

## Nightwatch – Tea on the Rail

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Hailey slides into the space beside me on the toerail and hands me a cup of hot tea.

- What's up?

I like Hailey. He's smart, gentle, confident. Only a few years older than me, but already the skipper. That's what they call the boss here. But he's not bossy. Not at all. And he never loses his temper.

It's my third time sailing. School sent me the first year; I remember how I was struck by how much bigger the boat was than I'd expected. So many ropes, so many new things, so many people. It all seemed so complicated.

But Hailey and the team teach you how to handle the sails, steer the boat, even use a chart for navigation. How to make tea at 45 degrees without scalding anyone. All the little tricks. Even how to cope, living for a week with so many people in such a small space. I've become so good at it that they keep asking me back. But the real lesson I've learned is that actually, sailing is about just four things. Four. The sea, the boat, and the wind. And you.

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It's that simple.

Not like home. There's masses more to keep track of at home. Like Mum. I was thinking about Mum when Hailey sat down. Worrying whether Dad would remember her tablets at the right time. Manage the wheelchair without flying into a fury. He's not been out long, and my nightmares have started again since he came back.

I slide a sideways glance at Hailey. His kind face greenish in the dim glow from the starboard running light. I bet no-one's ever gotten a bruise for forgetting the sugar in *his* tea. That's one of the reasons the boat's my safe place.

I hope Mum's ok. Safe. Not too anxious. I was worried about leaving her but she insisted. Says I do enough for her. Too much. Need to be with people my own age. Have fun. Make friends. But this is the first time I've left her with Dad. And I'm scared for her.

I try to forget my thoughts. Concentrate on the sparkle of phosphorescence a few feet below my old trainers. It's mesmerising, almost hypnotic. My feet are soaked from the occasional giant wave that comes along, but I don't mind. Mum would

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make a fuss, but she's not here. And wet feet can't hurt like a fist.

If there was anyone I could talk to about this stuff, it would probably be Hailey.

But I don't know how to even start. A salt tear burns its way down my cheek, reaches the edge of my chin and rolls, silent, into the Solent. Salt returning to salt.

I wish I could do that, melt and disappear into something bigger.

Hailey nudges my shoulder.

- Tea ok, mate? Penny for your thoughts...

I take a large gulp of scalding tea before I answer, to cover the shakiness of my voice.

- It's complicated.