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Opening Extract from...

The Starboard Sea

Written by Amber Dermot

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THE STARBOARD SEA

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ONE

On the morning I turned eighteen, instead of a birthday present, my father tossed me the keys to his car and informed me I was finally man enough to captain his Cadillac. It was early August. I was doomed to trade the final blaze of summer for the first days of school. Dad kept the engine running while I half-assed my way through packing, racing around our apartment stuffing boxer shorts and sport coats into duffel bags. Instead of helping me, Dad ordered our ancient doorman, Max, to ferry my luggage to the car. In his navy wool uniform, all epaulets, gold tassels, and brass stars, his kind face glistening with sweat, Max looked like the commander of a sinking ship. I told him not to worry, but Max was adamant. "Okay," I said, "but leave the heavy stuff to me." More than anything, I hated being waited on, but I didn't want to cause trouble for Max. We rode the elevator to the lobby and I told him, "For wearing that get-up in this heat, you deserve hazard pay."

"Don't worry about me," Max said. "I get paid to look this pretty." Max helped me load the car and wished me good luck. "It's your senior year," he said. "Enjoy yourself."

My mother was still on vacation in Maine. It occurred to me that the only soul in all of New York City I would miss would be my doorman. "Take care, Boss," I said and slid into the driver's seat.

Once on the road, Dad turned down the air-conditioning. I could feel the heat radiating off the dashboard as we cruised away from

Manhattan, weaving along the East River, headed for the coast of Massachusetts. Dad sat beside me in the passenger seat, alternating between the *Wall Street Journal* and *Forbes*. Every few minutes, he checked the road over his bifocals. "Jason Kilian Prosper, this isn't a race."

My father was tall, with a good two inches on me, three on my older brother, Riegel; the Cadillac was custom-designed with extra depth and legroom. A pair of life jackets could have been stowed in the space beyond his outstretched legs. Still, my father struggled for comfort. He lifted his left knee toward his chest, wincing when the bones cracked. His blue linen pants remained crisp in the damp heat. Even in pain, Dad sat composed and pleated, looking less like a dad and more like a member of the British House of Lords.

According to my father, I was "damaged goods." Selling me to another school wasn't going to be easy. This was the summer of 1987, the year of damaged goods: Oliver North and paper shredders, Gary Hart and *Monkey Business,* record-high AIDS, and a record-high stock market. That spring, Mathias Rust, just one year older than me, eager for a thrill, had evaded Soviet air defenses and landed his Cessna 172B in Red Square. That fall, the entire country would be riveted for two and a half days, as rescue workers in Midland, Texas, plotted to pull a baby from an abandoned well. And in the meantime, I had gotten myself banished from Kensington Prep and was about to start my senior year at Bellingham Academy.

"What's the drill?" I asked, breaking our silence. "Drinks with the headmaster? Nine holes of golf?"

Dad folded his newspaper into a tight, narrow column. "The headmaster is out of town. We're meeting with the dean. Dick Warr."

"I hope he lives up to his name," I said.

"Try behaving for once."

"I stopped behaving myself a long time ago." The needle fanned over seventy-five. Before Dad noticed, I decelerated, slightly.

"Just graduate." Dad scanned his newspaper. "Finish up for your mother. The poor woman. She doesn't like to show her face in public anymore."

"So *I'm* the reason Mom leaves the apartment in disguise. Go figure."

"Your brother never speaks to me that way." Dad cracked the side of my head with the *Journal*. His weapon of choice.

I don't think he meant to hurt me, but the impact and surprise caused me to swerve. The corner of the paper struck my right eye, knocking it shut and, for a brief instant, I let go of the wheel. Imagined us hitting the guardrail, the Cadillac embraced by an elbow of metal.

"Get control of yourself, for God's sake!" Dad pulled the steering wheel back in line.

For the rest of the trip, I half daydreamed and half drove, the car flipping forward and crushing Dad's body. Leaving me to surgically excise what little was left of my dad from the wreckage. Snapping his legs off cleanly at the knees. No blood. Just bones and sockets, white as a whale's tooth. On one knee, I'd scrimshaw the word "left," and on the other, "right." Neat and orderly. During long trips, the legs could be packed into one of those cases ventriloquists use to store their dummies. At last, Dad would no longer be in pain. His linen pants would drape and rest like opera curtains on the carpeted car floor.

"Pull over at the next rest stop. Time for me to drive."

