WE ARE THE *sea*

Maritime writer G. L. Tysk traces the voyages of Christopher Columbus from Europe to the Americas by sailing with tall ship *SSV Corwith Cramer* across the Atlantic Ocean.

The morning begins at 2:30 AM. Four hours before our first hot meal of the day, I set two sails, strike two more, and take the wheel of our 270-ton ship to avoid three squalls blowing our way across the Northern Atlantic. The sun rises but does little to warm the fresh breeze that numbs my hands and nips at my ears.

Our chief mate says, "We're going nine knots." A month ago, nine knots meant nothing. Now, I know that nine knots means hair whipping into my mouth and spray whipping onto the deck. Nine knots means grasping for handholds and passing food across see-sawing gimballed tables. Nine knots means the bow of the ship surging towards the sky in swaths of seafoam.

Breakfast is scrambled eggs and coffee cake. Our cheerful, Maine-born steward was a pastry chef before her brother convinced her to go to sea two years ago. She's been sailing ever since, cooking three meals and three snacks a day for 29 sailors who are always famished. "It's crazy," she tells me, effortlessly balancing platters of cake in one hand as the ship heels from side to side. "When one trip's over, I can't wait for the next one. When I start the next trip, I wonder what I'm doing here."

I've had my fair share of wondering what I've been doing here, halfway across the middle of nowhere. We encountered our first stormy weather two days out from the Canary Islands and it has taken a liking to us. The ship rolls from port to starboard and back again, sometimes with a violence that wakes me from an unsettled sleep as pots and pans slide in the galley and water washes up through our scuppers with the sound of torrential rain.

Our captain, Sean Bercaw, seems unfazed by it all. His face broadens in a perpetual grin above what seems like an endless collection of Hawaiian shirts. I met Sean while sailing aboard Mystic Seaport's wooden whaleship *Charles W Morgan* as a "voyager," one of a group of scientists, scholars, and artists tasked with chronicling the ship's voyage. When I heard from Sean again later that year, it was in his capacity as captain at the Sea Education Association's SEA Semester study abroad program. Only eight students had signed on for their Trans-Atlantic program, following Columbus's voyage from the Canary Islands to the Caribbean, and he was looking for former *Morgan* voyagers interested in sailing. SEA had never shipped voyagers, he cautioned. We would

be working, but we'd be neither professional crew nor students. We were the guinea pigs in SEA's experiment.

I'd signed the contract without hesitation, but doubts crept in days before my flight to Gran Canaria. For the last six years, I had set my own schedule and followed my own rules. My previous sailing excursions were 9-5 affairs, with plenty of time at the end of the day to relax with a burger and a cold drink. I was used to sleeping in and heading to bed after midnight. I worried aloud to my husband over a choppy internet connection from my hotel in Las Palmas. *What if shipboard life doesn't sit well with me? What if I don't like the crew? What if they don't like me?*

My husband, ever patient, cut me short. "You're not going for relaxation," he says. "You're going for work."

Sea Education Association occupies a tidy campus on the outer banks of Cape Cod. Hidden amidst lush shade trees, its rustic buildings exude a charm belying the fact that SEA has been taking in untrained students aboard their school ships and toughening them into sailors since 1971. SEA Semester combines a demanding curriculum and exhausting schedule, and one of our students confides after the end of the first week that she isn't sure why she signed up for this. "All my other friends who are studying abroad are getting drunk in Europe and not going to class," she sighs. "And here I am sleeping four hours a day and maybe not even getting the credits transferred back to my school."

I sympathize with her. Working for SEA means that I am only offered room, board, and transportation aboard the *SSV Corwith Cramer,* named for SEA's founder. In exchange, I agree to stand watch, man the deck, assist in oceanographic data collection, and make sure that our square-rigger makes it across the Atlantic in one piece. It sounded much more romantic back on solid ground, and a few seasick days later, I too feel like I'd rather be getting drunk in Europe. I'm already feeling slightly drunk as I stumble back and forth, fore and aft, swaying

with the incessant motion of the ship.

It's easy to quit a job on land. Turn in a notice, pack a cubicle, leave the office. But there is no turning in of notices on the Atlantic, no way to transport myself off the ship until we reach St. Croix. I am trapped here among strangers.

