

Nightwatch (revisited) – Cake on the Rail

The sea's been rough all evening, and by midnight everyone's already bundled into oilskins ahead of a forecast storm. I hand the helm back to Hailey, grab the piece of cake that someone thrusts into my hand, and slide into a space on the toerail next to the girl.

- Want some cake?

- Thanks.

She's all scrunched up into herself, disappearing into her oilskins like a hermit crab, trying not to be seen. Brittle as a seastar. She pulls little bits off the slice of cake with careful fingers, eats it morsel by morsel. Fragile, delicate, like she's savouring something for the first time.

I watch the waves a few feet below my old trainers. It's my fifth time on board, but this time is different. I'm a volunteer now.

The way the girl holds herself reminds me of my first trip. How vulnerable I felt. How it took time before I trusted this space, these people, enough to feel safe, enough to relax. Enough to open up. How when I did find the courage to open up to Hailey, I also found confidence to deal with other things. And how that

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confidence has changed my life beyond the boat.

Dad's out of the picture now. Mum's got a carer and a court order, and a new, relaxed smile. Encouraged me to go for it when I was invited to volunteer. Says nothing's ever made her prouder. That I've got a lot to give.

I didn't know what that meant, at first. A lot to give. I haven't even got new trainers. But Hailey explained that overcoming my own challenges means I can help others find safety too. That my experience and my time are the most valuable gifts. I'm still not sure I understand, but I know I want to give back, to help someone else get a taste of the magic that sailing's worked on me.

And this girl looks like she needs some magic in her life.

- That was nice, she says at last, rubbing skinny hands together, crumbs disappearing into the dark tumble of the waves.

- Want another slice?

- Nah, I'm good.

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We sit next to each other for hours, just watching the waves. The threatened storm fails to turn up, and as we approach harbour, night softening towards morning, the soft twinkle of the shorelights looks inviting. Safe. Dawn pinks the eastern horizon, and someone brings us mugs of hot tea. I glance at the girl and notice she's shivering.

- Cold?

- I'm ok.

I hear her voice catch on the words, sheer fabric snagging on a rock, and I know straightaway that she's not shivering, but crying. Silent tears, deep inside the sheltering hood of her oilskins. Tears that I recognise. At first, I'm not sure what to do; but then I think: what would Hailey say?

- Hey. Wanna talk about it?

- It's complicated.

- That's ok. Me and complicated, we go way back.