's arms. The sound of the passed-out drunk's head smacking against the deck sounded like a foot kicking in a pumpkin. The drunk from the back said he would kick the shit out of the drunk who did the dragging if he didn't pick the passed out drunk back up and bring him to his rack. The drunk who did the dragging told the drunk from the back to fuck himself. More insults and cuss words were traded back and forth.

In boot camp, I was amazed at how much my company commanders cussed. It seemed that every other word was an expletive. To them the word "fuck" could be used

to enhance any description and as any part of speech: a noun, verb, adverb, adjective, an object of the preposition, a dangling participle. They cussed at us to simulate real-life conditions in the fleet and they cussed at us because the real-life conditions in the fleet had conditioned them to do so. The drunk who did the dragging cussed nearly as well as my company commanders did.

Another drunk from the back noticed that my rack did not have any curtains and said that since my rack was empty they should just throw the passed out drunk in there for the night. I immediately wished that I was not so good at making myself unnoticeable and briefly contemplated speaking out to let them know that the rack was occupied. But, I said nothing and the passed out drunk landed next to me.

In boot camp, it was my company commanders's responsibility to prepare all us recruits for any possible threat or danger that we might have to face out in the fleet. We had to survive everything from gas attacks, where we were crowded into a room and forced to breathe in tear gas, to being lost at sea. A "lost at sea" simulation meant jumping into a pool where, to "survive," we had to be able to tread water in full uniform for five minutes, then we had to strip our dungaree pants off, tie the ends of the pant legs into knots, and plunge the top of the pants into the water so the legs would fill with air and serve as a floatation device.

However, my company commanders provided no simulated training in boot camp that would prepare me for how to escape from within a rack while lying next to a passed-out drunk who reeked of beer, cigarettes, and other indescribable foul smells. I was on my own to figure out a way to get out of that rack as quickly as possible.

If I were in a normal bed, all I would have to do to escape if a passed out drunk were tossed next to me would be to roll off the other side and sneak away. The passed out drunk would never know that I was ever there. But my rack and my situation were not normal. In a rack on a ship, there is only one exit and, unfortunately, the passed out drunk was between it and me. I could try to push him out of the rack, but that would risk the chance that he might wake up. I didn't want that to happen so my only other option was to crawl over him and find somewhere else to sleep.

I felt sickened from the smells and from the anxiety caused by the mission before me. Some of the drunks were still awake, watching television. What if they heard me? How would I be able to explain my situation to them? I had to be extra cautious and quiet to make sure they *didn't* hear me. I had to extricate myself from the corner of the rack slowly.

I had been pressed tight against the back of the rack with my backside toward the passed-out drunk, so first, I had to roll over on my back. The drunk was lying on his side with his face towards me. When I rolled over, my back no longer propped him up and he fell on top of me. We were cheek to cheek. His left leg intertwined with my legs and his hands ended up in places where they should not have been. He breathed heavily, and his breath was sour. His stomach made strange, backed-up-toilet-like sounds that began

traveling up his chest and into his throat. He started to gag. He was going to throw up. My stomach began reacting the same way and I, too, began to feel as if I were going to throw up.

I had to get out of there immediately. My heartbeat raced faster. I felt claustrophobic. I could not breathe. I had to get out. I panicked. I tried to roll the passed out drunk off me, but I could barely move his dead weight. I struggled, knowing that the noise I was making was too loud for the quiet berthing. I didn't care. I had to get out of there. The drunk was going to throw up any second. I pushed with all my might and a groan came from the back of my throat. My knees banged against the metal bulkhead in their effort to find enough leverage to move him.

Hands reached in, grabbed the drunk, and pulled him out of my rack. Inquisitive faces, dark within the shadows, then leaned in to look at me.

"Well, well... it seems that there was someone in the rack after all. Who the fuck are you?"

"I... me... new..."

"Hey guys, check it out! We have us a new boot camp to welcome aboard."

"Muster the Welcoming Committee!"

"Looked to me like the boot was in there trying to hump poor old Sully."

A shadowed face with a deep, serious voice asked, "You a faggot boot?"

Before I could react or say anything, I was dragged out onto the deck and my blanket was pulled tightly over my head and around my arms. Explosions went off in my head as punches smashed into my cheeks, into my nose, into my ears. Through the piercing ringing in my head, I heard one of the drunks tell another to stop hitting me in the face. I guess they had rules to their ritual. But, whoever it was who was doing the punching apparently didn't care for the rule because he continued to punish my face.

"Boot, this is what we call a good, old fashioned, welcome aboard party."

"Yeah, just think of us as your welcoming committee. We sure are happy to have you aboard, Shipmate."

I don't know how long it was – it seemed like an eternity – before someone joined the group and said that he got everything that they needed. The punches ceased and whoever it was holding the blanket over my head leaned close to my ear and, in a youthful, high-pitched voice, said in a ceremonious manner, "And now, Shipmate, we present you with an even more special welcoming gift, a gift that all newly reporting boot camps are required to receive."

He sounded as if he truly expected me to be excited about the gift. He acted as if it were my birthday and they had just finished singing the birthday song to me and were now ready to give me my presents.

My welcoming gift turned out to be them pulling down my underwear to my ankles and layering my crotch and anus with a thick grease that is used to lubricate the shaft that spins the ship's propellers. Initially there were discussion as to who would be the

lucky one to apply the grease, until a deep voice from behind the pack growled out a name, prompting one of the drunks into action and silencing the others.

As the lucky hazer performed his duties, several references were made to my manly inadequacies. Finally, he topped off the grease with a generous layer of coffee grounds, which were then thoroughly massaged into the most inappropriate places. After he finished, he wiped his hands off on my blanket and gave me one last punch to the thigh. The one who held the blanket over my head offered, "And if you even think about telling anyone about this, we'll fuck you up even more, Shipmate." They walked away giving each other high fives as I lay on the deck in pain.

After the drunks finished with me, they went back to their card game and porno videos. I knew that I should pull myself up off the deck and walk out to confront them. I should go out there and either threaten to kick each of their asses or pull up a chair and invite myself into their card game. That's what I should have done. That's what a real sailor would do. Instead, I crawled back into my rack and tried to find comfort on top of my bare, foam mattress. I wrapped the blanket tight around my head in an effort to muffle out the chatter from the card game and the empty moans coming from the television.

REVEILLE

Reveille. Reveille.

All hands heave out and trice up.

The smoking lamp is lighted in all authorized spaces.

Reveille.

MY FIRST THOUGHT when I woke was of an earthquake. Everything was shaking. My second thought was of pain. Everything hurt. Was I hurting because of the shaking, or was I shaking because of the pain?

I cautiously began to take inventory. Pain was everywhere. I went from body part to body part and found nothing but pain. Pain pulsed from every nerve ending throughout my body. It was a pain so intense and so complete that it demanded my complete attention, which I willingly gave. I didn't care that, without curtains for protection, I was completely exposed to everyone in my aisle in nothing but my underwear, grease, and coffee grounds. I didn't care that my blanket had fallen to the deck and cold air was blowing directly into my rack, leaving me freezing and shivering. I didn't even care that the earthquake was actually someone leaning into my rack violently trying to shake me awake. I only cared for the pain. Still, the shaking wouldn't stop, and I cautiously and tenderly opened my eyes.

"What the crap happened to you?" the sailor shaking me asked.

What the crap happened to me? I had been wondering the same thing all night long. I didn't know how to answer. Instead, I asked my own question. "Where's the head?"

The sailor took a slow step back from my rack and pointed to a door where tousle-haired, razor-stubbled, underwear-clad men were walking in and out with towels tossed over a shoulder and toiletry bags tucked under an arm.

"Dude, you really look like crap. I thought you were dead. You wouldn't wake up. That's why I was shaking you so hard."

After everything I had been through, an act of kindness. Tears welled up in my eyes. Pain vanished. My heart swelled with happiness. An angel in hell. A beautiful, sincere angel. My guardian. Not wanting my first potential friend to see me cry, I put my face into my hands as if I were attempting to rub away the sleep. When my hands touched my nose, my face exploded into another fireball of pain. My screaming must have scared him away because he was gone when the bright light of intense pain behind my forehead subsided and I began to get my vision back.

I rolled over to the edge of my rack so I could look out to see where my guardian angel had gone and all I saw were near-naked bodies swarming all around me. My aisle was packed full of men preparing for the day. Men, unconscious of their nakedness, men without bruises, beautiful men without worry of themselves, men of war, sailors, real sailors, beautiful sailors, were everywhere. How could I exit my rack and walk amongst them looking and feeling the way I did? Based on the amount of pain I felt and the heavy, metallic taste of blood in my mouth, and the reaction I got from my guardian angel, I assumed that I didn't look very healthy.

Still, regardless of how I felt or looked, I knew that eventually I would have to begin the day and face all the mess that was going to come with it. But that didn't stop me from being afraid. I did not want to meet any of my attackers and I did not want to have to try to explain to anyone what happened to me. I retrieved my blanket and decided to wait until the berthing cleared out before exiting my rack. I wished that the sailor who woke me up, my angel, was still with me to protect me and to tell me everything would be all right. Instead, all I had for protection was a blanket.

As I lay in my rack, I listened to the men preparing themselves for their day and I tried to imagine what it would be like to be out there with them, as one of them, with nothing on but underwear, shower shoes, and a towel draped over my shoulder. They made being themselves look so easy. I had never felt comfortable just being myself with other people, especially without clothes on. I barely was comfortable being myself with me. Why was the act of being so hard for me when others made it look so easy? Sailors were outside my rack right now not worrying about how they would respond if someone spoke to them, or how skinny they looked as they walked around in their underwear.

Boot camp was hell when it came to having to expose myself publicly. The showers were all open and the toilet stalls had no doors. In the morning, we would have to form lines in front of the toilets and wait our turn. I couldn't even pee with someone standing next to me and now I was told that I would have to sit on the toilet and do my business with a line of impatient recruits staring at me. I was afraid to go to the head for the first week.

