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POINT OF VIEW

Love and Hate on Night Watch

How can you feel both, and at the same time, no less? Just ask a sailor on delivery **by Katrina Hays**

IBOTH ADORE AND DESPISE NIGHT WATCH. THERE IS NO MIDDLE ground here. Being awake and functioning at 0200 brings on feelings that are too strong. By all rights, I should be asleep between 2200 and 0600—deeply asleep, dreaming soundlessly, recharging my batteries. Yet sailors have another ridiculous and sublime way to spend time—night watch. Let me count the ways I loathe and love it:

Of Loathing

I hate getting up.

My boyfriend, Elliott, is so much better about waking up for his watch. I gently touch his ankle and say his name, and he jerks and says, “Hmmm?” He flips back the blanket, turns on the light, hops out of the berth, and puts on his clothes. Done deal.

On the other hand: Elliott gently touches my ankle and says my name, and I resentfully groan and squeeze my eyes tight.

“No, no, no, no, no, no,” I moan.

“Time to get up, Katygirl,” he says, leaving to go put water on to boil for my tea.

I lie there. I don’t move. I try to open my eyes. I pull the awful polyester blanket tighter around my shoulders. When I finally shame myself into throwing the blanket back, I usually sit up too fast and crack my head against the overhead of the berth and collapse back on my side, cursing.

I slowly pull my sweater over my head. I scootch to the edge of the bunk, put my feet against the side of the boat, and attempt to pull on my jeans. Sometimes I get stuck here. Elliott once came out of the head to find me with my jeans pulled up to my knees but no farther.

My eyes were shut.

Finally dressed, I use the head and brush my teeth. How can my mouth get so foul after just three hours of sleep? I stare groggily at my reflection in the mirror—the face is puffy and flushed, and the hair is pulled out from the braid and hanging in wads around the face. Lovely.

I stagger up to the galley and fumble for cup, tea bag, sugar, milk. I inevitably can’t find one of these things and snarl accusingly at Elliott, who sweetly kisses my cheek on his way to sleep in my berth. I hate him, too.

I struggle into my jacket, plaster a hat over my awful hair, look

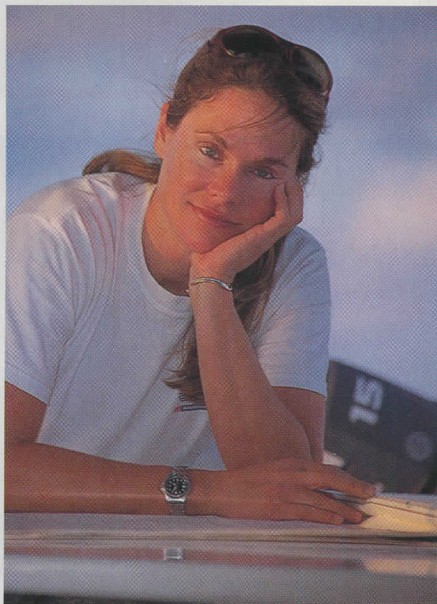
at the log, or try to, and gaze at the computerized track of our progress. Or try to. Up to this point, I am really still asleep.

I hate feeling sick.

Being inside a small boat moving across a large ocean at night can be disorienting to the novice sailor. The darkness combined with the odd sideways swooping of a Norseman 43 catamaran sailing to windward can be exquisite torture for those of us with unreliable stomachs.

When the conditions are just right, the oncoming swell

The delivery crew wrestles with her paradox, on paper.



compresses between the two hulls of the boat and periodically slams against the bottom of the saloon, resulting in an explosive bang that sends charts, unsecured mugs, and an unconcerned cat flying into the air. The only light in the saloon is an eerie glow from the computer screen. It makes me feel like I’m in a weird haunted house that glows, shrieks, bangs, and slides sideways. Barf city. Happily, merely getting to fresh air alleviates this feeling, and the helm is, thank heaven, outside. I grab my mug of tea and go topside.

I hate forgetting my tea bag in my mug and having a lovely cuppa turn into a foul brew of too much bergamot that’s so strong my teeth squeak together if I actually drink it.

I hate convincing myself that because I’m bored, I’m also hungry. I try to talk myself into the idea that fruit would be the best thing for me to eat. I envision one of those tart little tangerines in the bin waiting for me. I hate failing at this every single time and having a handful, or two, or three, of chocolate-chunk cookies.

