

BILL DODGE

THE GYPSY EMPRESS

I HAD BEEN PESTERING THE FUNDY GYPSUM COMPANY for over a month without getting a response. My older brother Jack and I were living together in the North End of Halifax at the time. He had just started classes at the university, and I was a recent arrival “down east” and still using two empty Corn Flakes shipping boxes to hold all my clothes—one for dirty laundry, one for clean. I was planning to put off school and earn enough money to buy a used car, and I had already spent weeks riding the ferry back and forth across the harbour, gazing at all the different ships in port. One look at the *Bluenose II*—a replica of the gaff rig schooner and working fishing boat whose image is on the back of every Canadian dime—had convinced me I had to get a job at sea. It was the kind of big adventure I was looking for, but I knew getting hired wouldn’t be easy without any experience.

Jack had signed the lease for our two-bedroom upstairs apartment—a steal, he boasted, at \$125 a month—with one of the North End’s biggest landlords. Ronnie Cochran was notorious for buying distressed properties at sheriff sales and furnishing them with used appliances. Finding the apartment was a huge relief for my brother. He’d spent a miserable first year in campus housing being tormented by loud seniors who were binge-drinking *Hockey Night In Canada* fans. Jack was so relieved to be moving off-campus that he rented the apartment without noticing it had a major code violation. All the door frames were exactly six feet high, which meant that we were both a few inches out of luck. There was only one wall phone in the living room, so whenever the phone rang in the morning and one of us rolled out of our bedrooms to answer there was a loud thud when a forehead hit the door frame. A few early morning calls knocked my brother right off his feet. I was the slow learner and hit the floor with astonishing regularity. Fortunately I was already up making coffee when the morning call came from Captain Graves. He said *The Empress* was in the port of Montreal taking on a load of wheat and would be sailing for Kingston, Jamaica in 48 hours. If

I was ready to join her crew, there would be a ticket waiting for me at the Halifax airport. Take it or leave it. I took the offer immediately.

In the struggling rural economy of the Annapolis Valley, the “gypsy boats” were legendary. Farm boys, fishermen, and former felons were all able to find gainful employment on the ships. As it turned out, the timing of my hiring was lucky. It wasn’t too long before the Fundy Gypsum Company itself would fall on hard times and start relying on foreign crews to save money.

Soft enough to break up in your hands, gypsum is a white, chalky, sedimentary rock that’s mainly used for drywall and plaster. It can also be found as a byproduct or binding agent in everything from shampoo and toothpaste to plaster and cement. With a bustling population of 1200, the tiny port of Hantsport was connected by a short rail link to the gypsum mines in nearby Windsor. According to geologists, these local gypsum deposits were caused by the evaporation of an inland salt-water sea roughly 350 million years ago. Proud Nova Scotians like to think of the tides in the Bay of Fundy’s Minas Basin as the 8th wonder of the world. Rising to a world-record height of over 50 feet, they pose a real challenge for navigators. Arriving at Hantsport on the rising tide, the Fundy Gypsum Company’s ships would have to load and sail out before being left high and dry in the red mud. Built for salt water but no bigger than the fresh water “Lakers” that regularly ply the Great Lakes, the company’s bulk carriers could only make it all the way into Hantsport by unloading their ballast water and coming in as light as possible. In its heyday, the Fundy Gypsum Company had the bragging rights for one of the fastest dock operations in the world. The average loading time for some 40 thousand tons of Hants County’s finest quarried gypsum was just over three hours. That was all the time the “gypsy boats” had to get back out at high tide.

A short, barrel-chested French Quebecker, Jean Pierre greeted me at the arrival gate in Montreal with a cigar stuck in the corner of his mouth and a sign with my name spelled wrong. He made it clear in his broken English that his job was to deliver me straight to the docks. I complained about the weather in my high school French, and that was the end of our small talk. Jean Pierre stubbed out his cigar and carefully pocketed it before getting behind the wheel of his black Chrysler. He motioned for me to get in the back seat and began inching his way out of the airport parking lot while the

windshield wipers battled with the heavy October rain. We crawled along Côte de Liesse Boulevard and onto the Métropolitain before the traffic eased up and Jean Pierre was finally speeding down Saint Urbain to Notre Dame East. After we reached the Montreal docks and passed through the port security gates, there was an eeriness to my driver's final farewell. He hadn't spoken a word in the car, but I imagined that he was ushering me into some quiet brotherhood—some unspoken seafaring code. The transportation had all been arranged by the company, so there was no business for him to conduct. After I grabbed my duffel bag out of the back seat, all I heard him mumble in the rain was "bonne chance," like he was bidding farewell to a ghost. Then he quickly slid back behind the wheel and drove off. I had barely taken in which pier we had stopped at. The whole port smelled like rotten fish, but it was a little late for second thoughts. Walking up the gangway of The Empress in my half-soaked ski jacket, I realized I still had no idea where I was going.