Finally, when the pain was too unbearable and I couldn't hold it any longer for fear of having an accident while doing squat thrusts or mountain climbers, I joined the morning crapper line, tried not to make eye contact with anyone, especially with the recruit who was on the toilet just before me, and waited for the humiliation. When it was

my turn there were two recruits waiting in line after me. They watched me go and made fun of me the whole time. They talked about me and laughed loudly at me while I tried to focus all my attention on the floor tiles at my feet. When I finished one of them said, "Look at white boy. He wipes his ass like it's a pussy." I guess If I could survive that, I could survive life on board a ship where, I hoped, the showers at least had curtains and the toilet stalls had doors.

I peeked outside of my rack to watch the morning routine. Four underwear - only clad men were gathered at the end of my aisle casually smiling and laughing as they talked. As a group, they looked odd, mismatched for each other. Their colors didn't match. Their characteristics didn't match. Yet, still they were drawn together by something. What was it? What was it that enabled the four of them to come together so easily and form their little group?

One, tall and skinny like me, towered over the other three. To compensate for the absurd distance between himself and the others, he hunched his back and rolled his shoulders forward until his neck stuck out and his head hung down as if it were too heavy for him to hold high. Two were short—one, just an average, so-so short and the other, a significantly more than average short. The significantly more than average shorter sailor compensated for his absurd shortness in the opposite manner of the tall sailor: instead of rolling himself forward, he threw his chest out and held his shoulders back; and it looked to me that he was standing on the balls of his feet, almost on his tippy toes.

Where the other three were absurd in their imperfections, the fourth was absurdly perfect. His height was perfect. His hair was perfect. His shoulders were perfect. Everything about him was perfect, especially how he stood there looking like one of those perfect underwear models found in magazines. He was the center of the group's attention. The other three took turns talking to him, trying to impress him or to get him to laugh somehow. It was he who drew and held the group together.

When the taller of the two shorter sailors was talking, the tallest sailor of the group looked over everyone's heads and noticed me peeking out from my rack. He said something and they all turned to look at me. I ducked my head back into my rack and hoped that the situation wouldn't turn out as badly for me as last night's events had. I heard the tall sailor say, "Hey Reece, I think someone has a crush on you." I listened as they all laughed, all except Reece.

The Underwear Model walked over to my rack and looked down at me for a moment before speaking. I tried not to, but I couldn't help but look up at him and all his perfection.

"Look," he said with a voice perfectly equalized and balanced in its masculinity, "I don't know who you are or why you look so fucking ugly, but, since you don't know me, I think it's only fair to warn you: It really creeps me out when I see a guy checking out another guy. It creeps me out, but I think, what the hell, if that's the sick shit they're

into, then go for it. More bitches for me. But when I see a guy checking me out, it doesn't just creep me out, it pisses me the fuck off. You know why it pisses me off? Because I don't like fags, that's why. And I especially don't like fags who live in the same shitty, tight space as I do who think they can check me out whenever they feel like it."

He kneeled down to my rack, leaned in close, and said, "Listen up, beautiful. From now on, if I ever catch you looking at me again, I will fucking destroy you. You got that?"

I got it all right. Perfectly.

The Underwear Model walked back toward his group and I heard the other three tease him about me being his new boyfriend. He slammed one of them into the lockers and told them all to fuck off.

After I was certain that the berthing compartment was empty, I unwrapped the blanket from my head and went to inspect my wounds. I was not prepared for how bad I actually looked. I was ugly. My nose turned slightly toward my right ear. My left ear was swollen and purple. My eyes were bloodshot and ringed with dark circles. A broken fingernail was sticking out of the back of my neck. The rest of me was not so bad, except for the blood smears, the thick, black grease up and down my legs and back, and the coffee grounds. I could clean myself of the blood, grease, and coffee, but for the time being I was stuck with the pain.

I washed myself up the best that I could, carefully navigating around bruises, cuts, and other inflictions. Then I returned to my rack, put on a clean pair of dungarees, and waited for someone to return, hoping that it would be my angel and not one of my attackers. Though I didn't see any of their faces, I knew I would be able to recognize them if I heard their voices. I crawled into my rack, wrapped the blanket around my head, and waited.

It was not long before the door to the berthing compartment swung open and several sailors stormed in. The room went from calm to fury in an instant. Loud chatter. Cussing. Ball scores. Sex talk. Some began moving chairs and tables. Others brought cleaning gear out of a closet and began sweeping, dusting, and stripping the wax from the deck with a large buffing machine. Some snuck back into their racks. Deep, angry beats blasted from a stereo.

I tried to listen to the voices of the cleaning crew to determine if any were my attackers, but I couldn't be sure because of the loud music. A couple of the sailors noticed me as they cleaned near my rack, but they said nothing. They just continued going through the motions of their labor.

The door opened again, and an older looking sailor walked in to the compartment. He wore the same dungaree uniform as we did, but the three inverted chevrons on his sleeve indicated that he was of a much higher rank, a petty officer first class. When the other sailors saw him, they immediately began to look as if they were cleaning in earnest.

The petty officer first class began checking the progress of the work. I could not hear exactly what he was saying, but I could tell that he was upset about the lack of work that had been accomplished. He walked toward several members of the cleaning crew and gesticulated heavily. His face reddened. The sailors he was screaming at occasionally would shrug their shoulders or shake their heads. The senior petty officer continued screaming and gesticulated even harder. His eyes widened. His face reddened deeper. Hands flapped everywhere. Teeth gnashed. Eyes bulged to a point where they seemed dangerously close to bursting.

Finally, one of the sailors walked toward the racks, and made a sweeping gesture with his arm. The petty officer first class slapped his clipboard against his thigh, brushed by the sailor, and began throwing open curtains as he walked down each aisle. Sailors began rolling out of their racks, yawning and wiping sleep from their eyes.

When the petty officer got to my rack he looked down at me and screamed, "Get the blanket off your head and get to work before I write you up, ya lazy fuck."

I waited until he moved on to the next occupied rack and screamed more threats before I rolled out. Uncertain what to do, I walked hesitantly to the front of the compartment and stood under the television that was mounted on the bulkhead, waiting to be noticed. The petty officer first class continued directing the cleaning efforts through screams and threats. He now had ten sailors working for him. I am not sure how effective they were – after one mopped down the wax, others walked over it; or, after one wiped down the bulkhead, another would come by and dust off the overheads – but all, at least, were busy doing something and none were in their racks.

The petty officer first class walked over to me as he was writing something in his clipboard. Without looking up he said, "Either you're new and don't know what the fuck you're doing or you're just fucking stupid." I wanted to let him know that he was correct on both counts, but fear prevented me from saying anything. "Listen," he said calmly as he continued writing, "I don't have time for your games. Start cleaning now or I'm going to send you all to the fo'c's'le with a needle gun shoved up your ass." His pen stopped, and he looked up at me. "Jesus, Shipmate, what the hell happened to you?"

What the hell happened to me? That was the question I had been asking myself all morning. It was my intent to tell him that I fell down the ladder that leads to the berthing compartment. As awkward as I was, why would he not believe me? While I stood there with lips trembling around a hesitant lie, a short, unkempt junior petty officer, a petty officer third class, slowly drawled, "Strict, I bet a hog's head for a whore he's been in a lover's quarrel. And I'd say by the looks of him that his man got the better of him."

At first, I didn't understand what the petty officer third class said. It wasn't just because of his heavy accent; it was mostly because I was too busy digesting the fact that a petty officer, a non-commissioned officer, was a member of a cleaning party. I had thought that only the lowest ranking sailors like me would have to perform such menial

tasks, or “character enhancing duties,” as my company commanders liked to call them. Everyone else called them “shit jobs.”

“What the hell are you talking about Grady?” the petty officer first class asked impatiently as his pen continued working on the clipboard.

“Just look at him. Don’t he look like he’s two boobs away from being a broad?” Petty Officer Grady drawled on as he wiped his nose on the back of his sleeve. By this time, the attention that the petty officers were giving to me drew several of the other sailors into our conversation. They all laughed at what Petty Officer Grady had just said. Someone called me the new berthing bitch.

The petty officer first class smacked his clipboard against the trashcan, sending a shockwave through the room. “Jesus fuck, Grady. If you must speak, then at least try to sound a little more intelligent than a retarded second grader?”

Petty Officer Grady adjusted his crotch, pulled out a can of snuff from his back pocket, pinched a thick wad of the tobacco between his fingers, and tucked it securely into his lower lip.

The petty officer first class took a step closer to me. The name “STRICTER” was stenciled across the pocket of his shirt. My knees nearly buckled when he stared directly at me.

“All right sailor, I don’t have time for your silly games, so I say for the last time. What the hell happened to you? And if you tell me that you got yourself into a blanket party last night, like I suspect you did, you better believe that some heads are gonna roll.”

I had no intention of telling him what really happened, but he seemed to anticipate my thoughts.

“And if you think you’re gonna tell me that you slipped and fell, or some other bullshit like that, because you think you have to lie to cover up for your new shipmates, you better think again. Because if you do and I find out that you were lying, I will hold you accountable as an accomplice to the hazing. You got that new guy?”

My chest was so tight I could not breathe. Petty Officer Stricter’s glare focused in on me. I squeaked out the only reply I could think of. “Yes, sir.”

“God damn it, Boot Camp! You’re not in boot camp anymore. I am not a fucking sir. I am a petty officer.” He leaned closer into me. “And for Christ’s sake, stop standing at attention. If I want you at attention, I’ll put you there myself.”

Every muscle in my body was so tense there was no way for me not to stand at attention.

“All right, here’s how it is, Boot Camp. To tell you the truth, I really don’t care whether you got a hazing or not. Besides, by the looks of you, it appears that maybe you needed it. Toughen you up some. But our new navy says to hell with tradition, and that new sailors can’t be initiated no more so, god damn it, if someone gave you a fucking hazing, I want to know about it so I can hold those sons of bitches accountable.”