Our near accident had been his fault. For some parents, having children meant full absolution from any future mistakes. My father wouldn't permit himself to be wrong. He shifted the blame of misplaced scissors, rising interest rates, and iceless ice cube trays all onto Riegel and me. Dad cheated on our mom and told our mom it was her fault he cheated on her.

My mother really had left our apartment in disguise. Decoyed in a rotating masquerade of ginger-haired wigs and cat's-eye sunglasses, she'd chased after my dad and his harem.

Mom and I had spent the earlier part of that summer at our cottage in Maine. Our mornings devoted to relaxing on wicker porch chairs, watching the Iran-contra hearings, mixing champagne with grapefruit juice. As the men on the TV bragged and lied, denying their accomplishments, my mother turned the sound to mute and spoke to me about my father's indiscretions.

"Of all your father's mistresses, my favorite was this knock-kneed Eastern European hussy he would lug around on business trips, this woman Gayla, a dozen years his junior. Called her his 'administrative

aide.' Gayla the Flying Whore is what I called her. I followed them once on a nonstop to the Caymans. Your father didn't notice me in my red wig coming down the aisle to claim my seat in coach. He was preoccupied with his first-class hot towels, with brushing the white cloth against her neck. That woman took forever to get off the plane. Commandeering the aisle, prattling on to the flight crew while the rest of us cooled our heels. The way that woman laughed, with her teeth. I never laughed that way." My mother swept the champagne flute to her lips, then confirmed that she was ready to hunt a new breed of Gaylas. From under her wicker seat, Mom pulled out a hatbox, opened the top, and withdrew a mass of chocolate ringlets. "My latest disguise." She twirled the hairpiece on her fist and said, "When you were little, I caught you and Riegel with one of my old wigs. Remember? The hair all matted like a rat's nest."

"We used it to play tag. Chasing each other, then forcing the loser into the wig." Riegel had made up this game as a way of torturing me. A brittle net material covered the inside of the hairpiece, and my brother the bully liked to pull it over my nose and push the scratchy lining into my face. The suffocation became my own definition of blindness. Not an absence of light, but a prickling concealment. A rough and painful mask.

"I guess we both played games with the damn thing," Mom said.

Mom was wrong to tell me about Dad. To let me know that he cheated and to make me afraid of the ways he could hurt me. He was a swindler passing for a saint, and as I sat beside him in his big American luxury car, I thought, "Be careful, Dad. I'm on to you."

My father had his wild streak, but he drove his Cadillac slow and steady like a grandma rocking a baby to sleep. It took us all afternoon to reach our destination. We exited the highway and a wooden historical marker welcomed my father and me to the small Atlantic village of Bellinghem, spelled with an "e." Another sign, this one metal and posted just a few yards away, welcomed us to Bellingham Academy. It was impossible to tell where the school ended and the town began. A run of dorms resembled coach houses. Fenced roads between

the dormitories felt like estate driveways. I'd been to Bellingham twice before for dinghy races. My sailing partner Cal and I had won our individual races but lost both regattas to the home team. They sailed high-performance Fireballs and had an ocean advantage over schools like Kensington that practiced on lakes with shifty winds. As I stared at the waterfront, the color and movement on the ocean created an optical illusion in my mind. The entire school appeared to float on water, like a life raft. I felt weightless. The rhythm of the waves reminded me of naval hymns, of songs about peril and rescue.

Most of us who found ourselves at Bellingham had been kicked out of better schools for stealing, or having sex, or smoking weed. Rich kids who'd gotten caught, been given a second chance, only to be caught again then finally expelled. We weren't bad people, but having failed that initial test of innocence and honor, we no longer felt burdened to be good. In some ways it was a relief to have fallen. To have fucked up only to land softly, cushioned, as my dad reminded me, "by a goddamn safety net of your parents' wealth." Bellingham offered us sanctuary, minimal regulations, and a valuable lesson: Breaking rules could lead to more freedom. Because the school catered to thieves, sluts, and dope fiends, it was understood that additional transgressions would be overlooked. If you could pay, you could stay. I comforted myself knowing that I'd lowered all future expectations. So long as I didn't torch my dormitory or poison my hall mates, I was free to take full advantage of the lax standards and leniency. But all this freedom would indeed cost me something: a stain on my reputation. I'd been Bellinghammed. It was almost as bad as winding up at Choate.