"You the new Officers' Messman? You'll need to report to Captain Reed right away. Follow me back aft. He's eating lunch in the officers' mess." Wearing rain pants and a hooded parka, my burly escort turned on his heels and started heading along the walkway at a brisk pace. Stepping into the room in front of me, he announced my arrival: "Reporting a new crew member aboard, Captain." All the officers looked up from their plates, but it was the weather-lined face and craggy white eyebrows at the head of the table that held my attention. The Captain gave me a thorough inspection.

"Good!" came the final response. "Let's introduce him to the Cook and get him settled in his quarters." That was it. Captain Reed was clearly more interested in finishing his lunch than talking to me. It wasn't exactly the reception I was hoping for, but I was already being directed towards the galley. The encounter there with the Cook was just as abrupt. Nobody called him Captain, but I could see from George's swagger, shuffling behind his hot stoves, who was really in charge. With the right active ingredients, he could probably sink any ship.

"So you're the new Officers' Messman?" George didn't wait for my answer. "If you're seasick, we'll throw you overboard!" His pale sweaty face broke into an amused scowl. Dressed in galley whites, George's ample belly jiggled proudly over his belt. Turning to stir one of his pots, it was impossible not to notice the thick wallet bulging out of his back pocket. He had said all he wanted to say for now.

Officers' Messman had to be one of the lousiest-paying jobs at sea, but it was one I'd taken on eagerly. The main duties included mopping alleys, cleaning officers' cabins, serving meals in the officers' mess, washing dishes, and bringing the Captain his afternoon tea. Most of the time, I'd be working in the galley with George, the Second Cook, and the Crew's Messman, whose name was Bob. When he greeted me in the crew's empty mess, Bob avoided eye contact by slowly rubbing out his cigarette with his shoe. A white-haired skeleton of a man wearing a T-shirt and sporting a buzz cut, he had two prominent tattoos: a dagger through a rose on his right forearm and a cross and anchor on his other arm. Based on his pallor, it seemed likely his main diet was cigarettes and hard liquor.

"The galley staff and engine crew sleep back aft. Deckhands and officers are all up forward," he shrugged, heading towards the door. Bob led me out of the mess and down a ladder to the lower deck. "There isn't much to it—four bunks, a table, and some lockers," he said, opening the cabin door. "Your bunk's below me. The Utility Man and Second Cook sleep in the other bunks. We start early—5:30 every morning. One word of advice: mind your own business. If you have any questions, just ask the Cook."

It didn't take long to appreciate just how important an ally the Cook was. And much to my surprise, I got on George's good side right away. It was a lucky break. During my first breakfast in the crew's mess, he noticed that I didn't reach for any salt or pepper on the table. He took it as a compliment. After a week of noticing that I still wasn't adding salt or pepper to my food, he announced to everyone in the crew's mess that I was the only one who appreciated his good cooking. From then on, I wasn't treated much better than the Second Cook. Lester was the galley's chief potato peeler and pot scrubber, and he annoyed George by spending most of his time complaining about his wages and boasting about his sexual exploits. "Keep a cool tool fool" was one of the Cook's regular quips, but it was almost impossible to keep a muzzle on Lester. George was well-known on board for refusing to fraternize with any crew members. He preferred his own company and never left the boat during shore leave, although he would often get the Purser to do a special shopping errand for him.

I don't know how I got the order mixed up, but my first big reprimand came after serving the Captain a bowl of prunes for breakfast. I was sure I'd heard him ask me for prunes, but he insisted he'd ordered brown toast. "What is this!" he barked. "I won't put up with any games on my ship, young