My bladder felt as if it would involuntarily release its contents at any moment.

The petty officer continued, “Now, I’m not stupid. I know how these idiots act. They think, regardless of the rules, that all new guys must be welcomed aboard properly, with a blanket party. And I can take a pretty good guess at who was responsible for it. However, I need to hear it from you, so, I ask you again, and for the final time. What the fuck happened last night?”

Even in my worst nightmares, I never could have imagined that the navy would be like this. What was I thinking when I joined? I did okay in school. Why didn’t I go to college like my mother wanted? What made me think that someone like me could be a real sailor? I was frozen. I could not move and my brain could not think. The only part of me that was ready for action was my bladder. The pressure was intense.

Petty Officer Stricter sighed heavily and asked, “Why am I not hearing anything coming out of your mouth? Boot Camp, let me be clear. To me, one’s silence indicates one’s consent.”

I had no idea what he meant. My look of fear must have momentarily shifted to a look of confusion because he restated what he had just said.

“What that means, Einstein, is that if I say something that you don’t agree with, but you say nothing, then, to me, it means that you agree with what I said. For instance, at this moment, I assume that your silence means that you are trying to cover up a hazing, which, if there was one, makes you an accomplice.”

The petty officer took a step back and turned to scream an order for everyone to get their asses back to work. He began beating the clipboard against the palm of his hand as he returned his attention back to me.

I couldn’t think. I couldn’t think, and I couldn’t breathe. The smack of the clipboard against his palm reminded me of the punches that had been delivered to my head and body only hours before.

Smack.

“Who did this to you Boot Camp?”

Smack.

“Boot Camp! Did you receive a blanket party last night?”

Smack! Smack! All the faces, noises, smells, threats, fears, confusion, pain, and everything else from last night and up to the present moment assaulted my thought process and prevented me from answering. Smack! Smack!

“Boot Camp!”

“Ye–yes, Petty Officer... I–I was attacked last night.” Hot tears rolled slowly down both of my cheeks. “But I don’t know who did it,” I quickly added. I looked around the room, hoping to receive even the slightest of reassuring looks. Instead, it looked as if the crew were ready to rush me and tear me limb from limb.

Petty Officer Stricter stopped smacking the clipboard on his hand and wrote something into it before tossing it on the card table behind me. He turned to face the group and ordered someone to turn off the music. The silence was profound.

“All right shitheads, in case you didn’t hear him, our new boot camp says he was attacked last night.” He paced back and forth in front of the group.

“Does anyone here know what happened?” The sailors shrugged and shook their heads no. Petty Officer Stricter returned to the card table and picked up his clipboard. He returned to the group and said, “Okay, let me ask you again, one more time, just to make sure you understand the question. Does anyone in this compartment know who gave our newest sailor a blanket party last night?” Everyone stared back at him without answering. “All right then, Shipmates,” he said, “get your lazy asses back to work. But remember,” he warned as he pointed his clipboard at them, “I got each of your names written down. If I find out that any of you were involved in any of this bullshit or knows anything about it, your ass is mine.”

The music started booming again.

Petty Officer Stricter turned back toward me. “Are you sure you don’t recognize anyone from last night?”

“Yes, I’m sure petty officer. It... it all happened so fast... it was dark.”

“Well, it appears we are in a bind at the moment since no one here is saying anything. He poked me in the chest with his clipboard and said,” But don’t you worry Boot, we’ll find out who did this to you and hold them accountable.”

That was the last thing that I wanted. He screamed for Petty Officer Grady. When the sailor walked over, Petty Officer Stricter told him that I was the new guy that he had been expecting and that, since I was now damaged goods, he wanted Petty Officer Grady to take me to the corpsman to get me checked out. And then, if cleared by the Doc, he was to take my narrow ass up to the forecandle to do some real work.

Petty Officer Stricter left the compartment. After the door closed behind him, everyone stopped working and stared at me. I stood there trying not to make eye contact with anyone until Petty Officer Grady said to me, “Let’s go sweetheart.” As I followed behind him, a wet sponge smacked me on the side of the face.

ON THE FORECASTLE

FORTUNATELY, THE CORPSMAN said that my injuries were not serious and, after twisting my nose back into place, he gave me a small bottle of pain pills and said I was well enough to go to work. I knew that I was supposed to be exhausted from everything that I had just been through – the long flight over; the three hour ride from the airport to base; having to report for duty; and, of course, the blanket party – but the excitement of being out on the forecastle getting ready to work on a real task, one that put me in direct contact with the ship and real sailors, one not of cleaning pubic hairs out of urinals like we had to do every day in boot camp, exhilarated me and provided me with a surge of energy. The wind and the noise and the commotion filled me with large doses of adrenaline.

I waited impatiently behind Petty Officer Grady as he explained to the petty officer in charge that we both had been assigned to his working party. The petty officer in charge was a young-looking petty officer second class with large, tattooed biceps who did not seem too pleased at us interrupting his work.

Without turning off his needle gun or without removing the foam plugs from his ears or the safety goggles from his eyes, the supervisor reluctantly stopped working and, before acknowledging Petty Officer Grady, took the time to scan the forecastle to check on his crew. Satisfied that everyone was working as they should have been, he looked up at Petty Officer Grady. I saw Petty Officer Grady's mouth move but, because of the wind and the noise from the needle guns, I heard nothing of what he said. Apparently, the petty officer in charge did because he nodded his head in a direction toward the forward part of the ship and then pointed once toward the port side and once toward the starboard side. Petty Officer Grady gave a thumbs up sign and then nodded at me to follow him.

We walked toward several large metal containers located near the center of the forecastle. The containers reminded me of a large version of the cigar boxes that I used in elementary school, the kind that had pictures of pilgrims on it and were used to store my pencils, crayons, glue, and scissors.

Inside one of the containers were the needle guns, neatly stacked, looking like long, metal cigars. Petty Officer Grady reached in, grabbed two guns, and handed one to me. Next to the box of needle guns was a pile of black, coiled hoses. Next to the hoses was another container filled with protective goggles. And next to the goggles was still another container filled with ear protection devices, which Petty Officer Grady referred to as “Mickey Mouse ears.” He handed me an item from each box, waited for me to don the goggles and the Mickey Mouse ears, showed me how to hook the hose up to the needle gun, and then nodded for me to follow him to the port side of the ship where the petty officer in charge had directed us to work.

He explained, mostly through hand motions and body language, that I was to use the needle gun to begin removing non-skid, the thick, course material that was spread on the deck to prevent sailors and equipment from slipping in wet weather. He showed me how to hook my hose up to a central pneumatic air-line that provided the high-pressure air needed to power the needle guns. After he showed me how to turn the needle gun on, he indicated that I should get to work. He then spit over the side, pointed over to where he would be working, and left me to my task.

In boot camp, the needle gun held a legendary status. My company commanders told us that we all would probably have the good fortune of operating one at some point once we were out in the fleet. Occasionally they spun elaborate yarns of how the mighty needle gun had saved shipmates’s lives, how it had prevented wars and ended wars, and how it promoted world peace and harmony.

According to them, the needle gun could do all these things because it helps to keep ships in good repair. And when ships are kept in good repair they are better able to protect their sailors and their nation because they are better able to complete their mission. Perhaps more importantly, they added, when visiting foreign ports, ships in good repair are more impressive and powerful looking than rusty, ragtag-looking ones. When a United States ship pulls into a foreign port looking clean, fit, and ready for battle, potential enemies will think twice about starting any problems with us. Without any problems from our enemies, peace and harmony spreads throughout the world, all because of the work of the mighty needle gun.

With a mighty needle gun finally in hand, I was ready to do real work as real sailors do. As I lowered myself to sit down on the deck, my body reminded me that it still had some healing to do. I felt stiff and sore all over. But the deck was still cool, and it felt good on the backs of my legs. I cautiously turned the shaft of the needle gun like Petty Officer Grady had showed me. High-pressure air shot into the gun and the bunch of thick metal needles rattled into life.

The gun’s surge of power and the intensity of the vibration took me by surprise. It jumped from my hands and fell to the deck, spasmodically writhing and jerking away from me. I lunged after it, but the gun, unrestrained and powered by the high-pressure air, quickly snaked out of my reach and headed toward the deck edge. I crawled as fast

as I could and dove after it just as it was about to rattle over the side. I missed. The gun went over, and I wanted to go over with it.

But I didn't give up. I grabbed the hose as it was streaming over the side after the gun and held on tight. The gun made it about half way down before it came to an abrupt stop in mid-flight. It then swung into the side of the ship with a bang that was so loud that, even with all the combined noise of the needle guns, and even through the hearing protection, everyone on the forecastle could hear it. It continued to rattle and bounce against the side as I reeled it back up as quickly as I could. All the goggled-covered eyes were on me. Petty Officer Grady shook his head in disgust.

With both hands fast around the needle gun, I finally got to work removing non-skid from the deck. The powerful vibrations of the gun easily removed the material, exposing the ship's bare metal surface. As I worked, I noticed the vibrations moving through my body. I had to hold my jaw tightly shut to prevent my teeth from rattling together.

Soon, though, I began to take comfort in the vibrations. It was as if I were receiving a body massage. Blood pulsed through my body and my nerve endings tingled. Together, the needle gun and I vibrated our way through our task, as if we had become one with each other. I imagined that my body, vibrating in unison with the gun, possessed its power. With one finger, or toe, or elbow, I could remove paint, rust, or non-skid from anything. I could place the palm of my vibrating hand on the deck, and when I removed it, all that would be left would be a shiny metal handprint.

Because the nature of the task forced me to spend most of my time on my hands and knees, my wrists became sore and my knees turned raw. While the gun easily removed the non-skid from the metal, the circumference of all the needles together was only about one inch and I soon realized that it was going to take quite a bit of effort to remove all the non-skid from the area that Petty Officer Grady had paced off for me. Once that realization dawned upon me, I began to lose my momentum. The novelty of the task wore off and the monotony of it set in. Just as strongly as the surge of extra energy and excitement for the task had rushed in, it receded. Everything – the flight over, the blanket party, Petty Officer Stricter, the Underwear Model, and especially, the lack of food – caught up to me all at once. I was exhausted.