Until we become familiar with the quirks of ship and shipmate, we all develop ways to cope. I sequester myself in my bunk for short naps after watch, curl up and breathe in the scent of sunscreen and sweat that has seeped into my sheets. The wind blows sail commands and laughter down the companionway. I wipe salt spray off my arms and legs and do my laundry in a bucket. I have a rash on my wrist from the plastic strap of my watch and rust stains on my shorts from the buckle of my rigging belt.

I only half-notice that every day, my skin is a little browner and the faces around me become a little more familiar. I'm mostly blind to the rough calluses creeping in across my palms and the pads of my fingers, hardened patches of skin born from repeated grasping and hauling and coiling of lines on rolling seas.

I am becoming a sailor.

My love affair with the sea began before I was born. At the end of the Second World War, my grandparents fled the advancing Japanese front line, escaping inland China to a small island off the coast of Hong Kong. There, under British rule, they raised my mother and her six siblings amidst the bustle of the fishing port, a colorful bustle of houseboats and seafood stalls winding along one of the island's only roads. My grandfather sold fuel to the fishermen. My grandmother took care of the children and sent all seven of them off to college overseas, determined that none of them should have to live through the horrors of another war.

The war that my grandparents feared never came. Instead, their children began to come home and bring their own children with them. I spent summers on the island in my grandparents' concrete house overlooking the sea. I knew nothing of war, nothing about the political struggle for control of this tiny spit of land in the middle of the ocean. Instead, I chased my brother up steep stone streets, across open sewers and crumbling stairways, rode my bike down narrow lanes where the sky was a sliver of blue above the roofs of crowded houses.

On board the *Cramer*, our students trace Caribbean history. They follow the transformation of the islands from isolated pre-Columbian worlds to vortexes of European conflict, from colonial powers to our modern definition of paradise. I watch them hard at work on their journals and think of my grandparents' island, the island of my mother's childhood and my childhood. Adapt or die, these islands seem to cry, but their treeless shorelines, fast food chains and hotels that are meant to grow them into twenty-first century destinations also diminish them somehow. As we drift at anchor, I imagine the beaches without the tourists and surfboards and bars and think of sunsets sinking in red and gold over the shadows of boats in the harbor.



My childhood was filled with the sea, but I didn't start sailing in earnest until I was 26. I caught sea fever at an inopportune time; most sailors start their careers young, and 26 is already middle-aged in the professional sailor's world. My third mate is 27, my chief mate 31. I am 33. Aside from the SEA faculty, I am the oldest person aboard ship.

"You look young," everyone else tells me. "Don't worry." At first I am amused, then eventually I realize that what they really mean is that the shipboard community is an ageless entity. There is a curious sense at sea that time has been suspended, as if through watch changes and midnight wakeups and long hours on bow lookout, the ship and all its crew exist in a frozen encapsulation free from the outside world. Here, age matters less than experience, and experience matters less than willingness to learn.

Jeff Schell, our chief scientist, tells us anecdotes of some of SEA's non-student programs. Adult professionals join the ship's company and quickly discover that they dislike being told what to do, when to eat, how to act. It's not easy for the students either; I can see the frustration in their faces when the routine still hasn't quite set in and we are all feeling the stress of close quarters. But students are at least familiar with knowing that everything they do is a potential pass or fail. As an adult, those two terms quickly become amorphous. Do we garner a pass if we receive a promotion at work? Do we fail if a spouse files for divorce?

I struggle with my adult-ness on board but try not to let anyone else see. Before stepping aboard, I told myself I had to be willing to learn, to bear up my fair share of the work, and to hold in my oftentimes short temper. What I didn't expect were the small things that began to wear on me. The smell of the heads. The lack of showers. Not being able to control what I had for breakfast. Not being able to punch the helpful person waking me up for a four hour watch in the middle of a downpour.

But I get up for watch in the downpour because to refuse and go back to bed would be letting down 28 other people, people I have grown to care deeply about in a short amount of time. Out here on the Atlantic, we only have the ship and each other. To reject each other would be to reject the ship, and none of us can imagine that. Even as we grow browner, shaggier, nimbler, stronger, we grow into the ship as one entity. We speak of each other as hands - hands to set sails, strike them, sweat the lines, haul away halyards, lower the science boom. Our hands are steady on the wheel and sudsy in the galley. We pass dinner plates and cleaning buckets, grasp the shrouds on our ascents aloft, and reach for each other to remind ourselves that we are not alone.

