

### What Matters Most

After taking a shower, I pick up my phone and call Lauren. “Hey, I got your text what’s up?”

“Wow. Now is when you call back?”

I tilt my head and cradle the phone against my shoulder to prepare a nightcap. “Look, I have had a long day and really don’t have time for none of your shit.”

“You never have time for much of anything Damian,” she said.

“Not when every conversation is some sort of accusation or some means to start a fight. I’m tired of it Lauren.”

“It doesn’t matter how you feel about me. Hell, it doesn’t matter if we never speak to one another--”

“--Sound’s like Heaven,” I said as I place the cork back into the Hennessy bottle.

“You’re so god damn infuriating,” she said snidely.

“What is it you want? Is it about Mike?” I place the drink on the coffee table and sit on the edge of my leather black and teal sofa to enjoy the clear panoramic view of the city lights.

“Your son has been asking about you. He calls and you don’t pick up.

“I am working I can’t always an—”

“--The longer you are away affects his mood, his confidence, and overall productivity at school asshole!”

I let out a deep breath. “Ok, what do you want from me Lauren?”

“He got into a fight today because someone said he had no dad.”

“Good, I hope he messed whoever it was up.”

“That’s not the point Damian!”

“I have an important business trip tomorrow--”

“—Is your trip more important than your son?”

“Fine! I’ll cancel the damn trip,” I said reluctantly. I’ll pick him up tomorrow and take him fishing on Flash.” I take another sip of Hennessy to calm my irritation.

“It’s the least you can do!” she said and hung up abruptly.

I toss the phone on the table and stare at the city lights. “I’m gonna have to call Steve. He’ll have a panic attack when I ask for the week off.” Steve tried to change my mind, but I knew he didn’t want to pass the assignment off to the inept wolves in sales. “Goodbye commission...”

“We’re going so fast dad!” Michael said with a full smile on his face. His little knuckles turn white the tighter he held Flash’s gold railing to keep from bouncing in his seat. “I bet we look like a red and gold blur!”

“With hard work you can have your own Flash one day,” I said returning his smile.

“Look at me, we are go getters. We strive for greatness. With time--”

“-Woah... Papi, look, omg, look over there!” Michael said excitedly pointing towards Flash’s starboard side.

Two dolphins majestically weave in and out of the calm blue water alongside Flash like thoroughbreds racing to the finish line. Joyful clicks fill the air as they perform wonderous feats of aerial acrobatics. The sun shone brightly, and the waves made Flash hop along like a giant red rabbit. The salty mist lands coolly on our faces as the view of the shore became smaller and

smaller. Once we were far enough, I throttle down Flash and lower the anchor. "Go get the fishing rods Mike."

"Ok," he said rushing down into the storage compartment.

We move toward the rear deck and kick our feet into the water then cast out lines and sit in a momentary silence as flash bobbed on the water.

"I heard you have been having some trouble in school" I said playfully bumping into him.

"Someone said something I didn't like," he said remorsefully.

"Buddy, people are gonna tell you things you don't like all your life. Sometimes it's jealousy. Some people like to watch you get torn down."

"What do you do?"

"I actually like it, it makes me work harder to show them that I am better than they are."

"Mommy says I need to not let it bother me and to just be happy with myself."

"Well she's not wrong... but you can also have it make you stronger. You can use that anger like fuel to push you." As we sat together talking, the thought of my lost commission began to fade. We talked about his interest in some show about robot dinosaurs and guys in suits, and his interest in talking pony's. Before we knew it, it was just past five. "Come on buddy we should probably start making our way to shore," I said as I place the lid on the bucket of fish we caught. "Did you have fun?"

"Oh yea!" he said flashing me two thumbs up.

I raise the anchor and fire back up Flashes engines slowly increasing the throttle to thirty knots. I reach overhead to turn check the GPS and radio only to be interrupted by a momentary sputter and click from Flash's engines. "What the hell?" I said raising a curious eyebrow.

“Is everything ok Papi?” asked Michael shifting nervously in his seat. The wonder from the day’s events disappears from his eyes and the smile he wore fades. “Why did the boat shake like that?”

“I’m sure we’re fine buddy, just give me a sec.” I place my hand on the throttle and pull back slowly. Flash sputters again. “No, no, no... come on baby don’t you stall on me,” I mutter jerking the throttle forward in a feeble attempt to prevent the stall. Flash jolts forward once... twice... then silence. Frantically I crank the key, only to be rewarded with the sound of water gently lapping against the side of the boat.

“Dad?” Michael said nervously.

“Give me a second buddy, I’m sure everything is fine.” With my back to Michael, I press power buttons on random equipment on the console, but nothing turns on.