As noon approached, the sun strengthened and burned off the lingering clouds, turning the air into a thick, hot blanket of humidity. I became soaked with sweat. The needle gun became slippery and hard to hold. My hands cramped, my head ached, and my mouth was completely dry. I started to grow dizzy and my eyes began to blur. And when, through the haze, I saw Petty Officer Stricter climbing down a ladder to the forecastle, I fainted.

I had never fainted before, so I was not prepared for the warning signs or how suddenly it all could happen. What was strange was that I could see myself fainting. I could see the gun slip from my hands and begin, once again, its crazy, jumping bean

dance. I could see the deck rushing up to meet my face as I slumped over. Thankfully, I felt no pain. Someone rolled me over and, just before I completely blacked out, I could see Petty Officer Stricter standing over me screaming.

I read somewhere that some people fantasize about killing themselves. Death arouses them. They lie in bed and plot their own demise in their mind the way others lie in bed and fantasize about sex. But I had never wanted to die. I had always had a fear of the unknown in life, so I had never been particularly fond of thinking about death, the biggest unknown of them all. But, at the moment of my revival, the instant after the cold salt water hit my face and I realized that, once again, I was the star of an embarrassing and unfortunate situation, I thought that I would rather die than have to wake up and face Petty Officer Stricter.

Even after I regained consciousness, he was still standing over me and screaming. The goggled-covered eyes had left their work area and now hovered over me. Needle guns vibrated restlessly in their hands. Petty Officer Stricter was not screaming for the goggled-covered eyes to stand back so that I could get some air, nor was he screaming for someone to call the corpsman. He was screaming that the call for chow was still five minutes away and that all the goggled-covered eyes had better get their asses back to work because a lot could be accomplished in those five minutes and that this piece of shit, meaning me, lying at his feet was not worth wasting five minutes of work over. I had to agree with him. I felt like shit and I certainly didn't feel as valuable as five minutes's worth of work.

The word that lunch was now being served on the mess deck was passed over the 1MC, the ship's public-address system. Petty Officer Stricter walked directly to the petty officer in charge and barked out some orders. The petty officer in charge stood up and made a slicing motion with his hand across his neck. The monstrous hum of the needle guns slowly died down until the only sound I heard was the ringing in my ears. We were told to return all our gear and then secure for chow.

At the thought of food, my stomach tightened and rumbled and reminded me that I had not eaten since I had the complementary stale donuts at the airport USO almost twenty-four hours ago. I shuffled around, still feeling a little woozy, trying to look as if I knew what I was doing, until Petty Officer Grady came over and slowly explained the proper way to break down the needle gun and secure it. While I was stowing the hose and Petty Officer Grady was explaining how his technique for skinning coon was similar to removing non-skid from the deck, Petty Officer Stricter walked up to us.

"Grady, here's what you're gonna do," he explained as he began writing notes in his clipboard. "You're gonna take Miss Faint-of-Heart here to a romantic meal and fill his belly with some of our fine navy cuisine, and then, after chow, you're gonna start checking him in."

He handed Petty Officer Grady a check-in sheet. Petty Officer Grady glanced at it then handed it to me.

Petty Officer Stricter continued, "At 1600, I want you to bring him to the office. We need to meet with the chief to explain to him about last night's blanket party."

He started to walk away but stopped and said, "One more thing. And make sure you get our little precious here a set of curtains for his rack, so he can have some privacy tonight."

THE MESS DECK

I FOLLOWED PETTY Officer Grady back inside the skin of the ship. Once inside, he never seemed to stop talking, although I wasn't really sure if he was actually talking to me or just talking out of habit to no one in particular. In addition to "boot camp," he called me other names that I appreciated even less. Names such as "fruitcake" and "sweetheart," or "queer bait" and "limp wrist." I should have told him that I didn't appreciate it, but I was too tired and hungry, and a little too scared, to do so. He said that everyone called him Dirty Grady. By the looks of his wrinkled and stained dungarees, I could tell why.

As we walked, he compared the maze of passageways to the hidden trails in the woods he used to hunt back home and concluded that a wussy like me would never be able to make it in the deep south without getting himself lost or killed. I silently agreed but felt no urge to try to make conversation. I was famished and exhausted. All I wanted to do was to eat, sleep, and try to forget how much of a fool I had made of myself this morning.

We queued up in the back of a long line. I was hungry like I have never been hungry before and I became impatient with the slow advance toward food. I asked Dirty Grady why the line moved so slowly.

"First Classes," was all he said.

I didn't understand what he meant until we turned the corner and, up where the food was being served, I could see there was a separate, shorter line of petty officer first classes. Dirty Grady explained that first classes had head-of-the-line privileges that allowed them to cut in front of lower ranking sailors. As I watched, I saw that most of the first classes made their way into the line, if not politely, at least with a nod that recognized that the person they cut in front of deferred to their rank.

Then came Petty Officer Stricter. Not only did he follow directly behind the first class in front of him instead of letting a junior sailor alternate through as the other first classes did, he made his cut without any acknowledgement to the junior sailor who just had to forfeit his spot to two people. After the first classes had all exercised their head-

of-the-line privileges, the line began to move fast enough for the feet to maintain a constant shuffle forward.

Hard, compartmentalized plastic trays. Large, stainless steel utensils. Spotted glasses. Grilled burgers. Fried Chicken. Rice. Mashed potatoes. Succotash. Ladles of gravy. Cookies. Cake. Milk. Chocolate milk. Bug juice. Overly carbonated sodas. Coffee. The food and drinks were plentiful, filling, and free. Dirty Grady got fried chicken and rice with bug juice. I got a cheeseburger with the works, and whatever else the mess cranks would give me. I was not normally a heavy eater, but right then I was hungry enough to eat my boondockers.

Every ship is its own, isolated community. And, just as with any community, every ship has its own social stratum. There are the class distinctions between officer and enlisted; the intellectual distinctions between those with high-skilled jobs and those with low-skilled jobs; and, of course, there are the distinctions between race, ethnicity, and gender. All these distinctions were made evident by the segregation imposed – by self or by custom – in where everyone on the ship ate their meals.

Officers and chief petty officers did not eat with the crew. Officers dined in their comparatively lush wardroom and chief petty officers dined in their comfortable and exclusive mess. On the crew's mess deck, the petty officer first classes segregated themselves into their own, walled-off mess. The rest of us were left to segregate ourselves exactly how society had conditioned us to do so. Blacks segregated themselves into a location by the television. They decided what would be watched and how loudly it would be heard. The Filipinos segregated themselves into a location near the entrance to the mess deck. The Latinos segregated themselves near the exit. The Whites generally segregated themselves by skill set and sat everywhere else. The few Asians who were not Filipino tended to sit with the Whites. Females either clustered together or mixed in with the males of their own race.

Dirty Grady made his way toward his group. They sat at a table near the Latinos and when we arrived he said, without looking at me and loud enough for his group to hear, "Find someplace else to sit, queerbait. This here's a man's table."

I didn't mind. I didn't want to have to socialize with anyone anyway. I only wanted to eat. I figured I would feel more comfortable and less awkward sitting at a table where I had no association with anyone.

There was an empty seat with the Blacks, but they laughed and talked loudly, as if it were their goal to drown out the sound of the blaring television. There were several empty chairs with the Filipinos, but they spoke rapidly in an unfamiliar language that reminded me of a recording being played on the fast setting. There was an empty seat by a group of females, but they leaned into each other and spoke in intimate, exclusive tones. I settled on an empty seat at a table that had two Whites and an Asian, one of whom was a female, sitting at it. Their table was situated near a door that had a sign hanging on it that read:

First Class Mess

Knock

Uncover

Enter

Not sure whether I should sit down without an invite, I stood next to the table until I was noticed. No one said anything or offered me the empty chair, but the female did pull her tray closer to her. This indicated to me that she was at least resolved to the fact that I was about to sit next to her, which I did.

She and I both sat with our backs to the outside bulkhead of the First Class Mess. Through the bulkhead, I could hear indistinct conversation and the scraping of silverware against the plastic trays. A television was on and I could hear the voice of a newscaster, though I could not make out what it was that was being reported. I imagined Petty Officer Stricter sitting in there, resolutely stuffing down his second square meal of the day as he plotted out the afternoon's work schedule in his clipboard.

The food was delicious and I ate with the ravaging passion and resolve of a wild beast during a feeding frenzy. It was all over in a matter of minutes. When I finished, I looked up from my tray, feeling satisfied, sleepy, and content. Just then, one of Dirty Grady's friends walked up to my table and whispered into the ear of the sailor sitting across from me. They both looked at me and then over to Dirty Grady, who slowly nodded in affirmation.

The eyes of the sailor sitting across from me turned cold. His icy stare chilled me down to my stomach, turning its contents into something hard and uncomfortable. I knew that he was about to say something to me that I didn't want to hear. I quickly collected my utensils and other items, grabbed my tray, and looked around the room for the scullery. I was not quick enough. The sailor sitting across from me emptied the contents of his tray onto mine and told the other two sailors sitting at the table that I was the fag who cried to Stricter this morning about getting hazed. The news had the same, chilling effect on the other two sailors sitting at my table and they also emptied their trash and slop onto my tray.

The three stood up together and the sailor who had been sitting across from me said, "Learn the rules, pole smoker. Narks and fags sit over there." He pointed with his chin to a corner of the room where three sailors sat despondently together, away from everyone else. "And I don't care if you are the only person on the mess deck, that's where you sit from now on."

As the three were leaving, the sailor who sat next to me casually pushed my tray onto my lap. The entire room burst out in laughter. I had to hold onto the table as tight as I could. I had to hold tight and not let go because if I did, I knew I would break down and cry in front of everyone. I sat there and held on for life as the food soaked into my lap.