man. Are we clear?" I was too embarrassed and too stunned by my mistake to look at him. Later, I learned the whole miscommunication was intentional. Lester told me that the Captain had his own long-standing hazing rituals and that he liked to break in every new Officers' Messman in front of the officers. My second big initiation came a few days later in rough seas. I placed a bowl of hot corn chowder in front of the chief engineer and watched in horror as it immediately slid off the table into his lap. He swore at me and left the mess immediately. As soon as I started cleaning up, the Chief Mate took advantage of the situation and the Captain's absence to ask me for a bottle of ketchup. Without thinking, I brought out a bottle from the fridge in the galley and placed it on the table. With the first roll of the ship, the bottle hit the deck, splattering ketchup everywhere. When George heard all the laughter, he stepped into the officer's mess and apologized a little too sincerely on my behalf, while winking at the Chief Mate and the others. Later, he gave me some essential tips on how to serve food in rough weather, including the right way to sprinkle water on the tablecloth so everything would stick to its surface. The Cook also showed me how to prepare the Captain's tea tray. The tips included stuffing a paper napkin into the spout of the tea pot and sealing the cream jug with tin foil. Then he made me wrap the whole tray in a big towel to keep the tea warm and make sure the Captain's favourite cookies arrived crisp.

In rough weather, getting all the way from the galley to the bridge with the Captain's tea sometimes turned into a spectator sport. With huge waves washing over the decks and hatches and gusts of wind nearly blowing the tray out of my hands, getting to the bridge had its challenges. Watching the entertainment from the crew's lounge, a few crew members liked betting on whether I'd make it past midships without being swept overboard. Timing the waves was more of an art than a science. With both hands holding the tray, the handrails on the walkway were useless. I had to brace myself for every roll and pitch of the ship, so every step was a balancing act. Lucky for me, I never got seasick. The trickiest part about reaching the Captain's quarters was having to hold the tray with one hand while turning the steel latch on the fo'c'sle door. I was never comfortable turning my back on the ocean in a storm.

Whether I served him in his cabin or on the bridge, Captain Reed always made me wait while he poured his first cup of tea. If his tea arrived lukewarm, I had to do the whole exercise all over. That happened a few times be-

fore I learned how to prepare the tray by adding the boiling water last to the tea pot. One afternoon, after nearly a month of reliable service, the Captain surprised me by asking if I was ready to apprentice as an ordinary seaman. He let me know that I still had to take care of my regular duties, but he could start training right away by giving me some night watches. I thanked him and took up the training on the bridge deck. It didn't take long before he had me doing short tricks at the wheel too, but only during daytime and when he was on the bridge. Standing at the helm for the first time was a huge thrill. At first I could barely tell the difference when I made a small course change. The lag in the ship's response always seemed too long. "Five to port and five to starboard" were simple enough instructions from the Captain, but one afternoon we entered Galveston Bay, and a ship's pilot with a thick Texan drawl boarded *The Empress*. When I joined the Captain on the bridge for more training, all I kept hearing was "hard to port" when the Texas pilot was really saying "five to port." Captain Reed had remained on the bridge to keep an eye on me and assess my response to the pilot's commands. "What are you doing!" he yelled, repeating one of the Texan's steering commands in plain English before grabbing the wheel. I knew then that my ordinary seaman's training was in jeopardy.

"Come on, get up Bob!" yelled Donny, bursting into our cabin in the middle of the night.

"Turn off the light, fuck! I'm sleeping," Bob yelled back.

"I need a drink!"

"Leave me alone asshole!"

"I need some booze right fucking now, Bob!" A shirtless, red-bearded tub of a man, Donny stood only a few feet from my bed, oblivious to Lester and Gordon, who lay dead-silent on their bunks. Donny's big hairy belly spilled out over his tight-waisted blue jeans as he grabbed hold of Bob's ankles and began pulling him, feet first, off the bunk directly above me.

"Get up you bastard! I know you've got something!"

"Fuck off, Donny! Leave me alone!"

Donny kicked the metal locker next to my bunk, about a foot from my head. The kick left a dent in my locker. Bob was all skin and bones, 150 pounds at most, and no match for Donny. It was clear our cabin mates weren't about to get in the way of Donny's fists. Officially, *The Empress* was a dry ship, but everyone knew the Captain and officers would keep looking

the other way if the crew kept their drinking under control and out of sight.

"There's nothing here!" insisted Bob, nerves twitching. "Now fuck off and leave me alone, or I'll report you to the Bosun." There was no way Bob was talking Donny down from this confrontation. I'd never seen a case of the DTs, but Donny's whole body was trembling.

"I saw you buying rum! Come on!"

"Fuck off, man! It's all gone!"

"Jesus, man, I need something!"

"Get off me!" Bob shouted, somehow pulling his feet out of Donny's grasp and recoiling like cornered prey to the top of his bunk.

"Look at this, man!" Donny stepped back into the light and hauled down his jeans and underwear. "It's getting worse."

"Fuck Donny, what are you showing me this for!"

