

2016

Fiction Writing Portfolio

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

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Permission

“BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. –Click– .” The routine exchange with her alarm clock started her day. It said three words, and she gave her response. Jeanine never considered herself a morning person, but not once did she fall victim to the snooze button, there was always too much to do. She got up, made her bed, showered, folded her clothes and walked downstairs not ten minutes later. It wasn’t a routine to her, it was a drill.

The sun was still rising as she went about making breakfast. Four eggs, four strips of bacon, two slices of bread, enough to feed one and a half adults. She set the table for two, served the meals and waited. It wasn’t unusual for it to take him this long to come downstairs, but each time it frustrated her. Finally, with a sigh she walked back upstairs to knock on his door.

“Zach. Breakfast. Come on, you need to eat.” She was used to having to pressure him to eat more, he was so skinny it worried her more than she liked to admit. “You need to get up, Zach.” She reached for the door handle, but the door opened on its own.

“I’m up, mom.” Came Zach’s voice as the door opened. He was already dressed to her surprise. “Sorry, I was just getting ready.” Despite only being seventeen, he already looked so much like his father, though he had Jeanine’s nose and eyes at least. She wasn’t sure which she feared more, how much of his father he had in him, or how much of her.

“It’s getting cold, come on.” She encouraged, pleasantly surprised by his unusual readiness. They walked downstairs together and sat down to eat. He picked at his

food more than usual, causing Jeanine began to wonder what was up. Finally, with his food only halfway finished he spoke up.

"Mom I uhh." He paused. "I need you to sign something for me." He said passing forward a piece of paper. Jeanine didn't generally approve of the sort of field trips the school tried to send her son on, and she usually refused to sign them, but she read them nonetheless. Upon seeing the title on the form however, she froze.

SECTION VIII – PARENTAL/GUARDIAN CONSENT FOR ENLISTMENT

She sat, stunned. She knew exactly what it was and yet she couldn't –or rather, wouldn't process what it meant. Several painful seconds passed before Zach tried to explain "I really want to b--"

"-Zach no! It's too dangerous, you wouldn't last two *days* in the Army." She interrupted.

"Dad did. You did. I thought you'd--"

"-Yes, so I'd know! They'd eat you alive, Zach. They'd break you. Is that what you want?"

"I want to be stronger. I want to make a difference." Zach pleaded.

"Your father wanted to make a difference too, and it got him killed." Jeanine stated coldly. She immediately regretted it. Zach put his fork down and walked back upstairs, the paper abandoned on the table. Jeanine made no move to stop him. How could he want to throw himself into that? He was never good at sports and he was always on the skinny side --he was nowhere near strong enough to join the Army.

Only because you never let him be strong, a voice in the back of her mind crawled in. She quickly shook the thought away. "I'm only keeping him safe." She

muttered to herself, grabbing the paper and starting to clean up the plates. The rest of the morning continued with a thick and open hostility in the air. Zach didn't say another word to her as they both continued to get ready and drive to school. After dropping him off, anxiety flooded back into her mind as she drove herself to work. There was no way he stood a chance in the Army, or any branch for that matter. He wasn't cut out for it. *Your father said the exact same thing to you*, the voice came again. Her father had refused her because he was sexist and too traditional, not because he was trying to protect her. It wasn't the same, she had always been strong - she was the fastest on her high school varsity team, stronger than even most of the boys when she was a child. Zach was terrible at sports, and just kept to himself. The Army would break him. *But it would make him stronger*, she shook the thought again from her head, unwilling to consider the point any further as she pulled into the parking lot.

Work was the same as always, just a job to help pay bills. Vernon, her manager, always told her she was suited for better work than an electrician. She agreed but was unwilling to go back to school, she felt work already was pushing how much time she had to spend with Zach, going back to school would only make it worse. Still though, she trusted his opinion. They had deployed together overseas, and he had gotten her this job. She was always grateful to him, and he had been a close friend to Zach's father before he died.

Vernon also had a frustrating knack for being able to read her mind, she was hardly clocked in five minutes before he came up to her "Something you want to talk about, J.?"