DECK DIVISION

SLEEP ON BOARD combatant ships for junior officers is more of a privilege than a right. Because of their low rank and status, junior officers tend to acquire those duties and responsibilities that the more senior officers benevolently leave available for them as leadership development opportunities. Junior officers, still new to the navy and still with fire in their bellies, volunteer for these extra duties in their effort to impress their seniors and without regard for long-term consequences. Eventually, when they reach the point where they have too many extra duties and not enough time in the day to complete them all, sleep is sacrificed. It's not long before they become haggard and aged and barely recognizable as they shuffle around like walking dead from task to task, usually with thick binders filled with some form of work yet to be accomplished under each arm.

The constant rattle of an army of needle guns may irritate and distract most people, but to an overworked junior officer the sound serves as an enticing lullaby. Ensign Youngblood snored softly as his head rested peacefully on top of a stack of professional manuals. He slept deeply, albeit unwillingly, for it was his intention, not to rest, but to complete the ever-enlarging backlog of paperwork that he never could find time to complete. To ensure minimal interruptions, he forfeited his cramped desk in the Deck Division office, where there always seemed to be one distraction or another, and escaped to the relative quiet and solitude of the junior officer bunkroom, which was known by all as the J.O. Jungle.

The most pressing task that the ensign had to complete, and he had until the end of the work day to complete it, was to read three different reports that discussed various new underway replenishment technologies and techniques. He had to make a recommendation to the operations officer, based upon his assessment of the reports, which new techniques and technologies, if any, his ship should adopt. If his recommendation proved accurate, word might reach the commanding officer that he was the one who was responsible for it. However, if his recommendation was off, that word would definitely make it to the commanding officer.

But instead of analyzing the reports and writing up his recommendation, the young ensign, the ship's First Lieutenant, the officer responsible for managing the day-to-day operations of the Deck Division, soundly slept.

In addition to his primary duty as first lieutenant, which by itself included the responsibilities of managing the safe and proper use of all the ship's equipment and supplies associated with deck seamanship and managing and safeguarding the welfare of nearly fifty, mostly young, unpredictable sailors, the sleeping ensign also was the wardroom treasurer, the legal officer, and the alternate small arms custodian. On the side, he was studying for his surface warfare officer qualifications, a prerequisite in order to complete his qualifications as an underway Officer of the Deck. And ultimately, all these – the work, the extra duties, the sacrifice of sleep – were a prerequisite for promotion. Yet still, he slept.

Chiefs and officers, in an effort to help sort out the priorities and deadlines for all the ship's various duties and activities, are issued electronic organizers. These hand-held devices are often heard beeping in the shirt pockets of the chiefs and officers in an attempt to remind them of their next appointment, meeting, assignment, or watch. The ensign's organizer, setting on the desk next to the stack of manuals, not very far from his resting head, beeped desperately in its attempt to be heard over the buzz of the needle guns so it could remind the overworked ensign that he had ten minutes until he had to report to his next assignment.



As the ensign slept in the solitude of the bunkroom, his chief, working alone in the Deck Division office, sighed heavily in an attempt to motivate himself to begin working on the stack of blue folders that were piled high on his desk. Inside the folders were performance evaluations for each petty officer third class assigned to his division.

This was the third time the folders had crossed his desk. The first time they had crossed his desk was when they were submitted to him as an initial draft by his leading petty officer. The chief marked the evaluations up with his desired changes and then kicked them back to the LPO for re-write. After making the corrections, the LPO sent them back across the chief's desk for the second time. After another review to ensure all his changes were made, the chief then forwarded the evaluations on up to his division officer.

The evaluations were now back on his desk for a third time after his division officer, Ensign Youngblood, reviewed them, made his markups and returned them to the chief to correct. The chief knew that this back and forth would continue from him to his division officer, from his division officer to his department head, from the department head to the command master chief, from the command master chief to the executive

officer, and from the executive officer to his administrative staff for final copy. All the while, the folders would go up and down the chain of command, being marked up and then corrected, marked up and then corrected. The more the chief dwelt on the inefficiency of the insane process, the sullen he became.

He sighed again, pushed the folders to the farthest corner of his cluttered desk, leaned back in his chair and listened to the drone of the needle guns chewing away at their task. He thought about the sailors working the guns outside in the fresh sea air and he remembered the days when he, too, used to perform real work, when he, too, used to sweat and work his ass off. And at the end of the day, he could walk around his ship and see exactly what he had accomplished. Now all he saw was a constant stream of blue folders flowing across his desk.

The chief pulled the stack of folders back in front of him, sighed again, and then reached for his coffee mug. It was empty. He checked the time and supposed that the ensign would be standing his watch by now. He pulled a thermos bottle out from the bottom drawer of his desk, unscrewed its top off, and poured a careful amount of its contents into the mug. He leaned his head back and drained it in one quick pull. The liquid rushed down his throat and warmed his belly. He screwed the top back onto the thermos, returned the thermos back to the drawer, and then waited for the warmth from his belly to diffuse and reach his brain before opening the top folder off the stack.

Within the folder, he found the performance evaluation for Boatswains Mate Third Class (Surface Warrior) Eugene T. Grady. He pulled the evaluation out of the folder's pocket and assessed the damage caused by the young ensign's overzealous red pen. Like a dog pissing on trees in a park, the young officer had to make his presence known.

The hatch to the office opened and the division's leading petty officer entered the space. The petty officer quickly looked over his clipboard and then offered his greetings to the chief. The chief noticed that the petty officer was not carrying any blue folders with him and, for that, he was grateful.

"How's it going, Stricter? Is everyone turning to?"

Petty Officer Stricter was about to tell the chief about the new guy when someone knocked on the hatch. The petty officer checked his clipboard again, looked at his watch, and said to the chief, "That must be Grady with our new guy. I told them to come by so we could discuss the events from last night with you." He turned toward the hatch and commanded, "Enter!"

As the hatch opened and Petty Officer Grady entered the space, an announcement was passed over the 1MC. "Ensign Youngblood—quarterdeck."

The chief looked at his watch, sighed, and said, "Shit."

Petty Officer Stricter said, "Guess our young ensign is late again."

"Yeah."

"Asshole's never gonna learn," Petty Officer Stricter muttered as he wrote in his clipboard.

“Grady.”

“Chief?”

“Go to the quarterdeck and tell whoever it is that Ensign Youngblood is supposed to relieve that he’ll be there in ten minutes. Tell him that he’s doing something for the Ops Boss, or some shit like that.”

“Okay Chief.”

The chief waited until Petty Officer Grady left before he let out another sigh and said, “God damn it Strict, how many times have I told you not to disrespect your chain of command like that, especially in front of junior personnel?”

Petty Officer Stricter flipped through the pages of his clipboard. “You gonna call around to find our delinquent little junior officer or shall I.”

“I think I know where he is,” the chief said as he picked up the phone and began dialing. “He told me that he was going to the jungle to work on that recommendation he’s been blowing off for the past two weeks.”

“Damn Chief, if he’d just do his work down here in the office like he’s supposed to, we’d be able to keep an eye on him. Besides, I don’t know why anyone would even want to try to do any work in that pigsty. You’d think it’d be against the law to stuff four, immature junior officers into a sardine can of a bunkroom like that.”

The chief spoke in a low voice into the phone and quickly hung up. “He’s on his way.”

Petty Officer Stricter found the page he was looking for in his clipboard and said, “Chief, about that new boot we got in last night.”

“Yeah, I remember you saying one was coming.”

“Well, this one came, all right.”

The chief took a pull on the empty mug and instinctively reached for the bottom drawer. He pulled his hand away before opening it and said, “What the hell’s wrong with this one?”

Petty Officer Stricter sat his square body down in the counseling chair next to the chief’s desk. His eyes appeared to brighten as he explained the details of the past night. When he finished describing the scenes on the forecastle and the mess deck he said, “Well Chief, what do you think of our new sailor?”

The chief sighed and sunk deeper into his chair. So, this one got hazed during the night and fainted on the forecastle during the day. Big fucking deal. The last new guy got caught masturbating in his bunk. The one before him failed to mention a small detail during his recruitment process about a felony conviction. God damn it. Why does it seem that all the idiots end up in Deck Division? The chief knew he was no genius, but he also knew that he knew his ship better than anyone else on board did. He could handle the helm in the roughest of seas and the most congested of waterways. He’d forgotten more knots than most sailors ever learned. No, he was no genius, but damn it, he was no piece of shit, either.

“Strict, how can I know what to think? The poor kid just got here yesterday and, after hearing what you just said about him, I’m pretty sure everyone, including you, has already labeled him as a fuck up. Do we know who gave him the blanket party?”

“Not yet. He said he didn’t see anyone because of the blanket over his head. Of course, no one from berthing is talking.”

The chief sat up in his chair. “Do we have to worry about someone from the division kicking his ass for talking to you about the blanket party?”

“Depends on who did it, I guess. Could be.”

“Damn. Maybe we shouldn’t try too hard to find out who hazed him. Save the kid from getting another ass whipping. What do you think?”

“I don’t know, Chief. It’s your call I guess, but from what I did find out from the guys in his berthing, the boot got hazed pretty good: shaft grease up the ass and the whole nine yards. And he looked pretty banged up too.”

“I bet he did.”

“Yeah, but if that mother fucker was a real sailor he would have jumped out of his rack and smashed their skulls in with the first hard object he could find.”

“Give me a break, Strict. Just what the hell is a real sailor these days anyway? Am I a real sailor, doing nothing but jockeying around blue fucking folders all goddamned day?”

Petty Officer Stricter considered his chief’s rhetorical question for longer than a subordinate should have. “I don’t know, Chief—but that gay son of a bitch ain’t one, that’s for sure.”

“Don’t start with that shit again, Strict. You better than anyone knows that we can’t go around calling sailors names like that anymore.”

