

Raw

by Laurel Foglia '08

Jay is on watch. Jay is the hired first mate. He's an alcoholic, but we don't drink underway. "Fish!" he yells from the helm. All the fishing gear belongs to him. Jay is a drifter. He's an unsatisfied Renaissance man with an anger problem, a broken back, unresolved issues and a sharp sense of humor.

I am already scrambling to my feet and back into my clothes. Even from my sunbathing perch on the foredeck, I heard the snap and whirr of the reel clicker. I can see the line, taut and quivering, as I duck under the boom and swing my way back to the stern, clinging to the mast stays.

I hadn't ever sailed before this trip. There are five of us on the boat now, four men and me. The captain, John, and his first mate, Jay, were hired to deliver a Taswell 56 yacht from Italy to Florida. Dave, Andrew and I signed on as paying crew. We are here for the trans-Atlantic experience and to help when we can. There were three others, but they sailed only as far as the Canary Islands.

It's been fifteen days since we were last in port in Cape Verde, off the coast of Senegal. All day, all night, everyday, in every direction all I can see is the slow inhale exhale of the ocean, the smears and piles of clouds and the curve of the sky.

"Don't touch it, it's mine!" I shout when I reach the stern.

Dave looks startled and backs away from the reel. I guess he hadn't taken me seriously when I said I'd handle the next fish on my own. Dave has sailed before, but only on smaller rigs. He doesn't understand why a "smart college girl" would want to get her hands dirty out here in the middle of the ocean. Dave is the son of new-age Buddhists, a "Dharma brat." He hates killing things but he does it anyway. He's twenty-one and an alcoholic in training. He wants sex. I keep reminding him that we are on a boat and we haven't showered in weeks. I don't sound convincing.

I grab the Wolverine work gloves. They are clumsy and stiff with brine. I brace my hip against the pulpit while one hand cranks the reel and the other guides the spool. It's a Dorado, a female. Her head is stunted and square. She jerks the line and breaks the surface of the water. I pull her in and up on deck faster than I thought I could. She's heavy and strong but I'm determined, almost angry, my jaw tight. I get the hook out and abandon the gloves. I try to hold her still with one knee and one hand and grab the hammer with the other.

Andrew is coming up through the companionway. He is looking forward to raw fish, makeshift sashimi, for dinner. Andrew is an obsessive-compulsive geneticist from Toronto. He spends most of the time below deck writing about germ warfare.

Dorados can change color under stress. She is still thrashing. Her smooth scales are orange and yellow, bright green darkening to a turquoise on her dorsal fin, speckled with royal blue.

"Kill it, Laurel! What are you waiting for?" Dave's voice startles me.

I look up at him through my sunglasses and my tangled hair. He growls and gestures at the hammer in my hand. My stomach lurches. I notice John. John is the captain. He's a financial consultant when he's not delivering boats, and a Buddhist priest when he's not consulting finance. He's sitting in the cockpit trying to look peaceful. I think he looks smug.

I swore to them I would kill the next fish we caught. I thought it would prove something, might gain their respect, or at least muffle the passive sexism. I thought it might make me feel stronger, more capable. I can see Jay smirking at me. This part seems easy every time he does it. Two blows of the hammer on each side of the brain and the fish stops twitching, the color drains from its scales. Dave usually cuts the head off right away and throws it overboard. I think his conscience settles when he can't see its eyes anymore.

The fish is beautiful. Her underbelly is turning an angry yellow. Her fins are deep grey and flaring. Dave is losing patience. The fish is gaping. I can see the rows of spiny teeth in her jaw. The tight skin of her cheeks is translucent red.

The hammer feels too heavy for me. I lower my arm. "You get this one," I say finally, "I'll get the next one."

Dave grabs the handle like he knew I'd give up. I hope there won't be any more.