“Dad, I am scared.”

“Well, then why don’t you pull out your sketchbook and draw something while I try to fix this.”

“OK,” he said wearily. Michael jumped down from his seat, to retrieve his white and blue Monster’s Inc pack, then pulled out his sketchbook and color pencils. Upon his return, his foot gets caught in the backpack straps. He stumbles and his supplies scatter across the white deck.

“Michael...” I said unable to hide my irritation.

“I-I’m sorry dad...” Michael crawls on the deck to recover his materials.

I take a deep breath, grab the mic from the overhead radio and key it. Nothing. After slapping it against my palm a few times I key it again. Still nothing. A tone emanated from my pocket. I reach in and withdraw my phone; I had forgotten to charge it the night before after my conversation with Lauren and as a result the battery was running on empty.

Michael sat down on the deck of the boat. “Dad, is there anything you want me to draw?”

“No buddy just draw what you feel like drawing,” I said walking around the deck looking for a signal. I made it to the bow when I finally got a bar of signal when it was flooded with text messages from Lauren and Steve. Without hesitation I call Lauren before the bar can drop.

“You asshole—”

“--Lauren shut up listen quick, the boat died and were adri—” I was cut off by three quick tones and the phone powered down.

I plop back onto the deck and look over at Mike still drawing. I stand up and sit next to Michael and glance at the picture he was working on. It was a crude yet beautiful drawing of him and I fishing off the back of Flash. The night went on and Michael became sleepy. I placed a life vest down as a pillow and laid down next to him covering us both in a tarp. Day lead into night and night led into day. We talked and talked about the kind of dog he thought was the coolest, a girl he thought was cute in his class, and several other things you would think I would know. But I didn't... When we ran low on water, I began to ration it. The days were the worst, our skin turned as red as Flash and began to cracked. The salt water only offered a temporary relief only to quickly dry out our skin. There was no way to steer Flash with no power. So, we waited. Eerily, although Michael was weak, he seemed content. I cover Michaels face with the corner of the blue tarp. “It can't end like this.”

Michael pushes down on the tarp and smiles.

“Here drink this,” Damian said, handing Michael some of his water.

Michael sips the bottle and passes it back. “Now you Dad,” he said. “Sure thing buddy,” I said, returning his smile. I press the bottle against my chapped lips and pretend to take a sip until Michael closes his eyes. I replace the cap, secure the bottle and reach for his sketch book with

my peeling hand. I flip through the pages as doing my best to squint in the blinding light. “Man, I wish we had some clouds right now,” Damian said faintly. Each page showed a different crude sketch, from each day trapped on Flash. One where we slept under the tarp, one of me staring at the phone, and another of him and I racing the dolphins. Then it dawned on me. We had nothing, but in each picture, he smiled. I felt the need to cry but I couldn’t. I hated myself for bringing him out here. He deserved more out of me. He looked up to me, and never cared for any of the gifts I gave him over the years. All he wanted was his father to be there for him.

“Do you hear that dad?” Michael said, sitting up and pulling himself to the railing.

I put down the sketchbook and listen. “It sounds like clicking....”

“Look dad, it’s the Dolphins again.”

We could see them much clearer now. The pair looked like a pup and a parent. They swam around the boat playfully squirting water onto the deck. I looked at Michael’s laughing blistered face and was resigned to do what I feared. Selfishly I considered the cost of losing the boat, and I knew there was a better chance to have Flash spotted due to her size so I didn’t want to let her go. But there was no way to maneuver her. For Michael. I rummaged through the safety equipment and found the raft. Floating away from here was a risk but I had to do something. I blew it up and tossed it into the water. I pick up Michael, a few supplies and we pushed away from Flash. I gripped the oars and followed the dolphins clicking until I grew tired and the world grew dark. I awoke wearily oars still in hand to the sound of a faint horn. Michael lay under the tarp still breathing shallow. I painfully push forward rowing exhausted until I heard it again along with a commotion of muffled voices. The world blurred and became a haze. My body was lifted as if floating on air. The noise around me grew louder and clearer until I jolted upwards looking around for Michael.

“Where... Where is he!” I said hoarsely.

“He is fine. We were chasing some dolphins and luckily we found you two,” said a strange voice pointing to an opposite bunk where Michael laid.

“Is he ok? Where are we?”

“He is fine, we found you both off the coast of the Keys. You’re the two reported missing aren’t you? Welcome on board my fishing trolley Angelica.”

“We drifted 80 miles...” I mutter.

I stumble out of the cot and made my way to Michael. I place my hand in his resting my head on his chest. “We made it buddy. We’re safe.”