“Yeah, right chief. You don’t need to remind me about that little smartass fucker Hastey and all the bullshit sensitivity training I had to sit through because of him. But can you blame me for getting pissed off when the fucking navy keeps opening the door wider and wider so that any fruitcake freak like Hastey can come right in?”

“Here we go.”

“Damn right, here we go. Shit Chief, what is going on with our navy when I get busted for kicking a little ass to try to toughen up our sailors up a bit and a guy like Hastey can prance around the ship like a little dancing queen and nobody thinks anything’s wrong with that? We’re in the fucking military for Christ’s sake.”

“Face it Strict, you tried your damndest to get Hastey booted out, but he beat you at your own game.”

“That little fucker didn’t beat me at anything. I just got no goddamn support from the chain of command, that’s all.”

“Oh, c’mon Strict. The chain’s not gonna support you when you’re wrong and you know that. Hastey knew the UCMJ and the Don’t Ask Don’t Tell policy inside and out. He

was able to make a better case than you, that's all. Just think, in a couple of weeks Hasteley will be getting out of the navy and you won't have to worry about him again."

"Yeah, he finally goes but we get another one right behind him."

"Strict you just need to relax a bit and give the new guy a chance."

"Well, as far as I'm concerned he deserved the hazing he got. I bet it will do him some good."

"You know Strict, on second thought, go ahead and try to find out who gave him that hazing so me and you can kick their asses to let them know this kind of shit won't be tolerated anymore. How am I supposed to get a ship ready for war when all we do is feed on our young?"

"You got it Chief. I told Grady to bring the new guy with him, but I didn't see him. He better have his ass with him when he returns. We both can push the boot camp to see if he's holding back on anything. And if we don't find anything more out from him, I guarantee Grady can tell us who did it."

"No, leave the new guy alone. Let's give him a chance to get settled in. Lean on Grady and the rest of the division for information. But take it easy. I don't feel like getting my ass burned over another one of your witch hunts."

"Come on Chief, this is Strict you're talking to. I'm not gonna do anything that will put your retirement at risk. What I *am* gonna do is find out exactly what you want me to: who hazed the new guy and how can we prevent this from happening again."

The chief made a noise that almost sounded like a laugh, "You know Strict, the Navy has changed so much since I joined I wonder just how much more change I can take before I go completely crazy. What we now call a hazing we used to call an initiation, a rite of passage. Hell, sailors used to be proud to get the shit kicked out of them by their shipmates. It meant they were accepted."

There was a knock on the hatch. Petty Officer Stricter rose to answer it. Before undogging the hatch, he turned to the chief and said, "Look, the rules and the people may have changed, Chief, but the mission hasn't." He opened the hatch and Petty Officer Grady entered the space.

Petty Officer Stricter directed Petty Officer Grady to sit in the counseling chair next to the chief and said, "Grady, before you tell us what you know about what happened last night, tell me why you didn't bring the new guy here like I told you to."

Petty Officer Grady shifted in his chair. He looked at the chief, but the chief was staring at the stack of blue folders piled before him. "Well, as you know, the fruitcake has had quite an incredible twenty-four hours, and after we got done running around the ship checking him in, he was about ready to pass out again from exhaustion. So, I told him to go ahead and hit his rack." He looked nervously up at Petty Officer Stricter. "I'm sorry Strict if I done something what I shouldn't of done. I can run down and fetch him right now if you want."

Petty Officer Stricter had a talent for going from complete calm to utter fury without warning. The explosion took both Petty Officer Grady and the chief by surprise.

Listen Grady, you fucking redneck!" the petty officer roared, "I don't care how sensitive you are to your little sweetheart's condition. If I tell you I want him here at 1600, that means I want him here directly at 1600. I don't care how tired he is or how much he misses his mama even. If I say I want him here at 1600, then I want him right, the fuck, here, present and accounted for at 1600! You got that?"

Petty Officer Grady was unable to respond. His wad of tobacco was lodged in the back of his throat.

Petty Officer Stricter walked behind the scared sailor, leaned on the back of his chair, and said, "Okay, since our little boot camp isn't here to speak for himself, I guess you'll have to do for now." Like a chameleon, he transformed from the maniacal threat that he was a moment ago to a calm and caring manager. "Now, since the boot has had, to use your words, quite an incredible twenty-four hours, how about you explain to me and the chief just what the hell happened last night?"

After Petty Officer Grady left, Petty Officer Stricter asked, "What do you think, Chief?"

The chief sighed and said, "I want to talk to each of the sailors that Grady identified and, if they confess, then I'm gonna recommend to the chain that we won't write them up. Maybe just a week of restriction to the ship and extra duty."

"There's no doubt in my military mind that we can get them to confess. I'll go round them up and have them here for you in fifteen minutes."

"Sounds good. I guess I better walk up to the quarter deck and let the first lieutenant know what's going on."

Petty Officer Stricter walked over to the chief's desk and pulled open the bottom drawer. "Just think Chief, in six months you'll be able to put your retirement papers in." He brought out the thermos and carefully unscrewed the lid off. "In six months you'll never have to look at another blue folder again or have to deal with anymore Gradys or Boot Camps or sensitivity training." He opened the spout and poured the liquid into the chief's mug. "In six months you'll never have to put up with this kind of bullshit again."

The chief sighed, gave his head a slow nod, then picked up the mug and drained it.

FLAVOR, ARRIVING

WHEN DIRTY GRADY came back to the berthing compartment yesterday and told me that the chief didn't want to see me and that I could take the rest of the day off to recover, I went directly to my rack and fell asleep right away. I slept undisturbed and soundly for fifteen straight hours. The rest was exactly what I needed. When I woke up it was well before reveille and the compartment was quiet and dark. My internal clock was still stuck on boot camp time back on the east coast. Not knowing what to do, I pulled out my *Bluejackets' Manual* and began reading up on the job descriptions of the different career choices the navy had to offer.

I was reading about the proper care of brushes and rollers when the thought occurred to me: my company commanders were wrong. While they were passing the manuals out to each recruit in my company, they explained to us that the book we were receiving was to be considered as our navy bible. They said that if we studied it regularly and applied its lessons when we were out in the fleet that it, our bible, the navy's Holy Scripture passed down from King Neptune to Davy Jones to my company commanders to me, would prepare us for whatever challenges the fleet had to offer. Well, it was not true. I have never found anything in it to prepare me for how I was being treated. Even though I studied the manual religiously, it seemed that I was the least blessed.

I was deep in thought about how badly things were going for me when my curtains were thrown wide open and my guardian angel, the sailor who woke me yesterday morning and who was so concerned about me, appeared before my eyes. His face seemed to glow with energy as he leaned into my rack and said in a loud whisper, "What the crap? Are you actually reading that book?" He didn't wait for me to respond. "So, how are you doing? Are you healing up okay? I swear to God I thought you were close to death when I saw you yesterday."

My angel had returned and he remembered me. He was speaking to me, not as a screw up, but as if I were a regular person. He really did seem to care about me. I stared up at him, not knowing what to say.

“Are you just going to lie there reading that ridiculous propaganda or are you going to roll out of that rack and let me have a good look at you?”

I quickly closed the manual and tossed it aside. “No. Of course... hold on... I... just a minute.” It took some effort for me to unfold my large frame out onto the deck. I rolled out as if I were a twisted pretzel and struggled to find my footing.

My angel walked slowly around me, looking me up and down. “Well,” he said after finishing his inspection, “you don’t look as bad as you did yesterday anyway.”

I looked down at the deep purple and blue bruises on my legs and wished that I had on a pair of pajama bottoms. “Thank you,” I said. “I guess the corpsman did a pretty good job fixing me up.”

“So, my name is Johnny, Johnny Hastey, but my friends call me Johnny Flavor. Or just Flavor, if you want.”

I shook his outstretched hand and asked, “Why Flavor?”

He gave me a sly smile and said, “Because Hastey rhymes with tasty and I am one delicious sailor.” He grabbed both of my arms and squeezed. “I’m full of flavor... get it?”

Not really, but I shook my head as if I did.

“So, Boot Camp, I guess you didn’t expect your first day out in the fleet to turn out the way it did, did ya?”

“That’s for sure.”

“I hear that Stricter is making a big fuss about your hazing.”

“What do you mean?”

“That big old fart is always trying to make a fuss about something. I guess he thinks that if he can impress the chain of command enough that someday he’ll finally get promoted to chief.”

“I... I’m still not following you. What does his promotion have to do with me?” I asked.

“Boot, you got a lot to learn.” He laughed, smacked me on the shoulder, and said, “I guess that’s why you’re a goddamn boot. Don’t worry though. I’ll take care of you.”

Flavor was non-stop motion and energy. He paced up and down the aisle, as if he couldn’t decide where it was he should be. He leaned into me when speaking, as if he had to get as close to my ears as possible so I didn’t miss a word he said. He used his hands to help describe what he was saying, as if they were paintbrushes and he was painting a picture of each of his sentences. He opened his eyes wide when emphasizing important points, as if they were spotlights shining beams of light across a darkened sky.

“Hey, what duty section are you assigned to anyway?” he asked.

“Section four. At least that’s what Dirty Grady told me.”

“What the crap! We’re in the same duty section!” He started dancing around me excitedly.

Someone from one of the top racks told us to shut up so he could sleep. Flavor looked up at the rack and gave it a dirty look.

“We are?” I whispered.

“Heck yeah we are!” Flavor answered, even louder than before. He danced around behind me, grabbed my shoulders and started pulling himself up and down like a gymnast.

I began to feel a little nervous. I didn’t want to make a scene in the berthing compartment two nights in a row. I pulled myself away from him.

He stopped bouncing, danced back around to the front of me, and said, “That means that we both have the weekend off. And since we both have the weekend off, that means you’re going out with me and my friends on Friday.”

“I... I don’t know.” I was beginning to wonder if making friends with Flavor was such a good idea after all. He had so much energy and asked so many questions. I felt exhausted just from the short time we had been together.