Dad parked in front of the Academic Center, a modern two-story building that clashed with its traditional surroundings. While the outside walls were dressed in silvery cedar shingles, the roof wore a crown of glass. A massive arch of shiny blue windows curved atop steel rafters. A giant dorsal fin. Either the building was masquerading as a fish or a fish was moonlighting as a building.

"Monstrosity," Dad said, slamming the car door. "How many donors does it take to screw up a building?"

"Looks like a barracuda," I responded.

All over campus, parentless students raced about wearing Vuarnet sunglasses and Hard Rock Cafe T-shirts. Happy delinquents newly freed from their families. A tribe of boys stood in a circle playing Hacky Sack. Each one wore a brightly colored woven Guatemalan belt tied around his waist like a signal flag.

My father took great pride in introducing me to the men in charge. His way of taking care of his son. We entered the Academic Center and found Dean Warr's office. Dad told me to wait in the lounge, so I slid into the bucket seat of a brown leather chair. At my father's request, I'd thrown on a blue blazer and a red tie decorated with dark blue sailboats. The tie was a gift from Ted Turner, commemorating the ten-year anniversary of his victory at the America's Cup. I'd swiped it from my dad. I looked entirely presentable except I'd forgotten to wear socks. My ankles stuck out all white and hairy, and I was worried Dad would notice, criticize me. In a few minutes, I heard laughter. The distinct sound of hands slapping backs. I stood up and pulled my pant cuffs down to my loafers.

"Dick, I'd like you to meet my son, Jason. Jason, this is Mr. Warr."

The dean had a broad back, a narrow waist. He smelled like limes and wore the school's colors: a maroon jacket and blue pants. The sport coat sleeves stopped short around his wrists. We shook hands. He invited me into the bright white light of his office. Dad waited outside.

The office had a view of some newly planted saplings.

"Your father tells me you're quite the sailor." He sat down behind his desk.

"When the wind is strong," I said and found a chair to sit in.

"I think we SeaWolves have a lock on the Tender Trophy this year." Dean Warr leaned forward on his elbows.

"That's tremendous, truly." I nodded, flashing my teeth and folding my left leg across my right knee. I covered the bare ankle with my hand.

"We'll get you set up with Mr. Tripp, the head coach."

The dean's facial expression reminded me of a clown's smiling face lacquered onto a plastic Halloween mask. I wanted to reach over, grab

the mask by its bulbous nose, and snap the cheap elastic string against his ears. A reverse slingshot.

"Your father's an important man. He's shared his deep concern over your future. At Bellingham, we specialize in fresh starts, second chances." The dean raised both of his eyebrows but tilted his head, so it appeared that only the right brow was lifted.

"I just hope to graduate in the spring," I said.

"In the meantime, enjoy yourself. Our girls are grade-A fresh. Not like that monastery Kensington. I bet it can get lonely in those boys-only woods." Dean Warr continued smiling, his lip sat caught on his teeth like a crook on a barbed-wire fence.

I said nothing in response but wondered what my father had told this man.

"Good." He stood up. "No more questions."

Up to this point, I hadn't asked him any. I didn't move out of my chair, felt welded to it. "I was wondering if you could tell me how they named the school."

"After the town and the Bellinghem family," he said.

"But they're spelled differently. I noticed driving up. Thought there might be a story. Some history."

"The 'a' looks better on the letterhead." Still smiling, he opened the door of his office and checked his watch.

Dad and I said good-bye in front of Whitehall, my new dormitory. Before he had a chance to drive off, I decided to cost my family something more and reminded Dad that I needed an allowance. He slipped a leather folio from his sport coat, tore out a blank check, and signed it. "I trust you to fill in an appropriate amount." Dad told me to open a bank account first thing in the morning and then to call his current secretary, his latest Gayla, to report the exact figure I'd deemed necessary for my financial survival.

We scanned through the car one last time to make sure I had unloaded all my belongings.

"Do me a favor?" he asked. "Try to like this place."

"They're all the same, right?"

"Don't lose that check." He looked me over. "Buy yourself a pair of socks, and call your mother."

"Anything else?"

"Be sure to tell us if you need something."

I knew we weren't going to embrace, but it surprised me that my father didn't hold out his hand or pat my back or wish me one last happy birthday. He nodded once and settled into the driver's seat.

There wasn't much for me to unpack, but the thought of hanging blue button-downs in my closet and fun-tacking posters and tapestries to the bare walls made me feel claustrophobic. I decided to go for a walk.