"I'm here to work, Vern." She uttered flatly, Vernon shrugged.

"You should consider what Zach wants." He suggested carefully as he picked up his clipboard. Jeanine frowned, Zach had clearly already talked to him about it. Vernon was like an uncle to Zach, but it always cut her to know that Zach trusted him more than her sometimes.

"He's seventeen, you really think he truly knows what he wants at his age?" She asked.

"You're forty, do you really mean to tell me you know what *you* want? At least it's a start." He noted.

"That's hardly the same thing."

"Is it? Look, I know you care about him J. Maybe it isn't the right choice, but you gotta at least let him make it."

"And if he fails? I'm not letting my son risk his life because he *thinks* it's what he wants."

"Just think about it, J. That's all I'm asking." Vernon said, holding his hands up in surrender as he went back to work.

After her shift, her worry persisted as she drove to pick Zach up from school. She was early but was too anxious to wait in the car so she parked and walked to the front office. It was there that the principal spotted her and approached with a confused look on his face. "Ms. Carr? I wasn't expecting you so soon, I suppose we can meet now." he said.

Jeanine's stomach sank, "My phone has been muted from work. Did I miss a message? Is something wrong?" she asked.

"Well, yes actually. Zach got into a fight today." He pointed out, before quickly adding "Let's discuss this in my office." They walked down a short hallway and into his office. The principal took a seat and motioned for Jeanine to do the same.

"Ms. Carr, as I mentioned Zach got into a fight with another student today, which is highly unusual for him. Has everything been alright at home?" the tone in which he said it seemed accusatory to Jeanine, which prickled her.

"That's a private matter, Mr. Harris." Jeanine asserted firmly, to which he furrowed his brow.

"It is well within your right to choose how to raise your son Ms. Carr. However, your son's success and well-being is not simply your own concern. I reserve comment on your decision to refuse him participation in extracurricular activities, but if I may be frank- "

"-You may not, Mr. Harris. I will talk to him and make sure it doesn't happen again." Jeanine snapped impatiently. Mr. Harris exhaled sharply through his nose.

"You are smothering him, Ms. Carr and he is clearly acting out- "

"-Goodbye Mr. Harris." She cut him off, and strode for the door. Letting out a breath of frustration she walked back to the front office. Despite her attempts to brush off the principal's comments, they dug in along with Vernon's earlier that day. She took a seat on one of the chairs near the door and placed her hands in her pockets. When she did, she felt something brush against her hand inside.

Opening it up she found the very thing that had started this all --the consent form. She bit her lip. She knew she was being too protective, she knew she was ruining his childhood, and she hated that that still couldn't stop her. Memories flooded

back of her childhood, of running away from her family the day she turned eighteen and joining the military. She hated her father and was set on surpassing him out of spite. She swore to show that she could, that she was stronger than him, better than him.

Then she met Michael. He had changed everything, he helped her see the world better. She wanted nothing else but to settle down with him, to live a family life with him, to raise children to be everything they could be. Tears welled up in her eyes as reality returned, a life without him, and only their son for her to care for. She stared down at the paper. Zach would be able to enlist in a year even without her consent, but she knew she couldn't do that to him. She had to move on, it had been so long.

She was interrupted by Zach's approach, a black eye swelling up the side of his face. "I'm ready to go." he mumbled, his eyes on the floor. Thankful he wasn't paying much attention, she quietly wiped her tears before he could see and led him to the car.

Once home she made spaghetti, unable to concentrate well enough to make anything more complicated. She set the table again, worried she would have to fight to get Zach to come to the table again. To her surprise, he came as soon as she called. He drifted to his seat, his mood clearly too broken to fight over coming down to dinner. Jeanine waited from her seat patiently as he paused at his chair, picking up the folded piece of paper sitting in it.

His face scrunched in confusion at first as he opened it. Then Jeanine saw his face soften for the first time in a long while. "Mom, I uhh. You-, you signed it!" He finally managed. Jeanine suddenly realized she was not prepared to make a conversation out of it.

“Yes, it’s what you said you wanted. As difficult as it will- “she started, before quickly being cut off.