“What do you mean you don’t know?” Flavor asked. “If we are going to be friends then you have no choice but to go out with me so we can get to know each other better. You don’t already have plans, do you?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Of course you don’t,” he teased. “Look, we still got a couple of hours or so before reveille and, since I’m just now wandering in, I need to grab a nap before we start turning to.” He stripped down to his skivvies as he talked and then rolled effortlessly into the bottom rack across from mine. When he was lying down, he looked up at me and said, “We can talk more about this weekend over chow, okay?”

“Yes. Okay.”

Flavor pulled his curtains closed and I folded myself back into my rack. My head was spinning from what had just happened to me. My head was spinning and my heart was pounding. I had finally made a friend! I had to admit, he was a very energetic and somewhat wild friend who made me a bit nervous, but still he was a friend. He said so himself. I wondered why he liked me when so many others treated me so badly. Maybe something was wrong with him. Questions about Flavor, who he was, where he was from, and many others, flooded into my mind. There was no way I was going to be able to get back to sleep before chow.

MORNING MUSTER

I QUICKLY LEARNED that, with Flavor, everything happens fast. He sprang out of his rack as reveille was still being called and was cleaned, dressed, and ready for chow before I had even finished brushing my teeth. Still buttoning up my shirt, I followed him out of the berthing compartment and up to the mess deck.

For a little guy he sure could walk fast. And he talked the whole way, often looking back at me over his shoulder. I thought for sure he would trip over something or walk into someone who was heading the other way, but he didn't. He maneuvered through the narrow passageways and up the ladders gracefully and without effort; he could open a hatch and walk through it in one fluid motion. It was as if I were walking with a figure skater or a ballroom dancer. And the best part was, that as quick and as restless as he was, he would stop and patiently wait for me as I lumbered through each hatch and secured it behind me.

As we waited for chow, Flavor went down the line of sailors and gave me the background on just about all of them. He told me who I could trust and who I couldn't, who might make a good friend and who wouldn't, and who were the lifers and who were the FTNers. I didn't know what a lifer or an FTNer was so Flavor explained them to me.

A lifer is someone who not only plans to make the navy a career, but he is someone who makes the navy his life. Like career sailors, lifers are also patriotic and like all the benefits the navy offers, such as the free medical and the guaranteed pension after twenty years of service, and all that. But, for lifers, it is more than duty and rewards. Lifers don't just like the navy way of life, they seem to need it. Their identity is their uniform. They need the structure of the navy routine, of being told when to wake up, when to go to work, when to take a break, when to eat, when to go on liberty, and when to go to bed. They love their three-square meals a day and schedule their daily routines around them. The easiest way to spot a lifer is by the way he talks. Lifers always speak in navy terms, even when it seems out of place to do so. To a lifer, everyone is a shipmate, and he usually means it in a good way.

An FTNer, on the other hand, is someone whose motto is “Fuck the Navy!” and who can’t wait to get out. FTNers typically are young sailors on their first enlistment who have a hard time conforming to the navy way of life and who either get out on their own at the end of their first enlistment or get kicked out before their first enlistment ends. If an FTNer calls you a shipmate, he usually doesn’t mean it as a compliment. Unfortunately, Flavor concluded, it seemed that the bulk of the FTNers worked in Deck Division.

We got our food and drinks and I followed Flavor onto the mess deck, wondering where we would sit. He led me to an open table for two in the middle of the compartment and sat down. I hesitated.

“Is there something wrong, Boot?”

“Well, yesterday, I was told that the only place I was allowed to sit was over there in the corner by the trashcan.”

In between chewing and swallowing his food, Flavor said, “Boot, you are going to have to learn very quickly that some of the idiots on this ship are going to push you as far as you let them. Now sit down and eat.”

I sat, ate, and listened while Flavor bounced and danced in his chair and told me all about our plans for Friday night.

After chow, we made our way to the forecandle for morning muster. When we stepped out onto the weather deck, we were met by a light breeze that still retained hints of a cooler, pre-dawn air. Instinctively, I took in a deep breath. The air felt good in my lungs, rejuvenating, but the sudden expansion of my chest stretched muscles and other things in my upper body that reminded me that I still had quite a bit of healing to do. I slowly let the air out and took in another breath. As the air filled my lungs this time, I noticed that it had a unique smell to it. I breathed the air out and then sniffed around a bit. Japan smelled something like... vegetables, onions maybe. Whatever it was, it wasn’t a bad smell I decided. It would just take some getting used to, like it does when first entering an unfamiliar home with its unfamiliar smells.

We walked over to the railing and stopped to take in the morning view before falling in for muster. The sun, shining silver through a hazy sky, had already cleared the small range of mountains that nestled the bay. The water on the bay was calm and lapped gently against the side of the ship. On its surface, small spatters of oil slicks sparkled and shimmered and glowed like rainbows.

Several other ships were tied up near ours and Flavor listed off their names for me. One was a Ticonderoga-class cruiser and the other two were Arleigh Burke-class destroyers. I asked where the aircraft carrier was tied up. He said that right now it was probably cutting squares somewhere off the coast of Korea, and that even if it were pier side, we wouldn’t be able to see it from our ship. Since it is the United States’s only forward deployed aircraft carrier and one of its primary means of projecting power overseas, and since the ship is the base’s biggest attraction for the Japanese whenever

the base is opened to the public, it gets the premier pier near the front of the base, right next to the admiral's flagship. Junior commanders like ours get parked way at the back of the base. But, he said, he was glad the aircraft carrier wasn't in port because that meant there would be 5,000 less sailors for us to compete with this weekend while out on the town.

We walked over to the other side of the forecastle where we had a better view of the base and the city beyond it. The area immediately around our pier looked industrial with its drab warehouses and power plants and large, towering cranes. Because we were too far away to walk to the main part of the base where all the civilized places were, Flavor said that I would have to get used to riding the base bus and pointed out to me where the bus stop was located.

In the distance was the city of *Yokosuka*. It pressed right up against the base, separated only by a long barrier fence with ominous-looking razor wire on top. Directly on the other side of the fence, all crammed and jumbled together, were the city's homes, shopping malls, schools, office towers, and other buildings of all shapes and sizes. According to Flavor, out within that uncoordinated, contiguous mass of concrete was where all the fun was. I stood there and tried to take it all in, but it was hard. It was hard to believe that I was now living in a foreign country. It was even harder to believe that, not only was I living in a foreign country, but I was living in a foreign country while stationed on an American naval base that was armed with a lethal armada of American warships. I tried to imagine what it would be like if Japan had won the war and had its military stationed all throughout America. It was hard. I couldn't imagine it.

I didn't know much about Japan, but I did know that there was a famous volcano located somewhere on the island. I asked Flavor about it. He said that *Fuji-san*, the legendary Mount Fuji, was about a three-hour drive away and that it was imperative that I visit it at least once during my tour. Better yet, he said, I should climb it if I have the chance.

Climb Mount Fuji? How was that even possible? I asked Flavor if he had ever climbed it. He said that he had always wanted to, but he never did. It was then that he told me the most unexpected and depressing news. He told me that he would soon be discharged from the navy. He said that his enlistment was up and that it was time for him to head back to the world. But I wasn't to worry, he told me in a manner much too lightly than the heavy news deserved, because there is a Japanese legend that says those who visit Japan and who do not climb Mount Fuji are destined to return. He'll be back some day he promised.

Petty Officer Stricter walked out onto the forecastle and called out for Deck Division to fall in for muster. As Flavor and I fell into ranks with the forty-seven other sailors from our division, the rest of the crew was also falling into ranks on weather decks all throughout the ship as other divisions of various sizes began holding their own morning musters. Petty Officer Stricter took muster, read the significant events to us from the

Plan of the Day, and then barked out work assignments for everyone. It was hard for me to concentrate. I couldn't stop thinking about what Flavor had just told me. I had just met him and soon he would be gone. Petty Officer Stricter called out my name and, once again, assigned me to the forecandle for more needle gun work. He ordered Flavor to the paint locker. Flavor whispered under his breath to me that if Stricter knew how much he actually loved to paint, he would never get assigned to paint duty.

Petty Officer Stricter put us at parade rest until the chief and the division officer made their way over from the department head's morning muster. When they arrived, he called us all to attention, saluted Ensign Youngblood, and announced that all Deck Division was present and accounted for. The ensign returned the salute and told us to stand at ease as he began passing on to us the pertinent information from the department head's report. It was the first time I had seen the ensign. I couldn't believe how young he looked, especially compared to the chief. The ensign couldn't have been much older than me and here he was standing up there as, not just my leader, but as the entire division's leader, even the chief's, looking and acting confident and relaxed in his sharp, khaki officer uniform. How could he do something like that without falling apart? Why couldn't I do something like that without falling apart?

The ensign read from his notes and told us that the upcoming engineering inspection is going to require an all hands effort to pass, so we should be thinking about how we could volunteer to help. The base was going to be opened up to the public for the Fourth of July ceremony. What that meant for those who were new was that Japanese civilians would be allowed on base to enjoy the festivities, so we all must look and act our best. He looked up from his notebook and reminded us that we were all ambassadors for our country and the navy no matter where we were or what we were doing. We should always look and act accordingly, not just on special occasions. He went back to his notes and said that since we are just about at the end of the E-4 evaluation cycle, now is the time to start preparing for the E-5 cycle.

He closed his notebook, began pacing back and forth in front of the ranks, then continued his brief by saying that he had something serious to discuss and that everyone should pay close attention. Two nights ago, he said, someone from our division was attacked. Apparently, the attackers thought they were just having fun and were following a harmless tradition. Regardless of tradition, he said, hazing, bullying, and intimidation, both physical and non-physical, are in stark contrast with the navy's core values and will not be tolerated. Those who performed the hazing have been caught and they have confessed. The chief and he recommended to the chain of command, and they agreed, that those responsible for the hazing would not be formally written up, but instead would be restricted to the ship for a week and would be assigned extra duties. However, if something like this ever happened again, we should expect to receive the most severe punishment that the chain had to offer.