"It's a serious dose." Bob sounded genuinely sorry. The rash looked scary, but what scared me more was the way Donny's whole body kept shaking.

"I can't take it anymore."

"You gotta tell the Captain!"

"It'll be days before we get into port."

"Ask the Cook to give you a shot of penicillin. You know he keeps some in the fridge for emergencies."

"C'mon man, you gotta give me some booze!"

"Talk to Glen. I know he bought a few 40-ouncers in Tampico."

"You cocksucker! He told me to speak to you."

"Sorry man, I'm all out! Now fuck off and leave us alone!" Bob gestured at his silent bunkmates across the cabin. "Leave or we're going to talk to the Captain." Donny got the message. The cabin door slammed shut with a parting curse that echoed down the alleyway.

At times, alone at night on the watch and staring into the pitch-black darkness for other ships' lights, the universe had no up or down. The 12,000-ton *Empress* was unmoored in a vast ocean of stars, as if it had no direction or home port. Once, we were approaching a field of oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico, and I could have sworn I was looking at a small city lit up with rows of streetlights. The seas' disorienting effect was strongest on moonless nights. In the warm waters of the Caribbean, I enjoyed hanging out on the deck during afternoon breaks to watch the dolphins and flying fish leap in

the bow's wake. The dolphins were tireless acrobats, hanging motionless in the air for a few seconds as if they were winking at The Empress and saying, "see what I can do." Their bow-surfing could go on for hours, but I had to get back to work.

Jamaica was one of the more popular destinations among the crew. As soon as we reached Kingston and the ship's lines were secured, the whole port swung into action. Stevedores and deckhands began opening the hatches and swinging conveyor belts into position over the holds. The conveyors and heavy equipment were all operated by the port. Everyone looked forward to getting a break from their normal routines and going ashore. We were told the unloading would be finished by the end of the day, but Captain Reed had scheduled 48 hours for the ship to be resupplied, which was plenty of time to enjoy some local hospitality. It was also enough time for Donny to find a medical clinic.

"Taxi, mon! I be driving straight to Kingston town. Anything you want boss, no problem."

"Jah say, 'why not give the gypsy boys something special?' One pound free for every two pounds. The Blue Mountains' best ganja."

"Come over here, cherry boy. Take a walk with me on the beach, and I do you for free."

"Tag Heuers! Fine watches. Best knock-off prices."

"Don't make eye contact," said Lester, keeping up a brisk pace as we kept walking through the gauntlet of service providers. I stayed in lock step with my two cabin mates. Gordon, the Utility Man, had been raised in the Valley not far from Lester's family farm near Avonport. It was clear these Valley boys had been working on the gypsum boats long enough to know every kind of hustle. We passed two shirtless Rastafarians in the parking lot with nearly waist-long dreadlocks. One was holding a machete casually against his bare shoulder while talking with the taxi driver and laughing. The three men waved at us, inviting us over.

"Jamaica's a fucking war zone," said Lester. "Just ignore them. The government cracked down on gangs here and passed strict gun laws."

"You can get life imprisonment just for owning a few bullets," added Gordon. "That's why you see the Rastas walking around with machetes."

There was a cluster of straggly-looking palm trees by an abandoned pool about a mile down the harbour road. Lester said some crew members were planning to go up into the mountains to score ganja, but everyone knew

it was a risky venture. Drug-sniffing dogs were brought on board in some ports. No one knew when there might be a random police inspection. Gordon said there were different ways you could try to fool the dogs, but they didn't always work. He said some crew members would try to seal their dope in a plastic bag and hide it in a pail of water with their dirty laundry. Sprinkling pepper around your cabin was just foolish, he said. Hurting the dogs just guaranteed your cabin would be subjected to a more thorough search. We agreed that getting busted in a foreign port in Mexico or Jamaica was no joke.

The three of us kept walking along the beach road toward the palm trees, eager to get away from the welcome scene at the dock. As soon as we reached the deserted park with its one bench under the shade of one of the palms, we sat down and stretched out our legs, lighting up cigarettes. Cigarettes were part of our regular pay. Every two weeks we received a free carton of Export A along with our wages. Pay day was a sacred ritual for the whole crew. We would line up outside the Captain's quarters, entering one at a time while he doled out the brown pay packets from his safe. The crisp American dollars were always carefully pre-counted, and the free cigarettes were handed out at the same time—one carton per sailor. The downside of being paid in cash on the high seas is having to carry your accumulated wages with you or find a place to stash all the cash somewhere on the ship. Everyone is always looking over their shoulder.