On the one hand, moving across an ocean on a small sailboat at night is disorienting. On the other, the magic of sailing is stronger at night

Of Loving

I am, I confess, addicted to the sky at night. When I’m fortunate enough to have the heavens clear, I can easily spend my watch with my head tilted back, staring at the stars. I have my favorites: Orion, marching across the fall and winter sky; the Pleiades, who lead him; and Gemini, my birth constellation, following close behind. In the summer I love Cygnus, the swan, fly-

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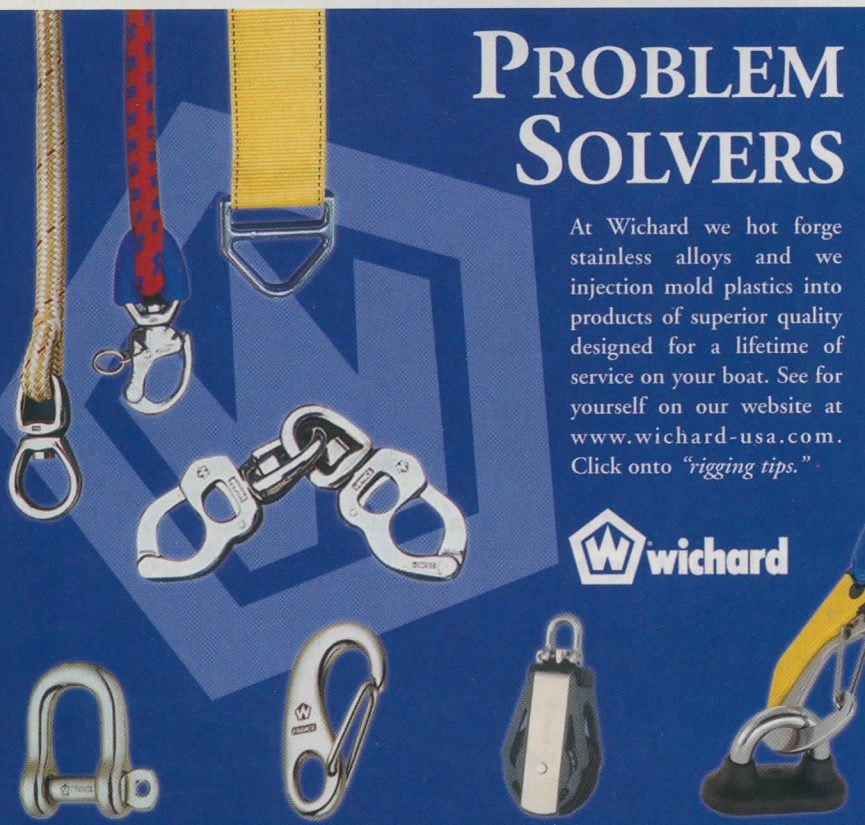
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ing across the heavens with little Delphinus tagging along.

But my Big Three are Cassiopeia, the Big Dipper, and Polaris. These were my earliest sky friends, and now I think of them as a fine trio: Cass, Dip, and Pol. Cassiopeia and the Dipper engage in an endless pavane, arms outstretched and dancing around Polaris.

I love my tea. I love the warmth of the mug in my hands. I love the perfect hot, sweet milkiness of it in my mouth. I love the way it feels as it hits my sleepy stomach, and I love the way it has just enough caffeine to wake me up but still allow me to sleep three hours later.

I love sailing at night. I adore slipping quietly over the water like an exhaled breath, eating up the miles while the world turns in darkness under the boat's hull. The magic of sailing is stronger at night. Swaddled in utter blackness, I become aware of the external signals of the wind and current that push the boat along. In the midst of the wide-open ocean, I have no landmarks to tell me that our course is the correct one. I look at the glowing computer and see proof that we're actually moving, mile after mile, toward islands we want to reach, and I simply believe.

I love watching the moon. I love the magic and majesty of her rising out of the ocean. I love her powerful light, fading and disappearing, then growing again to fat splendor over the course of the month.

Here's what I love best of all about night watch: Sometime around 0400, the night takes on a form and shape of its own. I slip into a zone in which the darkness, the late hour, the shifts and lurch of the boat beneath me, and the sound and touch of the wind all combine to lull me into a feeling of infinity. I am hypnotized by the night.

Suddenly, I notice the light. Just when I think that it can't get any darker, I'm startled by the loom on the eastern horizon. Startled—and immediately grateful. The night watch abruptly shifts to a sunrise watch. I stare at the growing, glowing light. If we're sailing due east, I have the sensation of being on a ball and rolling, rushing toward the sun. The pulsing red shimmer that quickly springs into the air and becomes a new day is a miracle. I am reborn. The world is reborn. I breathe in my new day.

And, at the very end of my night watch, I love the fact that I can go back to bed.

Writer, sailor, and former opera singer Katarina Hays is, for the time being, landlocked in Bend, Oregon.