**From Bow to Stern…**

Chad V. Broughman

Each wave swelled bigger than the last, as if Lake Superior was in hard labor, bearing child after child. Throbbing. Pushing. Moaning. While the torrents crashed against the *SS Edmund Fitzgerald*, Robert fought the instinct to clap his hands over his ears. He was the youngest crewman by a decade, still proving himself after emptying his stomach on the freighter’s upper deck. So, when taconite pellets spilled from a cargo-hold, he jumped at the chance to shovel up the mess. Sharp autumn winds biting his face. Fingers kinked, numb. And when a porter shredded his leg on the conveyer, Robert bandaged the grisly slash then forfeited his last swig of hooch. That’s why Captain assigned him to the boiler room. Slapped him on the back, reached to tousle his hair but thought better of it, offered his hand instead. “You’re an oiler now,” he declared. To that end, Robert came to be sweating at the bottom of the vessel as it rocked like a free-falling pendulum on a blustery November night.

Just as Robert was climbing up the ranks, Bruce, the other fireroom sailor, was slipping down—from able-bodied seaman to the stokehold. He worked straight-faced, stoic. Rumors of his bloated gambling debts roiled about the stern, as did his spells of carousing in Escanaba, most involving a fellow deckhand’s sweetheart. During off-duty, Bruce sat on the chief-deck, nipping on some Johnnie Walker, sharing details of his romps, never softening the particulars, even when the gal’s suitor stood nearby.

A constant hum of generators, pumps, and heat-exchangers left little room for small talk. For days, the two worked together in silence. But the wordlessness halted when a shipmate opened the hatch above, shouting, “Hold tight! Heading smack-dab into this goddamn storm! Waves hitting thirty feet!”

With a hefty nod, Bruce motioned Robert over. They perched on some cinder blocks, backs against the wall. “Breaktime.” He pulled off his shirt, mopped his neck. A barrel chest, patchy tufts of black hair. And a round middle, jutting over his belt like risen dough at a pan’s ledge. Robert stared at the pale green tattoo, an anchor spanning elbow to wrist, the crown having blurred with age. The numbers *7-7-69* were scrawled below it. Bruce said flatly, “My wife’s death day,” then squeezed his eyes shut. Robert waited, uncertain. Awkward space grew between them, like the instant before lovers first kiss. The ship leaned on its side, so far that the steam-drums and turbine were beneath them. Both men were knocked off kilter, left grappling for balance––taut faces, owl-eyed. An unforgettable wail sounded out, and the hatch lifted again. “Ol’ Russell cut his head on the king post. Can’t stop the bleedin’. We’re taking on water, too. Better come up, sea-dogs.” He left the cover open. The din of a ship’s distress poured in––loud, undeniable. And Superior roared, bending the barge double. Robert’s lungs pushed into his throat. As he scrambled to the ladder, Bruce spoke again, a low, even tone. “She was birthing our baby boy. Too much for her little body, I s’pose.” Robert paused, eyed the opening overhead, then Bruce, and sat again.

“50 knots, gentlemen! Hunker down!”

Robert’s heart thrashed his ribs as if it might pound through his chest, land at his feet. He sucked in quick, let the air out slow, like a leaking tire. Then he managed to say, “How old’s the youngster?”

“Oh, he died with her. Never even held the lad.” Bruce propped his meaty hands atop his thighs, clicked his tongue. “What brought you aboard the *Fitz*, kid?”

Robert tried to still the panic before speaking. He swallowed hard. “Army wouldn’t take me. Gotta flubbed eye.” Several rats scurried past, fleshy noses crinkling, beady eyes shining with fear. They watched the vermin until thin, naked tails were all they could see. “Pa was in a bad way, swung a feed basket at me. Said he felt sorry. But did it again soon after, nearly tore off my sister’s lip.” Above, Captain boomed, “If we can make it to Whitefish Point––” Another wave lurched the ship upward; a gale wind slammed it back down. “––too much cussed spray, can’t see land!”

“First time I saw the *Fitz*, I scanned her bow to stern.” Bruce’s words were breathy, strained. “Bigger than Hogback Mountain, I thought. Nothing’ll make her sway.”

“Main hatchway gave in, gentlemen! Fuckin’ ship’s going down!”

A sob escaped Robert’s mouth. Tears slid across his nose, jaw. He cupped his hands over his crotch to hide the piss soaking through. “I’m a coward,” he said.

“Sometimes, it’s the quiet ones with the yellowest bellies.” A long creak, then several pops, cracks. Captain barked out muffled orders. Over the tumult, Bruce bellowed, “What haven’t you done, boy? Tell me something you wanted to do.”

Robert’s chin quivered. Gravity tugged at everything around him, yet he felt loose, floating. “Tell my Pa he’s a pot-licker. And––” He sleeved his wet face. “I ain’t never been with a woman.” Stillness chewed up the air, in the boiler room, on the ship, and across the universe. Robert couldn’t fight any longer. He began to cry. “Should’ve known. I heard about the christening of this blasted ship. Took three tries to break the champagne bottle. And the day she launched, some poor bastard had a heart attack, died.”

Water sluiced through the hatch, rushing like a river. Bruce patted Robert’s knee, just once. The touch sparked a surge of anger. Robert flared like fire. “Stop pretending you ain’t afraid!”

The hull broke free. Metal crunched all around, the world folding in.

“I’m fucking terrified!” He blinked freshwater from his eyes. “Scared my life’s been full’a gall and hate. That I’ve shamed my dead, pretty bride. My son.” Grabbing Robert’s chin, pulling his face till their eyes locked, he hollered, “I ain’t half the man you are.” The big lake swirled at their necks. “Sorry, boy! May I burn in hell for unlocking the hatches.”