

## **The Wine Dark Sea**

*“The Power of Purpose” Essay Competition  
Fiction Category*

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The sun rose that morning much as it had for thousands upon thousands of mornings previously. For even when the sun was masked by clouds or blinding rain or snow, it was always there, rising in the East and setting in the West, eternal. The Sailor, being a man of some experience, knew this, yet he was grateful each morning to awake to the first hesitant tendrils of the dawn, as the sun announced its presence with a reassuring display of its fiery majesty.

The harbor in which The Sailor found himself this particular morn was a familiar one, for it was his home port. The high peaked roofs and pastel colored walls of the village were as recognizable to him as the back of his hand. It was a modest village, certainly no major center of commerce, simply a natural harbor from which men set forth to earn a living, fishing the rich banks off the coast or plying the great merchant fleets that routinely set sail from more prosperous environs in this land and abroad. Sometimes the men who went to sea came back, and sometimes they did not. The sea was an enchanting but harsh mistress, as fickle as a beautiful woman not lacking in suitors. Some of those who did not return were simply swallowed by the sea, wrapped in her liquid embrace until their lungs filled with water and they drowned. Others, seduced by the siren’s call of distant lands and wondrous new people and cultures, never saw fit to return, content to dwell in places far removed from the graves of their ancestors.

The Sailor had felt this alluring pull, had heeded the wanderlust that beckoned him forth time and again, whenever money ran short or the horizon seemed just a little too close for comfort. Yet he always returned to the place of his birth. Perhaps it was the comfort of familiarity, so welcoming after time at sea. Perhaps it was the security of knowing that no matter how far he roamed, or what adventures befell him, there was always a place he could return to. And yet it had not always been so. For as a younger and perhaps more foolishly naïve man, The Sailor had set forth on a journey from which he had not voluntarily expected to return. But the plans of men are ephemeral things, and as such are subject to forces much greater than can possibly be imagined, and as a consequence, are ever changing and malleable. Their purpose perhaps less so, but here is where our story truly begins...

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Even as a young boy, The Sailor knew that his heart belonged to the sea. Every day from the time he was old enough to venture forth on his own he would make his way to the water’s edge, to the expanse of sand and jutting rocks that formed a beach separating dry land from water. He would poke around the shoreline, seeking out the treasures that the tide would have deposited for his delight and inspection. Shells of various creatures, some mottled, some brightly colored. Scraps of seaweed or gnarled pieces of ancient looking driftwood, which came, The Sailor thought with the imagination of a bright and impressionable youth, from trees that might have once populated the Garden of Eden, or perhaps formed the planking of Noah’s Ark itself! When not combing the beach or wading into the eddy pools left behind by the pounding surf, The Sailor could often be found on the hills overlooking the village, gazing out to sea where the sails of those ships on a course outward bound could be seen silhouetted

against the eggshell sky. What wondrous sights might the men on board behold? What great challenges might they face? Headstrong and contrary winds? Bloodthirsty corsairs? Tempests called forth by Poseidon himself to rend and tear wood, metal, cloth and flesh? The Sailor’s eyes would alight with feverish passion at these thoughts, for he knew where his destiny called him, and where his purpose lay.

The dreams of youth are loath to die, and for The Sailor, this meant seeking passage on an outward bound cutter shortly after reaching the age of majority. He gathered together his sea bag, filled with all his worldly possessions, which were modest by any stretch of the imagination. A couple sets of warm and sturdy clothes; a leather pouch, useful for collecting things that might catch his fancy; a clasp knife with a smoothly worn handle and blade oiled and honed to a fine edge. The wing feather from a hawk that had captivated his attention with its steely gaze as it soared on thermal currents early on summer day, intent on the hunt. And perhaps his most prized possession of all, a leather bound copy of *The Odyssey*. Early in his youth, The Sailor had demonstrated a keen mind, and thanks to a young priest, had been bestowed with the gift of literacy. While The Sailor had been dutifully instructed in the texts of both the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, it was Homer’s epic tale of the Greek hero Odysseus that had fired his imagination. While the Greek siege of Troy, with all the fighting and subterfuge that entailed, would excite the blood of any young man, it was Odysseus’ long voyage at sea that had only increased The Sailor’s longing to feel the sway of a deck beneath his feet, to taste the salty spray of the world’s oceans, to hear the flap of canvas under tension as it filled with Poseidon’s breath. Like Odysseus, The Sailor knew that his destiny lay at sea and, with quickened pulse and shining eyes, he hoisted his sea bag and stepped aboard his first ship.