“Thank you! Thank you, I won’t let you down mom. I’ll make you proud I promise.” Zach said, his face lit and confident. He then proceeded to talk throughout the rest of dinner, more than he had talked to her in weeks. She listened, in awe of the passion her son had that she hadn’t seen before.

The next few months until graduation were the best she had had in a very long time. Before she knew it, the day had come and she was driving to drop him off for training rather than school. The months had flown and she could feel her worry being to creep back in, but she kept it back. She hugged her son and said goodbye. She was proud of him, and that pride was stronger than her anxiety.

The drive home felt far longer than any she had driven before, but it felt right. An unexpected feeling of release came over her. When she got home she looked through some of the college mail that had been coming to Zach for weeks now. She moved to throw them away when one of them caught her attention. It had been so long since she felt the desire to be the best, and now there was no she needed to look after, only herself until Zach got out. It felt motivating, exciting, and she wasted no time.

Sinking

"We're fucked. We're so *fucking* fucked."

"Robert, calm down. Tell me what is wrong with the engine."

"It's *fucked* Victoria. The *engine* is *fucked*. We're completely dead in the water."

"Can we fix it?"

"What part of *fucked* didn't you understand! It's *dead*, the ship's *dead*!" Robert ran his hands through his salt and pepper hair, pausing a moment before slamming a fist against the computer console. "God *damn* it!"

Victoria frowned and turned to her own console, tapping away at the various sensors to distract herself from his outburst. "We'll have to take the escape pods. We're too far out of the way to be picked- "she stopped, staring at her screen.

"What? What the *fuck* else is wrong?"

Victoria took in a slow breath, "Only one of the pods survived the explosion."

She watched as the color drained from Robert's face. The two of them stared at each other as a painfully long moment passed in silence. As the situation began to settle in, their eyes wandered to walls of the ship. A cramped place that had been their home the last few weeks, now threatened to become their coffin. Finally, his hands shaking, Robert stood and walked across the cabin. It was a cramped space with a low ceiling. The floor and walkway were heavily obstructed by computer consoles, thick cables, and immobile chairs. Even with the mess, they both had been used to it for years and didn't even need glance down whenever they traversed the room.

"Give me a second. I need a drink."

"I'm not sure this is the time fo- "

"No. Give me a *fucking* second." With jittering hands Robert opened a panel under one of the consoles. He knocked away the drinking glasses and grabbed the bottle of gin he kept hidden there. He stood for a moment, staring at it in contemplative silence before uncorking it and taking a hard swig. He continued to stand with his back to Victoria for several more painful seconds before returning to his seat across from her with an exasperated grunt. Staring blankly into his console he took another long swallow, refusing to make eye contact with her. The ship seemed to take on a completely different tone. The once familiar environment now the least comfortable place in the universe.

"We need to decide who is going to take the pod." Victoria finally stated.

"No fucking shit we do, why do you think I'm drinking?" He mumbled in-between his long sips before adding "Also, we're not deciding who is 'taking the pod', we're deciding who is going to stay behind and fucking die, don't try to sugar-coat it."

Victoria paused for a moment. "If the Captain were here-."

"If the Captain were still here *he'd* be taking the last pod and both of us would be dead." He said, sitting back into his chair.

Victoria glanced around the cabin, hoping for some idea to get them out of this mess. She was met with only the sound of Robert's drinking. With the engine dead and its ever-present hum extinguished, the smack of his lips and the sound of his swallowing was almost deafening in the alien silence. The longer she pondered, the more she

began to realize that Robert was right. Only one of them was getting out of this alive. She let out a long breath.

"How should we do this then?" she asked.

"Decide? Gee, I don't know, why don't you tell me why you're so deserving instead of me?"

"I have a son."

"So what? I have grandchildren." He said dismissively.

"-Who don't need you, they have their own parents to take care of them."

"Your son will survive off your insurance claim." He pointed out, eliciting a frown from Victoria.

"You're nearly twice my age. How many more years do you even expect to live?" she asked.

"Fifteen more, at least. And that is fifteen years in *retirement*. I've worked all my life; don't you try to tell me I don't deserve those years."

