



Dogwood

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Colin Ryan

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*“The sea remains quiet, saying to itself, I  
am the power.”*

*Khalil Gibran*

In the days following my college graduation, my long-time boyfriend and I sat in our favorite coffee shop just outside campus and shared a comfortable silence that had become our custom for Saturday mornings. Early sunlight poured horizontally through the windows, ripping long, stretched shadows across the floor and bathing the rest in rich amber. Outside, a gentle breeze kept the world in motion. Rippled waves drifted over the grass, and the trees pulsed along with the zephyr. These first reprieves from the long and grey Pacific Northwest winters felt novel and to be cherished.

Clark scrolled through his phone while I stared out the window, watching the tips of the dogwoods as they had just begun to flirt with flowering. I felt connected to them. Their season just beginning, flowers

destined to be grabbed by the wind and taken to parts of the world they'd rarely considered and never visited. I'd recently found myself fluttering in the winds of my own wild ambition. Now, at twenty-four, all the ideas dreamt up in nights spent stuffed into cramped dorm rooms with cheap pizza and temporary friends had become real possibilities. It had occurred to me, all of a sudden, how little I'd actually prepared for any of them. I had become afflicted with a paralysis of options. So instead, I drank coffee.

"Here's another good one," Clark said, not looking up from his phone. His face, long with sharp features, was caught in a shadow and glowed a pale blue in front of the screen. "Design and Development Junior Engineer. Starts at 80k, tens days PTO, and says here the office is dog friendly. That's nice."

"You don't have a dog," I said.

"Well, Joshua, it's good information to know if we ever wanted to get one. And great benefits package; covers families too."

He said *we* again. Clark had taken to pluralizing our lives. I probably should have said *we* don't have a dog, but recently, it had grown more necessary to mount these small defenses of my personal agency. I hadn't turned from the window, my focus still falling on the dogwoods. If I were the flowers, then he was the trunk.

Two in contrast and harmony. Both ones in need of the other. But a tree with no leaves will grow again, while a flower that dies on the branch serves no purpose at all.

“I think I want to sail down the coast,” I blurted out. I waited for his eyes to catch mine, to sense my sincerity and pay me due attention. When they didn't, I considered saying it again, this time more conscious of the tripping, dreaming way I sometimes mused. Instead, I took a long sip of my latte. It was nearing its end, and I held the mug up against my lips, allowing the heavy chocolate and syrup pooled at the bottom to run across my tongue. Its wide-mouthed rim covered my face and smelled of cherry.

“This one is in Bozeman,” Clark said while I hid behind the mug. “Do you know anything about Bozeman?”

My yearning for a seaward adventure wasn't an entirely random fabrication. We had talked about it once before. The memory dreamed itself up in my mind: Clark and I lying under a blanket on the floor of his dorm room; we were a little high and halfway through watching *Waterworld*. *Wouldn't that be kinda fun*, I'd said to him, *living out on the water, just for a little while*. Clark promised that we'd do it someday, as long as we returned before it became necessary to recycle our urine for drinking water. I wondered if he remembered that

night. Over the years, I'd coaxed him into promising any number of hypotheticals but never a commitment of action.

"My uncle has his boat. He'd let me use it." I said.

Clark kept scrolling. The gravity of the phone in his hand had intensified since graduating. To Clark, life was race. Graduating was the gun going off, and every second he sat here was another step he was falling behind. He muttered something incredulous about the price of houses. We were two people in conversations with ourselves but at each other.

"Clark!" I punctuated his name with my mug against the worn wooden table like a gavel. It made a dull thud. "Did you hear me?"

First, his eyes flicked up, then seeing my face, he followed with his head and straightened his back. I reached across the table and placed my hands on top of his, careful to make sure I completely covered his phone. "I want to sail down the coast."

He didn't need to ask why; he knew why. He didn't need to ask how; he knew I didn't know. He shifted his weight in his chair and leaned forward, bringing his face into the light. He was patient with me. I loved that about him.



“Okay, then we’ll make a plan. Perhaps next summer, after we’ve had some time to settle into this new chapter. We can start looking at boats in the winter when it’s the off-season. There will be deals.”