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The Sailor learned quickly that while it was true that some mariners were made and others born, the first passage tested them both. As he lay in his berth, suspended in his hammock, his stomach heaving and forehead bathed in sweat, he did, between bouts of miserable retching, question his resolve. Indeed, he questioned many things, including the existence of a merciful Creator, for how could such a being allow such suffering on His watch? The Sailor endured his rite of passage, perhaps not as stoically as he might have hoped, but such matters are at time beyond the ken of mere mortals. As it was, The Sailor progressed through the inevitable stages of the “mal de mer” that gripped him in its jealous clutches. The first stage, as his stomach emptied itself of its contents (and truth be told, The Sailor was amazed at what the stomach could hold), was accompanied by the unshakeable conviction that he would surely die. His misery was compounded by the unassailable realization, hours later, that he would not! This reality, from his tortured vantage point, brought not relief but merely horrific dismay as to the immediate future that awaited him. The Sailor lay in a tortured state for nearly two days, oblivious to the wonders which had drawn him to sea in the first place, content to take only sips of water between his episodes of sickness. On the morning of the third day, The Sailor arose and found that he could take his place alongside the ship’s company, wherein he could be initiated into the nautical brotherhood. For the next seven days, the student was as apt a

pupil as ever was, absorbing the intricacies of lines and shrouds, of hawsers and sheets, fore, aft, starboard and port. He learned to stay balanced on the balls of his feet, to adjust without thinking to the constant pitch and roll of the wooden vessel as it coursed through the cobalt sea. He held at bay his terror the first time he ascended into the rigging, inching his way up the ratlines in a fashion no self-respecting rodent could ever condone. Yet even this activity grew less daunting with practice, and by his sixth day at sea, The Sailor could boast of scaling the rigging, hand over hand, without pause to furl or unfurl sail as conditions dictated.

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On the tenth day of the voyage, the cutter hove to at its scheduled port of call. The Sailor disembarked to seek employment on one of the ocean-crossing ships that routinely plied the bustling harbor. His intent was to find a berth as a seaman apprentice before his meager funds ran out, a task that might readily be accomplished if Luck or her boon companion, Good Fortune, favored him. Certainly some outside agency smiled upon him, for The Sailor accomplished his goal within a day and a night, proudly signing his name to the log of the ship *Excelsior* as her first mate looked on. As circumstances would have it, the ship was short a deck hand, and scheduled for departure on the next favorable tide. Sea bag in hand, The Sailor found his berth and reported on deck at the appointed hour. The crew lined the railings and set forth to their duties, preparing the ship for the long months at sea. There were lines to be coiled, sheets to be tightened, reefs to be set. As the ship sailed forth from the harbor, The Sailor felt his breast swell with pride, for here he was a sailor at last, even if his rating was but seaman apprentice. For all things must have a beginning, and even those things that end are really embarking upon a new beginning. And when viewed from such a perspective, adventure is never far away.