After we were dismissed, Flavor said he would meet me later for chow and quickly headed off to his task. I looked around for Dirty Grady and it seemed that everyone was staring at me. The sailor who stood next to me in ranks walked by me and called me a pussy under his breath. By the looks of everyone else, it appeared that he spoke for them, too. Why did I ever admit to Petty Officer Stricter that I was hazed?

The petty officer in charge of the needle gun working party called his team together and gave us his instructions for the morning. Dirty Grady and I were ordered to bring the gear up to the forecastle. As Dirty Grady led the way to the hold where the gear was stored, I saw Flavor down on the pier. He happened to look up toward the forecastle and saw me. He did a little dance and gave me a big wave and a smile. As I waved back, I could not help but think that soon he would be down there waving, not to say hello, but to say goodbye forever.

SWEEPERS

SAILORS CLEAN. WE dust. We sweep. We strip. We buff. We shine. “Fuck the mission and clean the position,” and, “If you can catch it, you can clean it” are sayings my boot camp company commanders liked to scream out whenever they made us field day. If we ever made it to the fleet, they told us, we better be ready to field day our ships from top to bottom and fore to aft, at least three times a day, whether it needed it or not.

To help prepare us for our future ship-cleaning endeavors, our company commanders taught us much about the art of field daying. They taught us that bug juice, an overly sweetened fruity drink made from a powder and water mix, is powerful cleaning agent. It is especially useful in stripping the oxidation from brass fixtures. And they taught us that toothpaste is also another popular cleaner on board ships, used primarily to remove grit from tile grout. Through their screaming instructions and through their screaming insistence of repetition in the performance of what they were teaching us, by the time I graduated from boot camp, I was, indeed, a master in the art of field-daying.

However, when I got to my ship, I learned perhaps the most important lesson about field daying – that a ship full of sailors creates massive amounts of dust and lint and that this dust and lint bonds together to form giant, rolling dust balls, or *ghost turds* as they are respectfully called in the navy.

Ghost turds can be found anywhere on a ship – in any corner or around any hold, under any desk or on top of any shelf, behind any equipment rack or in front of any fixture – and no matter how often they are swept up, they mysteriously reappear soon afterwards. Vigilance must constantly be maintained against their unrelenting and deadly advance. For a ship to let its guard down for even one day could end in disaster. This disaster could be the result of a sustained psychological attack by the ghost turds: Their very presence makes a ship look ragtag and unprofessional. An unprofessional-looking ship, over time, can deplete a crew’s morale and degrade its ability to complete its mission. This disaster could also be the result of a sustained physical attack by the ghost turds: They know that greater power comes from greater numbers, so they are

always looking for ways to form into larger and larger turds. Once large enough, they become easily ignitable. And when these highly mobile, easily ignitable turds get near any equipment that creates static electricity, they become deadly time bombs set to erupt at the touch of the most innocent of sparks. Because of this never-ending battle between sailor and ghost turd, between good and evil, several times a day an order for the crew to commence sweepers can be heard over 1MCs on navy ships all over the world.

Sweepers man your brooms. Make a clean sweep down fore and aft. Sweep down all decks, ladders, and passageways. Deposit all trash and garbage in the receptacles provided for on the pier. Sweepers.

It was Friday afternoon and I was on my hands and knees sweeping up ghost turds from behind a ladder well. I had a foxtail in one hand and a dustpan in the other. As I swept, I was thinking, and worrying, about what it was going to be like to go out with Flavor and his friends later that evening when the sailor who was sweeping the passageway yelled out, "Attention on deck!"

The call for attention on deck is usually reserved for commanding officers and admirals. But in boot camp, to help prepare us for the fleet, we had to call it out whenever a company commander entered a space. The first recruit to see one of them walk into the space had to scream "Attention on deck!" loud enough so everyone could hear it. As soon as we heard it, we would have to drop whatever we were doing and pop tall, as rigid as "hard-ons." "Recruits, when you hear "attention on deck" called out," our company commanders instructed, "I don't care if you're in the middle of taking a shit, you better pop up just as fast, just as tall, and just as hard as my big johnny does during a Subic Bay liberty call." We were supposed to be proud when our company commanders identified us as "a true boner," a recruit who correctly stood at attention. If someone slouched or stood in a way the company commanders didn't like, he was called a limp dick until he was able to pop tall like a respectable hard on.

I had never seen my commanding officer before, except for the picture of him that was prominently displayed on the quarterdeck's Leadership Board, a board that had pictures of all the ship's senior officers. The commanding officer's picture was at the top of the board and was the biggest of them all. In fact, I had only ever seen one real commanding officer, and that was during the pass and review at my boot camp graduation ceremony. But when I heard "attention on deck" called out, my body responded automatically, and I popped tall. In doing so, I smacked the top of my head into the back of the ladder well. The ladder well gonged loudly, causing my commanding officer to break his aloof stride and take notice of me.

To be noticed was the last thing I wanted, especially by my commanding officer. I was partially hidden in the shadows behind the ladder so, to see me, he had to walk

around to the back. He found me busy trying to stand at attention, which was not easy to do since the back of the ladder well angled into where I was trying to stand.

"Well, you must be new on board sailor because you certainly don't look familiar," said my commanding officer.

I couldn't remember whether we were allowed to speak while standing at attention, so I chose to keep my mouth tightly shut while trying to find some way to get my body to a full, upright position without noticeably moving. Bent over, as if in a lopsided Japanese bow, I could only stare at his shoes, which was fine with me because enlisted sailors were not supposed to make eye contact with an officer while standing at attention. To be honest, I wasn't sure if I was authorized to stare at his shoes either.

"Jesus sailor, stand at ease and step out from there," the commanding officer ordered. I tried to but, because I was so tense and nervous, I was unable to reconfigure myself so that I could. All I was able to do was to shake from the fear of having such a high-ranking officer speak to me. As I shook, my head vibrated rhythmically against the back of the ladder. Fortunately, from the vibration, I began to slowly slide up its smooth, aluminum back until I was finally able to stand up straight.

"Holy smokes, sailor," he said after a slow whistle, "you're as tall as I am." Since it was not in my nature to feel tall, it still felt as if my mother, who is more than a foot shorter than me, towered over me. My commanding officer seemed like a giant.

I was certain that I was authorized to speak while standing at ease around officers, but I was not certain that I would be able to say anything intelligible, so I continued with my silence, while trying not to shake. He didn't seem to notice my near convulsions or mind my silence. He talked for the both of us.

"You know, son, when I entered the Naval Academy I was only five-ten, but by the time I graduated four years later I was as tall as I am now. But, as I'm sure you know, or at least you'll find out if you don't, that being tall is both a blessing and a curse. The little guys envy you and always look to find your weakness and ways to knock you down." He looked at the seaman who called attention on deck, and who happened to be very short. "Don't you short guys always look for ways to bring us big men down to your size?"

The seaman, not trying very hard to show his respect, answered blankly, "Yes, sir."

"See," he said, "what did I tell you?" He stood shoulder to shoulder to me, officially sizing me up. "Another curse about being tall is that you have to be especially careful on ships. For crying out loud, I swear that on my first ship I hit my forehead so many times it calloused over. But I got used to it. It's now rare that I catch one." He stepped back from me and said, "Step out of there and let's get a look at you. I can't tell which one of us is taller from where you're standing."

I stepped out from behind the ladder.

"There now aren't you a big fella? I'd say it's too close to call. You might have me by a nudge." He saw my face. "What happened to you, son?" I tried to say that I fell, but

before any words could shake out of my mouth the officer said, "Those little guys ganging up on you at the pub, are they? You got to watch out for them rascals." He smacked me on the shoulder and walked off.

Before climbing up the ladder, he stopped and said to me, "Look, us big men got to watch out for each other." Next, he turned the other sailor and said, "As for you, keep up the good work. Our inspection cycle is coming up and, like you, I have no intention of failing it for a second time." He winked and began his ascent. When he was halfway up the ladder he called out, "Carry on!"

I returned to chasing down ghost turds and my silent reflection. I had heard about an upcoming inspection, but I didn't really understand what it was all about. How do you go about inspecting a ship? What exactly would be inspected? Ensign Youngblood mentioned that we should volunteer to help prepare for it, but I had no idea what to volunteer for.

In boot camp, it seemed everything we did had to be inspected. Quarters, by their bounce, measured the tautness of our sheets; rulers measured the height of the folds of our shirts, pants, towels, socks, and underwear; targets measured the accuracy of our pistol shots; clocks measured the time it took to eat. In boot camp, we were inspected on how we marched, on how we dressed, on how we spoke, on just about everything we did. We were inspected so often in boot camp that eventually it all became routine and lost its significance.

But now that I was out in the fleet, the thought of a real inspection, an inspection that meant more than just more pushups if it was failed, would soon be taking place. The more I thought about it the harder I cleaned. Our ship was going to be inspected, for what I was not sure, but I was sure that I was going to do all I could to help it succeed.

And what did it mean, the commanding officer stopping to talk to me? He looked just like a commanding officer should look: tall, handsome, strong, confident; yet he spoke to me as a... well... as if we were, not exactly equals, but at least as if we were on the same team. A team of Big Men.

As I finished chasing down the last of the ghost turds, the sailor who called attention on deck walked up to me pushing a broom with a big pile of dust and trash in front of it.

"You're the nark who got half of our division busted, aren't ya?" he asked.

I was on my hands and knees. I looked up. He towered over me. Actually, only six guys got in trouble, but I really wasn't in a position to argue. He gave the pile of dust and trash a hard push, spreading it all over the area I had just swept.

"Well listen up, you tall freak," he continued. "The next time you decide to suck the commanding officer off in front of me, I'm gonna throw your faggot ass over the side." He gave me a knee to the chest and I fell back hard into the bulkhead.

"Who's the big man now?" he said as he walked away, leaving me to finish cleaning up the mess.

END OF SAMPLE

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