I squeezed him, a loving squeeze. One that said, *I appreciate you*. He needed that first, through my touch, before I said, “I’m going to sail down the coast now.”

“We can’t now,” he said. “These job offers all expire. If we go on a trip, they won’t be available when we get back. We’ll end up working split shifts at Starbucks buried under student loans until we die.”

“I know. *We* can’t go.” A forlorn smile pulled across my face, and he tried to pull his hands back, but I held my grip on them. He knew me better than anyone and understood that I was telling him he wasn’t invited. His head turned, showing me his cheek; it grew red with embarrassment. He couldn’t look me in the eyes. He knew I needed this; I knew I’d hurt him.

“So one semester of sailing in junior year, and you think you’re ready to take on the high seas?” He said.

It was a shot across my bow, a defensive reaction. He’d done it before, in times when my impulsivity had wrestled control from him. Clark made plans. He was a train on the tracks; every decision made with purpose, direction, and due diligence to task. I, on the other hand,

was a rocket fueled by whim, idle for long periods with quick and sudden bursts of unguided action. In this moment, it was that which he hated most about me, but when the dust settled, he'd remember it's also why he loved me.

“Well, if I can't, I can always call up the Coast Guard,” I said in an attempt to disarm him.

I didn't want to lose him, but I needed him to let me go.

The seconds hung long between us. I wondered what we looked like to onlookers; if peppered customers around the shop had taken pause from their lives and waited on bated breath to see if he'd give in. I hoped Clark noticed that I hadn't broken his gaze to check. I wanted him to notice that he had my full attention.

Finally, with a sigh, he squinted and brought his head back up into the light. “Then you'd best put them on speed dial.”

#

Despite my urgency, a matter as simple as boarding a boat and casting lines off took nearly a week for me to arrange. Following the coffee shop, Clark's attitude toward my waywardness ebbed and flowed. It had become apparent that he put little confidence in my sincerity. For that, I held no blame on him. My propensity for short-lived affairs with ideas that quickly

waned was well documented. In fact, Clark had been among the few commitments I'd shown any tenacity toward. That made him feel special, unique in his longevity. Even though my years at college, my course of study shifted on nearly a semester basis. As such, the further I proceeded toward an inevitable departure, the more it threatened his uniqueness. He was never so bold as to outwardly condemn my action; he knew well enough that reprimand would only stoke my motivation. Instead, he was supportive, helpful to a fault, waiting for the entire plan to collapse on itself. By the time I'd completed my preparations and survived my own fickle nature, Clark had resigned to a labored acceptance.

My uncle's boat was a twenty-five-foot-long fiberglass vessel with a sky-blue stripe running along its boards. He paid the marina it moored in hundreds of dollars a month to take care of its upkeep. Aside from maintenance, it sat untouched. My uncle had no affection for the sea. He'd purchased it to meet some expectation that men of his wealth and status owned boats. On the morning of my departure, I stood on its deck and listened to the engine spool up. It hummed and moaned like an animal waking after a long slumber. Clark stood on the edge of the dock across from me. The sea, if only a few inches, now between us.

“I can’t believe you’re actually leaving,” He said and fidgeted with the brown paper bag in his hands. Even though I’d loaded the ship with stores, he’d packed me lunch.

“It’s not like I’m not coming back,” I said, checking fluid levels on the console dash. The edge of my periphery caught him tilting his head away and wiping his eyes. I kept my focus on the console, pretending I hadn’t noticed until he faced forward again, then I faced him. “I *am* coming back.”

“No, you’re not,” he said. “What you’re doing is what people do to have a transformative experience. To come out the other side a different person. A changed person. You’re not going to be the same when you come back.”

He wasn’t wrong. I looked past him, not wanting to meet his eyes. My gaze fell again upon the dogwoods outside the marina fence. The flowers, just that morning, had bloomed. I wondered how the trunk felt. I wondered if it, with all its permanence, felt temporary. I wondered if it felt left behind.

I reached across the gap toward Clark’s hand. Our touch had always been the most honest communication between us, but the wake of a passing boat rocked the deck and forced me to retreat to regain

my balance. The inches of water between the dock and the deck felt suddenly to have grown wide as the ocean.