Ship, shipmate, self.

Sean tells me that SEA has not done a trans-Atlantic crossing in 24 years. By the time we reach the Caribbean, I understand why. Most of us dread coming back to a stuffed email inbox. We've been waiting three anxious weeks to contact spouses and parents. There are no floating cell phone towers in the middle of the Atlantic, and the satellite internet aboard ship is restricted for official business only. It is a strange feeling, in 2014, to be cut off entirely from every television network, every social media feed, every phone call.

Craig Marin, our maritime studies professor and veteran sailor, confesses that his own family hasn't quite known what to make of the long period of no contact. "They're freaked out," he says. "They've never gone so long without hearing from me before." I can hardly imagine Columbus and his men sailing off to the east with no way of mailing letters and no way of knowing when they would return. I wondered what I would have said were I in their place - *I'll see you later, honey. We might be back in three years, but don't count on it. Please don't forget about me.*

One night, far from sight of any land, one of my watch mates puts into words what we all secretly feel. "Maybe everyone else in the world has died," he muses. "Maybe we're the only ones left, and we don't even know."

We throw ourselves into our work because we have nothing else. We climb out onto the bowsprit to furl the jib, then climb back out again to unfurl it, set it, strike it, repeat. My mate instructs us on steering the ship with the flick of a wrist and on the correct way to set the topsail on a moonless night in the pouring rain. She teaches me to bring down the sun, to read a sextant, and to plot our position. I learn about the constellations as they wheel across the sky in a succession of night watches: Orion, Cassiopeia, Auriga, Taurus, Cygnus. The summer triangle. The elusive Southern Cross, only visible for a few hours before dawn as we draw close to the Equator. We stand on the quarterdeck and watch the sun rise and set, wait for the elusive green flash as it just disappears below the horizon and the stars glitter from the crevasse of the night sky. Our course is a faint trail of smudged pencil dots across a nautical chart of nothingness, and every day, we creep just a little bit further east.

There is no shame in embracing twenty-first century technology. Without our computers and GPS and our main engine, our voyage across the Atlantic would be

much longer and filled with so much more uncertainty. Upon landfall, all it takes is the touch of a finger to contact a loved one, and our first day on shore becomes a caricature of desperate sailors waving smartphones in every direction in hopes of catching a wireless signal. The days of Columbus' Atlantic crossing, with its crude navigation and uncertain communications, are long past. But I am a little afraid of the voyage end, when we must leave each other for good and move along our own paths, paths that have briefly crossed for one moment in time.

On my last night in St. Croix, I lie on the quarterdeck and attempt to locate the stars. After so many nights alone on the Atlantic, the lights of the dock are almost unbearable. Clouds crawl across the sky and it smells like rain, and when I finally glimpse Orion, he is faint and flickering above the streetlamps and floodlights. I think back to the fishing village of my mother's childhood and how, like the Caribbean, it has cut down its trees and planted resorts in their place, all in the name of progress.

Six weeks ago, my world was not this world. Six weeks ago, I gazed up at the night sky and could not identify a single star. I clung to what I thought I wanted, just as these islands clung to what they thought they wanted. Now, all I want is to sail forever out of the sight of land and lights and cling jealously to the floating world I now call home and the crew that has become my family.

We all know that there are no ironclad promises, especially not for sailors, whose transient natures speak louder than words. But still, we pledge to find each other on social media, to keep in touch via email, to text and to photo share, all terms that old tall ship sailors would have found absurd. Our hands grasp each other one last time. Finally, we drift away off the deck and down the dock, leaving the Caribbean and its islands behind to find their own places in the world, as we must find ours.

As my plane takes off, I strain my eyes for one last glimpse of the *Cramer*, but the bare hills are wreathed in clouds and the craggy shoreline is a dark ribbon of secrets. I can only press my forehead to the tiny window as my breath fogs the pane. *Please don't forget about me.*

We come together at first because we have no other choice. Now, at last, when we must finally fracture into separate entities, we cannot imagine letting go. For us, the ship has become our own island. It is new, untouched, a pristine paradise where we gather under the shade of our memories, far above the unchanging sea. g

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