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They had been to sea but a few short weeks and The Sailor had grown comfortable with his duties and comrades, or at least the majority of the latter. Men confined together in cramped quarters with little opportunity for outside diversion have precious few secrets, and given the nature of the human condition, sometimes this is not a desirable outcome. Perversely, the dark caverns of the heart all too often yearn for illumination, yet cannot bear close scrutiny without provoking some measure of uneasiness, disgust or outright horror. The Sailor came to know which men whose company he might actively seek, and those for whom a passing nod or half-hearted salutation before quickly moving on was most appropriate. The Sailor felt his body harden as the days wore on, as the sun bronzed his skin and his hands, once prone to cracks and bleeding that he unsuccessfully attempted to hide, grew thickened calluses from the passage of hemp and manila. The Sailor’s knowledge grew with each passing day, as he absorbed the accumulated wisdom of the more seasoned men. He watched the sail maker pass needle through cloth and learned to replicate his actions. He assisted the ship’s carpenter with the countless small repairs that invariably sprang forth, for wooden vessels must contend with the often harsh environment of the sea, and seams must be recaulked, spindles re-fashioned, and new spars coaxed from virgin wood. The Sailor came

to love the smell and texture of freshly sawn wood, to see the potential inherent in the raw wood’s grains as a needed item took shape from the ministrations of a skilled hand. There were, of course, fleeting moments of boredom, as the seemingly endless horizon stretched forth, reminding the ship and her crew of their relative insignificance in the grand scheme of things. Such ruminations were most appreciated by a thinking man while standing a midnight watch, keeping one eye on the ship, the other cast in perpetual wonderment at the dazzling array of constellations that populated the night sky. Knowing that the Ancients once navigated by those very stars made The Sailor’s heart race, and he eagerly took to learning to distinguish Andromeda from Capricorn, Orion the Hunter from Sagittarius the Archer. While the weather was warm he took to sleeping on the open deck, lying beneath a blanket of stars, recounting the tales that had passed countless lips over the centuries and even the millennia. At first The Sailor did not recognize the transformation, for it was a gradual process marked not with signposts but a far more subtle awareness such that one day The Sailor realized that he was becoming one with the sea.

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Gradually the temperate days and nights gave way to cold, for change on any voyage is mostly inevitable, whether the voyager is cognizant of this fact or not. The wind brought with it a coldness that cut cruelly to the bone, a portent of things to come. The Sailor adapted as best he could, insulating himself in layers to repel the cold and fortifying his spirit, reminding himself that Odysseus endured far worse on his long voyage home to his beloved Penelope. If only such a woman awaited his return, The Sailor thought to himself, before dismissing such a foolish notion, for he had no intention of returning to the village he once called home, far removed from the trade winds and routes that led to the spices and silks of the East, or the vast lands to the West which some insisted surely held in reserve, ripe for discovery, the fabled Northwest Passage. As the days and nights grew colder, and the vapor from men’s speech lingered long after words were spoken, a shift in the wind became gradually apparent. At first the wind only hinted at change, a stutter here or there, a momentary lull as the sails snapped and popped before regaining their trim and form. Yet The Sailor awoke one morning to find the timbers beneath his feet were not shivering and vibrating as the sails harnessed the wind, for there was no wind to speak of. The canvas hung limply, flapping lazily as the ship drifted, her helm unresponsive to the desired course. They lay “chained in irons” as the saying goes, for four long days and nights, deserted by the very thing that had brought them this far. Such betrayal is hard to swallow, and The Sailor mourned the loss of the wind no differently than the departure of a lover, for he was now a man of the sea and the wind was as much a part of him as the waves or the living vessel beneath his feet.

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It was on the fourth night as they lay helplessly becalmed that a curious thing manifested itself before The Sailor’s eyes, an omen that spoke to the essential Mysteries of this life. The Sailor and a handful of his closer companions (for all whom sail the sea are brothers, regardless of what frictions or estrangement might exist among them) had

gathered on deck to discuss the cruel turn of events that had befallen them. One man gave a startled cry and pointed, all eyes turning to follow his gaze and outstretched arm. There upon the waters, mere cable lengths from their vessel, arose a creature that reason dictated should not be. There exists between heaven and earth those Mysteries that defy conventional explanation, that speak to tales recounted in hushed and fearful tones over flickering fires and oil lamps. What rose from those waters glistened and shone as it twisted in the waves and cast a malevolent eye upon the ship. The Sailor felt his heart sink, for it was an evil omen indeed to behold the gaze of a mermaid. Like Homer’s harpies, her allure was undeniable, yet the Truth that she so jealously guarded could be known by no mortal man. As the mermaid sank beneath the waves, The Sailor shrank back in horror, gripped by a dark and terrible sense of foreboding.