"I've got at least three times that ahead of me. You think I deserve those years less because I haven't lived them yet?" Victoria scoffed.

"There's no guarantee you'll even live a great life. I've served on over fifteen ships in my time. I've saved lives. I've done my service, I deserve this."

"Don't be like this Robert."

"Don't be like what?" Robert slammed the bottle on the console. "It's not my fault you haven't done anything to deserve a second chance. You're sure as hell *not* taking that pod simply because you 'deserve it' more than me."

Victoria stood from her seat in frustration and paced the cabin. Her eyes rested on a fire axe in the corner. Robert was strong, but she was younger, quicker. Unfortunately, he noticed her gaze.

"Go on. Do it." He spat, "Take it by force, and make your worthless life even more worthless. See if you can live with yourself." Victoria paused for a long moment, staring at it before hiding a grimace and returning to her seat.

"We have to settle this fairly."

"Fairly? Like *hell* we do. In case you haven't noticed, life isn't fair. There won't be no fair ending here. One of us is dying a nice, long, suffocating death out in the middle of nowhere. How'd you imagine that being fair?"

"So, what, we both stay and die? That is hardly better than one of us surviving."

For once Robert did not respond, instead opting to take another swallow of gin before speaking up again, "What do you suggest then? I can't take you in a fight, and I know you don't have the balls to take it by force yourself."

"We draw straws."

Robert cursed again. "Like *hell*. If it's straws, you're drawing two to my one. My life isn't worth 50:50 with yours." He said with a wave of his hand.

Victoria stewed in silence as he continued to drink. Finally, she stood and stormed across the small cabin towards him in a sudden flare of anger, slapping her computer console aside. "I don't give a damn what you think your life is worth! I've kept my tongue, I've looked the other way, and I've turned a blind eye to your insufferable attitude for years. You're so convinced you are better than everyone and yet *they* are the ones acting better than *you*. Everyone *hates* you, you're a drunk, you're foul tempered, and half the work you claim to do is done by others." She shouted, grabbing the bottle out of his hand and pointing it at him threateningly. "For once, on the very day that might be my last, I have had enough of you." She snapped, tossing it back at him. "Sit there, drink your gin, curse me, and shout whatever the hell you want. We're drawing even *fucking* straws."

Journey's End

He had riches beyond riches. Gold beyond what he thought even existed in the world. Yet, all his gold could not quiet his aching stomach, or quench his thirst. Gold could not bring his friends back. Another island pierced through the thick haze of the afternoon sun. He had long since lost count of the number of islands he had passed by. Islands filled with savages, thieves, and cut-throats just waiting to get their claws on what was his. Islands also filled with the very food and water he needed to continue his journey, less it end in starvation and dehydration.

Another stab in his stomach caused an exasperated wail to bellow from his throat. The realization that had been sitting in the back of his mind was boiling over now --he had to get to shore. The crew was no more, their bodies long since buried into the sea. Only loneliness and death sailed with him now, and they were no help in operating a ship. Yet, his entire journey, the hardships he endured, and all his treasure would be useless if he met the same fate. He had to survive. Closing his eyes, he whispered a silent prayer for his lost friends and forced himself to steer the ship towards the island.

Tree-covered hills began to sway into view. With every inch the island grew, so did his worry. Fear began to settle in as he imagined what the natives would be like, what they would do if they found him. Every inch of his body wished to turn the ship around, return to the sea, to familiarity, to his friends, however lost they may be. His thirst pressed him onward. Before he could change his mind, he dropped anchor and dove in the water to swim ashore.

The willpower he had expended to bring the ship here left him far more exhausted than he anticipated, and the tides fought him with every breath. A slow creep of panic became to overcome him as he began to tire with the shore line far out of reach. Terror took over as he frantically tried to turn back to the ship. He fought for his life, each stroke seeming to suck a piece of his soul from his body. Just before he took hold of a rope, darkness enveloped him.

The darkness consumed and left him naked, exposed, and unable to stop his dreams. Thoughts of his friends again returned to haunt him. Try as he might he could not put them out of his mind. Their families left forever to wonder at their fates. All their plans for glory, how they would spend their shares, what futures they had ahead of them, lost.