I followed the local wind, the sea breeze, and made my way through the town center, passing a post office, a general store, a bank, and an array of restaurants and gift shops. Bellinghem was a one-street venue. Everything the town had to offer sat lined up in a neat shooting gallery. Oval-shaped wooden signs swung outside the shops. Names stenciled in gold leaf. The SINGING LIGHTHOUSE, the CHARMED DOLPHIN, the LOST MERMAID. I figured these businesses catered mainly to parents visiting their children on weekends. Quickly, I thought of my own store names in defense: the Toxic Oyster, the Slutty Sea Nymph, the Nauseated Fishmonger. I imagined a time in midautumn when my parents would drive up for the weekend. My mother would make us all wait while she picked out some overpriced silver knickknack in one of the gift stores. The three of us would then walk down by the waterfront, speaking only to point out different yachts in the harbor. In the evening, at dinner, Dad would order a bottle of his favorite Barolo and make sure that I had half a glass. This is how it had been at Kensington. Year after year. But no one in my family had mentioned any visits.

After a mile or so of passing saltbox houses, the road turned into a long camel stretch of sand. A groin made of orange and purple stones ran into the ocean and divided the beach into two sections. My best friend Cal and I had spent summers together in Maine hurdling and jumping off every big rock we could find. I always seemed to be drawn to jagged edges.

The high tide rushed in and washed over the break. That far from shore, only the sharp tips of the rocks were visible, and a strange figure stood a hundred yards out, surrounded by waves, with no discernible path behind itself. For a brief moment, I thought it was a cormorant. The tall black birds have no oil on their feathers, so they stand with wings unfolded, waiting for the sun to dry their plumage. But as I walked closer, I saw it was a person. Even closer, and I knew it was a girl. She had a bundle of curly hair streaming behind her. The wet feathers turned into the folds of a long, colorful skirt. Her arms rested at her sides. She belonged on the prow of an ancient vessel. I couldn't see her face, but I imagined it. I'd been to Greece and seen broken statues. A tour guide told me that the heads were removed because the Greeks felt they were too beautiful for the conquering Romans to see. Had even one of those faces survived, it would have been hers.

For a few minutes, I just stood and watched her. She never moved. The tide continued to rise, and I knew that she risked being trapped. Risked being washed out by a rogue wave. With the break flooded, there would be no way for her to walk back to shore. Even a strong swimmer could be pulled out into the rip.

I waded into the cool water, pushing out with slow, deliberate steps. Waves lapped against my pant legs and sprayed the edges of my jacket. The sand fell loose, collapsed, and tried to swallow one of my loafers. Unwilling to lose a shoe, I pulled away from the suction and gripped my toes tightly into the soles. Before continuing, I thought quickly and removed my jacket, holding it above my head. I walked, pressing down with only my heels. Shivering and strutting in delayed motion, I looked ridiculous. The girl stood farther out than I had judged, and just as I thought I was getting closer, the horizon changed. Expanding the distance between us.

"Hello," I shouted. "The tide's coming in."

She didn't hear me, or else didn't feel like responding.

"The break's flooded," I yelled even louder. "You'll have to paddle in." I was still a good hundred yards from her, but my voice echoed and rang out over the waves. "Hello. Over here. Can you swim?" If she couldn't, I'd need to dive in and carry her back. "If you'd just nod or something to let me know." Her face remained hidden, with only a

hint of profile. A long, narrow nose and tall forehead. "I'm a strong swimmer. I can hold you." She offered no response. Maybe she was deaf, or foreign. "Do you want me to come out? Hey."

The "hey" got her attention. Just impolite enough. Just slightly menacing. I wanted to take it back and let her know I was concerned, not rude. She turned around quickly and looked to the beach. Then, like a gymnast preparing for a run of flips and tumbles, she skipped over the water in double time. From my view, she appeared to dance on the ocean. The rocks were arranged underneath her, just inches below the surface. Not the life-threatening flood I'd imagined. She hadn't been in danger. Not really. I stood, wet up to my hips, watching her reach shore.

Once she hit the sand, she hesitated and looked back. I took my jacket off my head and straightened my necktie. She smiled to me across the water, waved, and cried out, "Thank you."

"But I didn't do anything," I shouted.

"You have no idea." She waved again and started up the beach. Her voice didn't sound distorted or strained, but close, as though she was in the water beside me.

"Wait," I told her.

I tried to run and catch up but managed only to splash myself and drop my jacket. The only untouched part of me was the inside knot of my tie. I felt like a puddle.

The girl was safe and dry and gone.