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Mom’s Harbor

My sister Patsy and I lean over the side of the dock so far that with even the slightest nudge, we would fall in. That is the only way to see the anemones clinging to the submerged wooden sides. Their strange, colorful tentacles undulate in the wakes of boats coming and going. This motion comforts me, but also makes me sick. My sea legs haven’t activated yet. I sit up, taking a break from observing the starfish and algae hiding from the fishermen strolling along the harbor. My head hurts from the rocking motion of the docks and the fresh paint smell from the man repainting the Cornelia Marie logo a few hundred yards down.

It’s a beautiful day. For a moment, the rain has let up in Kodiak. A chilled breeze from the ocean drifts through my bare arms but I am too enamored with the sunshine to put on my coat. The winter was too long to allow this t-shirt weather to pass me by. My mom stands behind Patsy and me, patiently waiting for us to move on from the sedentary sea life below the water’s edge. I tap my sister.

“Patsy, let’s keep going now.” I say. She starts, tilting precariously over the edge, but catches herself.

“I could have fallen in!” she yells, staring me down with a face that portends a bigger meltdown than my mistake would be worth.

“Okay, P. Your sister didn’t mean to startle you and you didn’t fall in, so it’s all good, right?” Mom calmly intervenes. The calamity melts from my sister’s face. I envy my mother for her skill at calming my sister so quickly- a skill I have not acquired despite my twenty two years practicing it. With help from my mother’s hand, Patsy stands and brushes herself off. We walk along silently, observing the men at work on every colored ship, imagining what we would name our ships if we ever had one. My sister wants a ship of pure white- small enough to be sleek but big enough to conquer the harsh Alaskan waves. She would name it *The Owlet,* an ode to her favorite feathered creatures. Patsy talks so long about her imaginary vessel that my mom and I don’t bother to share. Instead, we listen close to the fishermen winding their ropes and folding their nets. They shout ship talk and curses around the harbor, reminding one another not to forget what they need. There is care beneath their curses. My mom smiles when we laugh at their language. It’s unavoidable on an island like this. The smell of salty sea air is interrupted by someone’s French fries cooking before leaving the harbor. My stomach growls and I trip as I think more about lunch than walking carefully across the uneven and slippery boards. Just a few cuts on my hands are less than the usual injuries, so I only shed a tear or two. My mom hugs me tight and helps brush the wood splinters and dirt from my hands. She smells like the pine scented candles she loves and motor oil from brushing against the harbor railings. I can feel her heartbeat, steady and pronounced beneath her favorite Kodiak Crab Festival hoodie. The sound of her heart doesn’t make me dizzy like the waves. While I can hear it, I don’t even need my sea legs.

Finally, we make it to the end of the pier. My mom sighs. “There is not a single place in the world I would rather be than here with my girls.” She says. “My haven. Look out there, girls. Way out there. All these ships, they keep going until they reach the Being Sea. One of the most dangerous fishing grounds in the whole world. And when they’re done, they come right back here to this harbor. It’s safe here. It’s safe for the ships and it’s safe for us.” Past the wave breakers, everything was so far away it seemed harmless. I suppose everything looks harmless from far away. Even my mother’s heart, which would eventually fail her, seemed safe to me through her flesh and bones.

The sky was the first sign that evening was being ushered in. Standing there at the end of the mooring, we stood for what seemed like hours. At some point I had to put on my hoodie to keep from shivering. My hair was a red knotted mess from the breeze. I felt like I was walking on water when I looked straight ahead, feet curled slightly over the end of the dock. “We should get home and start dinner. Your dad will be home from work soon.” My mom said. Patsy agreed vehemently- she was ready to get back to her video games. The stairs were slick and treacherous as we shuffled up to our car. The view of the whole harbor at sunset was astonishing. Boats of bright blue, maroon, canary, black, rusted over, freshly painted, gigantic and small all lined the docks. My eyes stayed glued to the window as the harbor leaves my sight. Mom’s harbor. I spent so many days trying to count the barnacles encrusting the wooden walkways, thinking it was our place. Mine, my sister’s and my mom’s. Maybe even my dad’s when he came on the weekends.

I look back through that car window, down the stairs, weave between the ships to that view from the very end and I see now that it was my Mom’s all along. She brought us with her to her safe place. She waited patiently as we played and went home when she was supposed to. She even moved off of Kodiak island- far away to other Alaskan towns and later Wisconsin. But she never really left that harbor. Nowhere else could protect her from the savage winds and violent waves of the Bering Sea.

I decide years later that if I ever have a ship, I will name it *Michelle* and it shall live at Kodiak Harbor. It will be deep, ultramarine blue, like her spirit. It will be the steadiest ship, calming the fiercest storms and inspiring the most beautiful sunsets. Rust won’t be able to touch it because I will repaint it every year. I’ll park it right at the end of the furthest dock with the best view of the sunset and Patsy and I will sit in it and feel like we are walking on water.