After a few minutes puffing away on our Export A's and congratulating ourselves on finding our secluded haven, Lester and Gordon began discussing the Rastafari Movement and their favourite reggae bands. They were both convinced that Prime Minister Michael Manley and his opponent Edward Seaga were trying to capitalize on Bob Marley's popularity. Listening to the conversation, my eyes began drifting lazily up the slope overlooking our waterfront retreat. Suddenly several armed men appeared out of nowhere on the crest of the hill.

"Shit!" I blurted out.

"Where the fuck did they come from?" responded Lester, genuinely alarmed by the gang of prisoners wearing ankle chains that the guards were leading down the hill towards us. That was the first moment I noticed that the abandoned pool next to us had barbed wire strung along the top of its cement walls.

"This is a fucking makeshift prison yard!" Gordon declared, suddenly

recognizing the situation. "Quick! Throw them your cigarettes!"

The guards had been keeping a close eye on us as they marched the prisoners towards the pool gate, and they noticed our small act of charity right away, but they didn't seem to care. Two of the prisoners grabbed the cigarette packs as soon as they landed near their feet, and a third gave us a thumbs-up. Then one of the guards opened the lock on the gate, and the men started filing into the derelict-looking compound. At least twenty prisoners must have passed in front of us. Was this some daily exercise regime? We never found out, as we made a hasty exit without saying farewell.

The most harrowing place on Earth has got to be the Atlantic in the middle of a storm. It was just my luck that on our return voyage to Nova Scotia and the remote port of Little Narrows in Cape Breton, The Empress got caught in a hurricane. Crashing into thirty and forty-foot waves with no cargo to stabilize the ship, we went from thirty degrees heeled over on one side to thirty degrees heeled over on the other. When officers who've spent years at sea start skipping meals, you know you're in the middle of some serious weather. I counted the seconds, and I recalled some lines from "Maximus, to himself"—a favourite poem of mine written by the Gloucester poet and self-described "archaeologist of morning" Charles Olson:

I have had to learn the simplest things
last. Which made for difficulties.
Even at sea I was slow, to get the hand out, or to cross
a wet deck.

The sea was not, finally, my trade.

Soon the ship began attacking the waves directly, shuddering from bow to stern as we climbed each wave and then slammed back down on the water. The Captain was taking us deliberately off course into the open ocean to meet the waves head-on. One thing was damn sure: I wasn't bringing the Captain his tea. There was only one way to get across midships anyway, and that would involve scrambling down into the engine room with one hand on the ladder and the other trying to hold onto a tea tray. I remained holed up for the duration with Gordon, Bob, and Lester in our cabin. Gordon had heard that the engine crew had to get out their welding torches to try and plug a leak in the hull. A breach was the last thing I wanted to think about.

Bob and Lester didn't talk much. We were all trying to hold onto our stomachs. By the third morning, the massive storm had vanished like one big magic trick. Everyone went back to work like nothing had happened.

Who knows if six more months might have changed my mind, but I'd seen enough. When the ship's purser told George that the company was sending drivers to Little Narrows to pick up disembarking crew members, I jumped at the opportunity. Six months at sea was long enough for me. The desire to be back on stable ground was overwhelming. When I informed the Captain of my decision, his blunt response was: "I thought we'd make a seaman out of you." He had no idea how little appeal a life at sea had now for the youngest crew member on board. The last few days of our approach to Cape Breton were bitterly cold. When it was time to empty out my locker and say farewell to my cabin mates, I found Bob sitting on the edge of his bunk and taking swigs from his nearly empty bottle of Bacardi. Bob knew the cargo holds were empty when we left port, but he was convinced that the ballast tanks were empty too. He kept telling us that the Captain had nearly killed us and that I was doing the smart thing by getting off the ship. Lester and Gordon just rolled their eyes at me and went on listening to Bob's rant. We knew ballast water was a dirty secret. Ships travelling to and from Europe and Asia were known to carry billions of viruses and bacteria in their ballast tanks, along with invading species like zebra mussels. Lester and Gordon told Bob there were rules about when and where ballast water could be released, but Bob wasn't hearing any of it. The Captain had nearly sunk *The Empress*, he declared. Ships sailed under every kind of flag and foreign registration, and they were dumping at will, he said. *The Empress* was registered in Bermuda, so who was responsible? If it was up to him, Captain Reed would lose his job permanently.