That night the wind returned with a vengeance, howling with primal fury as the seas reared back and pounded the helpless ship. The tempest that arose with preternatural swiftness engulfed the ship, and the cries and pleadings of the terrified crew added to the din. Jagged spits of lightning rent the tapestry of night as thunderous peals sounded to the accompaniment of a driving rain that made the slippery pitching decks more treacherous than anything The Sailor had ever experienced. Balls of light danced in the rigging, the legendary St. Elmo’s fire crackling as it leapt playfully from mast to mast. With an explosive crack the main mast gave way, the stout timber no match for the forces arrayed against it. As sections of the mast rained down, pulling spars and canvas to the deck below, a rogue wave swept the deck, and in an instant The Sailor found himself fighting for his life as he pitched overboard into the teeming seas. His choked cries for help went unnoticed and unanswered, for the same wave that had snatched him from the only home he’d known the past several months had cleared the decks of many of his brethren. Throughout that long night The Sailor struggled, thrashing as waves threatened to pull him beneath the sea’s dark surface for all eternity. At any moment The Sailor expected to feel the sharp talons of the mermaid sink into his flesh, embracing him with deadly finality. There were moments of terrible desperation, and The Sailor fleetingly thought of giving in, of wearily surrendering to the maelstrom. Yet deep within him some spark rebelled, rallying against the hopelessness and despair. The Sailor thought of days long past, populated by the ghosts of memories, of the living and of the dead. He thought of his simple village, so far removed from the larger world that beckoned with promises of unending adventure. The Sailor knew then in a moment of startling clarity that it was not his fate to die, not now amid the wind and waves of some Eastern Typhoon, for he was the master and sole navigator of his destiny. With renewed strength and vigor The Sailor swam, and soon found refuge clinging to flotsam left by the crippled *Excelsior*.

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The Sailor must have fallen into an exhausted slumber, for when he awoke the seas were calm, the sky a welcoming and harmonious blue as sea birds wheeled and circled, their raucous cries punctuating the peaceful stillness. The Sailor recognized among their number species that never strayed far from land, and his heart swelled with newfound hope for the tempest must have carried him close to some unknown shore. And so it was that The Sailor was delivered, for that very day a passing fisherman in a small

skiff hailed him, and although his rescuer’s tongue was alien to The Sailor’s ears, his joyous cries required no translation, for all who sail upon the sea are brothers.

For a time The Sailor lived among the fisherman’s people, and learned their customs and their ways. He even found love, for the women of this nation were pleasing to the eye, and the daughter of the fisherman was quite comely indeed. But after several moons had waxed and waned, The Sailor felt the familiar call, and knew that he must heed its command, for a sailor’s place is out at sea, and the safety of harbors does not make for skillful mariners. The Sailor regretfully made to bid his new companions goodbye, for he knew in his heart that to everything there is a season and a purpose, and his path still lay stretched out before him, the journey unfolding somewhere beyond the waiting horizon. But he did not undertake this passage alone, for the daughter of the fisherman had been foretold that her destiny would come to her from beyond the Emerald Sea, and with this knowledge she was content. So The Sailor set out with his new bride and after many adventures that deserve retelling in their own time, returned to the place from which he came, a simple village on a windswept peninsula, ten days removed from the nearest port from which the great ocean-going ships might sail. He had come full circle, older and wiser than when he had first set out. And more than this, he had gained something far more precious, for he had found a loving bride, and while the sea ran in his blood and would always be his mistress, he now had reason to return home. For while a sailor’s place is out at sea, and all who sail upon it are brothers, there is no sea more challenging than that which fills the human heart, and love is the compass and sextant by which one may navigate through treacherous shallows and other perils both real and imagined. So it is and so it was, and so it shall forever be...

The End