What followed was a shallow goodbye, lacking the love and affection either of us deserved. He was taking the job in Boise. At the dog place. I told him I was happy for him and that Boise sounded great. I'm not sure I believed either part of it. He gave me the brown bag lunch, we embraced, kissed, and then he left, citing some transparent excuse as to why he could stay to watch me go. It was a goodbye we both regretted, but neither was brave enough to do anything about.

After he left, I peeked inside the brown paper bag to find a pink post-it note stuck to the wrapped tuna on wheat with the crust cut off just how I liked it. It was marked with blue ink in the immediately recognizable block lettering of Clark's handwriting.

*You must love in such a way that the person you love feels free.*

White pedals of the first emancipated flowers gusted across the deck, and I went below to the cabin and cried.

#

Favorable winds guided me from my slip at the marina through the bustling ferry lanes of Puget Sound and out toward the Straights of Juan de Fuca. I'd managed the first leg of my trip with only the most

minor of catastrophes. Least notable but of highest personal significance being the loss of my Bluetooth speaker overboard, which committed the remainder of my journey to the quiet introspection brought on by the suppressive ambiance of headlong winds. I had planned to spend the first night near my point of embarkation, but the conditions drew the boat west, and I found little reason to contend with nature's will.

By the time the sun relaxed behind the distant Olympic Mountains, I'd left the Seattle skyline behind and entered into the narrow straights flanked on either side by fading expanses of towering green trees. The smell of urban life, degrading, dispensable and dynamic, gave way to something more ancient and lasting, pine carried on salted air.

I became inundated with a great solitude. I felt feral. Natural.

I looked about, scanning carefully to note any others in my area, but the waters were abandoned, except for me. Then with the boat steadied, I stepped to the bow and stripped my clothes. First, my shirt, then belt and shorts, then hurriedly, my briefs, and tossed them onto the deck behind me. I stood tall and as far forward as I could. The air engulfed me, wrapping around each curve of bare skin, melting away the thing I'd been trying to escape but couldn't identify. I became lost, surrendered

to the wild, tempting the animal slumbering in me to wake. I focused on nothing but my breath. In, then out. With just a slight waxing moon hanging above, I felt invisible. I felt infinite.

Time's passage blurred. I stood there, eyes closed until a litany of whooping and hollering invaded my transcendence. I sprung to instinctive but directionless action and discovered that I was drifting past a previously hidden clearing in the trees where a group of four boys had set up camp around a small bonfire on the beach. They appeared to be of similar age to me, likely celebrating their own summer escape. I dove to my clothes and wrapped them around me the best I could, but there wasn't a garment in the world that could obscure my abashment. My movement was ungraceful, and, along with the water's motion beneath me, I couldn't have appeared as anything above floundering. The clearing was protected by exceptionally high trees, which had the benefit of shielding the campers from the very winds I'd hoped to rely on to escape this voyeuristic nightmare. My sails fell slack and I lost speed, the gentle current drawing me nearer to shore.

"Hey!" One of the voices called. "We're sorry. We didn't mean to make you feel bad."

I poked my head up above the sideboard. One of the boys, stocky with messy brown hair and the early

growth of a dark beard, had waded a few feet into the water and shouted toward me through cupped hands.

“Assholes,” I yelled back. It wasn’t the most appropriate or cleverest response, but I was otherwise occupied running through a mental checklist for getting the boat’s small engine online and getting out of there.

“Okay, you’re right. I feel terrible now. Clearly, you were having a moment,” he said. “I promise we’re not mean guys. Were just having a laugh is all. Let me make it up to you; we’re about throw some burgers on the fire. You hungry?”

I was. And for all my apprehension about their group, I was the boy naked on the bow of a sailboat who appeared out of nowhere. I imagined how I must have looked to them, coming around the bend posted up like some pale ornamental figurehead. The absurdity of it could only be laughed at, so that’s what I did. Once I composed myself and dressed, the boy in the water offered for me to toss him my anchor, which I did; he ran it to ground and sunk it deep into the rocky beach. My decision to come ashore was not made on the promise of a meal. Instead, there was an obligation to the spirit of my journey to answer calls and pass up no opportunity. Only then could I return, confident that I’d sampled my fill of what the world could offer.

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End of Preview

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