When Bob was finished, Gordon added some of his own parting advice. He told me to keep an eye on the bluffs overlooking the docks. If the RCMP was going to board the ship and do a bust, then I'd see some locals parked up on the cliffs flicking their cars' high beams. I didn't know who else was getting off at Little Narrows, but there were no cars or signals when we approached. *The Empress'* arrival in the bitter cold was met by only a few company taxis and a resupply truck. The rest of the parking lot at the dock was empty.

After surviving an epic pummelling at sea, the long road trip back to

Halifax in a heated car felt like paradise. I had one companion with me in the backseat: a deckhand from Kingsport named Pete, who hadn't been home for over a year. After we made some small talk, he pulled a photo out of his wallet and showed me his wife and five-year-old kid.

"Did you hear about Donny?"

"No. What about him?"

"He never got back aboard in Kingston. I thought you heard."

"Nobody told me."

"I talked to the Purser. He said the Captain called around to some local health clinics before reporting that he had a missing crew member to the police."

"So he just left port without him?"

"Happens all the time. That's the same way you got hired. We had an Officers' Messman disappear on us in Montreal."

"You're shitting!"

"Fuck, no!" I was shocked by the news. No one had ever said anything about who I replaced. Outside the car window, the snow-covered hills rose up like sea swells. The stark white beauty of the Cape Breton landscape and thoughts of returning to friends and family had made us both quiet. Our bodies were absorbing the strangeness of being back on land again and navigating these icy roads. It was odd, but after I heard about Donny's disappearance the face of the ship's electrician kept popping into my head. He was a loner, who worked by himself and never said much to anyone, and whenever the crew had gone ashore at a port he would always turn up with a black eye or fresh cuts and bruises on his face. I was still thinking about his face when Pete asked our driver to stop at the nearest liquor store. We had just entered Truro, and he immediately pulled into a Sobeys's parking lot.

"Sorry there boys, but the company's free transportation comes with rules," Finlay said. "There's no drinking inside the car."

As soon as we stopped, Pete hopped out of the back seat and headed straight for the Liquor Commission next to the supermarket. I knew I had to join him for this final rite of passage, so I followed him inside. Pete picked out a bottle of Johnnie Walker and a twelve-pack of Keith's. I really didn't want anything, but I knew that I couldn't leave empty-handed without disappointing him, so I bought a bottle of cheap table wine—Retsina—that I remembered drinking once at an art college party downtown. It tasted horrible, a bit like vinegar and pinecones, but I had to buy something. Pete

left the store ahead of me. The cashier looked surprised, but he bagged the Greek wine without saying anything.

The drive had taken over four hours, and the April snow had gradually turned to a cold rain as we approached Halifax. We passed through Dartmouth and then slowed down for the tolls on the Angus MacDonald bridge. I could see the ferry docking on the Halifax side of the harbour. After crossing the bridge, Finlay turned onto Gottingen Street and then onto Almon. Finally, the black Chrysler coasted to a familiar stop.

"Here's your address," Finlay said, and he helped me grab my duffel from the trunk.

"Don't forget this!" grinned Pete, rolling down the back window so he could hand me my bottle. It was still wrapped in its brown paper bag.

"Thanks." I was already wishing he'd forgotten. As we said goodbye, and I watched the car pull away from the curb, I knew Pete would be heading back to sea in a month or two, and we'd probably never see each other again. It was only when I started up the apartment stairs and reached for my keys that I discovered his parting gift. He had unknowingly handed me his bottle of Johnnie Walker. Pete wasn't going to be too happy with me when he got home and discovered a bottle of warm Greek Retsina in his bag.

Returning home unannounced, I had no idea what to expect. I hadn't spoken to my brother since I left, but I had been sending cash home regularly to cover my half of the rent. There had been no way to receive letters from him anyway.

I knocked twice before opening the door, unsure whether my brother would be home. Stepping inside, it took a moment to fully absorb what greeted me. Jack was out, but books and papers were scattered all over the floor and in random piles against the living room walls. The ugly shag carpet had what looked like an oil stain, and there was a full ashtray perched on the arm of the sofa. An image of a winter forest with blackened tree stumps was thumbtacked to the wall—part of a wall calendar that still displayed the month of February. In the kitchen, a trash bag smelled like it had been fermenting for days, and there was a pile of mostly junk mail on the table along with a film schedule and two empty prescription bottles. I recognized one of the envelopes, which I'd mailed home with April's rent. Everything seemed out of balance, and it hit me then that my brother had been navigating his own rite of passage. We were both stranded now with no map and nowhere we belonged, heading toward a horizon neither of us could see.