Green was what he awoke to. Leaves and trees surrounded him, shading him from the beating light of the sun. His body was incredibly sore, but his stomach and thirst for the first time since he could remember was not fighting his mind for control. A lovely voice appeared behind him, sending chills down his spine. It had been so long since he last had a conversation with someone, he had almost forgotten what it was like. As he turned he found that the voice belonged to the most beautiful face he had ever seen. Although he knew he was partially just happy to be talking to someone again, he couldn't help but fall in love.

Remembering how to hold a conversation was strange at first, but it quickly came back to him. The people here were not savages at all, far from it. They were just like him. He found it strange that he had never heard of the island. He found it even

stranger that the people didn't seem all that able or willing to point it out on his map, and of their lack of interest in who he was or where he had even come from. Such suspicions quickly passed however with the joy of their company.

Days passed as he regained his strength with each day more of a joy than the last. As time went on however, his ship, all his gold, and his friends slowly began to creep back into his mind. If only to get it off his chest, he revealed to the people of the island his story. He told them of the gold deep in the hold of his ship, and of the friends he had lost. He told them of Gerold, the loud, bushy mustache of a man who had convinced him to come on the adventure. He told them of Caroline, the terse captain who softened up at the slightest drop of ale. Of Randal and Victoria, the undefeated twins who fought side by side. Of Edward, Marcus, Elisabeth, and all the others who had been so close to him. And finally, he told them of the treasures, and call to adventure that that started them on the journey.

The people of the island were glad to hear his stories, and laughed as he described their challenges they had overcome on their quest for gold and glory. They grew somber and consoled him when he spoke of their deaths, and they reassured him as he finished his tale. It felt good to talk of his ordeal, but the more he did, the more the guilt pressed down on him. Before long the thought of staying became synonymous with abandoning the memory of his friends, and the journey they had set out on. He had to complete it, however terrible it had become. The people of the island begged him to stay, but the guilt had already won. He owed it to his friends to see the journey through to the end.

Sails fluttered and the sun dived beneath the waves as the island faded from view. No sooner had darkness descended than the sky filled with lightning. A furious storm overtook the seas and seized him unprepared. He fought tooth and nail but could do little more than try and keep the ship afloat. The ship jerked relentlessly and threatened to throw him overboard. As the storm grew worse he began to realize that this was to be his fate. The journey would end here, in the middle of the ocean, hundreds of miles from any of his he had lost on the journey. For the first time in weeks he felt utterly alone, the thought of dying while trying to fulfill the memory of his friends brought him far less joy than the guilt had convinced him. He wished nothing more than to be back with his friends, not dying scared and alone in this storm, miles from anyone's company.

Just as the waves threatened to split the ship in two, there was a sudden calm. The eye of the storm had come. Wasting no time, he steered the ship to and prepared for the storm's return. It had snuck up on him before, but this time he would be ready. He would be able to make it. It was then he saw the light in the distance, the island. Wind, waves, and darkness from the storm had turned him around, sailing him back. There were fires lit along the beach, and though he could not see them, he knew his friends were there. Indecision suddenly overtook him as he was faced once again with the decision. If he sailed to the island, the ship would certainly be sunk upon the rocks and all aboard would be lost. He knew deep down if he did not leave now, he never would leave the island again.

He turned to the storm, it challenged him but he knew he could make it through. If he sailed away however, he knew he would never see the island again, or the people

there, his friends there. Finally, with tears in his eyes he steered the ship for land. Wind howled and rain beat down upon him, washing him clean. The rocks came up much faster than he anticipated but he managed to dive into the water and swim to shore, no longer the weakling who had nearly drowned there weeks before. Standing on the shore he turned to see his ship dash itself upon the rocks. It slowly sunk along with everything onboard. He watched as the waves buried his ship, his treasure, his friends.

Although he was sad to say farewell, he was sure of his choice. Throwing his life away was not how they would have wanted the journey to end. At least now he could be happy. This journey was to have a happy ending.