



With the Dolphins

by Bill Stickers

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With the Dolphins is a story about the spirit of adventure on the high seas, the false promises of AI, and the inescapability of worker exploitation in late-stage capitalism—and how solidarity, in all its many forms, can effectively fight it.

I applied for the job on a whim, sick of my life in Wilmington, sick of the Motel Five and its handsy manager, Jeff. I was sick of an apartment that smelled like the last tenant's cigarettes, sick of my own aspirations to be a nursing assistant who wiped asses and changed sheets, and realizing that if I didn't make some kind of drastic change right now—freshly single, just starting to slide down the wrong half of my thirties—then I never would.

So I got a little plastic-covered cardboard box of wine from the gas station and sat down to take an inventory of my life. I found a resume template online and pasted the highlights of my so-far unremarkable career into it, then sent it off. Once I submitted it, I felt a sense of relief—like shipping off a Christmas gift in time.

The next day, I went back to the Motel Five and ducked Jeff in the morning, retrieving my little cart and setting about turning over the rooms, marking the laminated map with a dry-erase marker as I finished each one. I took

the garbage out to the dumpster, wiped surfaces, vacuumed floors, took the sheets to the laundry, and all the while I thought about what it might be like to live at sea. I had been on boats, sure; my uncle Ron had owned a party barge, and had taken us kids out fishing once or twice, but I'd never spent the night on a boat. I tried to imagine what it would be like to be rocked to sleep by the waves, to feel the cool breeze sweep off the water while I leaned on the rail. Maybe I'd see dolphins, or a pod of whales.

I had owned one of those Lisa Frank folders when I was a kid, hot pink with the smiling dolphins leaping out of the water on the front cover. I remember our science teacher, Mrs. Borland, telling us that dolphins were smart, that they had their own language and spoke to one another. I imagined that the dolphins on my folder were friends, that they liked to swim around eating fish and talking about dolphin boys.

At lunch I went out to my car to cry and eat leftovers like I always did, and finally opened my phone for the first time, sitting in the passenger's seat with my sad little plastic container of cabbage and rice. I'd missed a call from New York City, but they'd left a voicemail: it was a recruiter with Oto Klein, calling

to schedule an interview. I wolfed down my lunch, my mind racing with what I was going to say, and when I'd finished I called him back.

“Oto Klein Resources, this is Bill.”

“Hi, Bill, I'm—this is, ah, Katrina Johnston, calling ba—”

“Katrina! Yes, fantastic. When can we schedule you for an interview?”

“Well, I'm not sure how far of a drive—”

“We'll do this over teleconference, if that's okay. Do you have a computer?” he asked, leaning subtly on “have” enough that I felt he was being just a touch condescending while probably imagining he did just the opposite.

“I do.”

“Great. How about tonight?”

Tonight? Jesus.

“Okay,” I said.

“Great. Seven work for you?”

Barely. That was just enough time to get home and throw on a fresh outfit, but I figured I could do it. No: I decided in that moment that I *would* do it. Fuck

Jeff. I'd fake sick or just leave if I had to. This was my life, and I was going to take the wheel.

“Seven works great.”

“See you then!” and with that, the line went dead.

My chest swelled with a sense of triumph as I marched back through the service entrance, and for the rest of the day I was distracted by my maybe-premature sense of victory. I had taken the first big step. Long days spent in monotonous toil were soon to be in the rearview mirror; I was going to sail the high seas on a ship the likes of which the world had never seen. I would endure danger, learn to grapple with crises, and forge new bonds of friendship and camaraderie, and finally experience Adventure.

You know, Adventure? Battling the elements, forging a path into the unknown, boldly going, all that shit? I wanted to slip the surly bonds of boredom and television and my shitty little apartment and Jeff and all the other trappings of a predictable life in comfortable, sad, misery. I wanted to be free.

So I floated on a cloud of what I now recognize as delusion for the remainder of my shift, folding towels and cleaning glasses and dusting television

sets as I thought about how I might apply a little polish to the unremarkable details of my work experience to this point in order to sound like the kind of person who could actually handle an Adventure.

The fact that this was nearly impossible for a thirty-six year old woman who'd lived in the same place and worked the same job for over a decade did little to dampen my sense that this was an inevitability—that in spite of not yet having interviewed, I was destined to be the one for the job.

I checked my watch with increasing frequency as six o'clock approached, still with ten more rooms on my list. At five fifty-nine I stood in the center of room 214 and thought: *fuck it*.

I took off my lanyard and my nametag, put them in the cart's trashcan, and I walked out and went home. Fuck it.

Fuck the Five, fuck Jeff, fuck wiping the surfaces and vacuuming the floors. Fuck it.

With the advantage of time and distance, I can look back now and realize that the interview should have been a red flag to me. It was more a sales pitch than

an interview; Bill spent most of the time talking about the exciting, futuristic possibilities of artificial intelligence, how it was the next step in the evolution of the human animal and yada, yada, yada—in the moment I was excited that he thought my a good enough prospect to try and talk me into coming aboard.

I'd heard of artificial intelligence before, seen it in the movies; basically a computer that talks and thinks like a person, right? I mean, I thought it was interesting, but I wasn't sure why it needed to be on a ship, or why that ship needed to sail around the world, but I'd already started swinging the sledgehammer to demolish my life and I wasn't about to second-guess myself. What I did understand was that artificial intelligence was new, and big, and it was in the news, and that people were talking about it. I wanted to be a part of it.

At the end of the interview, Bill said he'd get back to me as soon as he could, and signed off. Staring at the blank screen, I felt like someone was wringing my neck—what was I *thinking*, quitting my job on the spot? What if it took a week? What was I going to do for money? We signed off and I sat in my apartment and just stared at the wall for a while. Whatever happened

with the interview, I was proud of myself at least for making a change. That took courage. And I'd never have to see Jeff again.

He called me four times that night, and left four voicemails. I deleted all of them without listening. They could keep the change of clothes in my locker.

Oto Klein Resources called me the next morning.

The morning after that, I was in my car, headed to Newark. I had my bag in the trunk, breakfast on the passenger seat, and I was singing along to the radio with the windows down. I felt wild and free in a way I hadn't since I graduated high school and felt like the world was laid out before me, excited to see how the rest of my life would turn out.

I swore a million things in my ecstasy, but most of all I swore to myself that I would never again let it get back to *that* point, where I felt like a prisoner in my own life.

This was, I thought, the beginning of a new me.

I was told to report to the docks at four o'clock, and I started the two-hour drive at eight in the morning. On the way, I stopped and called my landlord to sever my lease. I got my nails and my hair done, I bought some new clothes, a new phone—all on credit. In the line for lunch at one of those burger joints with the menu written in chalk on a sandwich board out front, I realized that I hadn't even asked what I'd be paid. The listing said DOE. The website had said "enhanced remuneration"—whatever that meant. I calmed my anxiety by remembering that I'd been living on minimum wage, and now I no longer had to pay rent.

The ball was rolling. Why slow it down?

I arrived at a guardhouse bearing a sign: "Consolidated Steel—Newark Shipyard" and gave the security guard my name. He raised the gate for me, and I drove into a massive parking lot in front of two gigantic concrete buildings, one with a banner that said "New Employee Orientation". I was met at the door by a woman about my age who looked at my duffel bag with a smirk

then ushered me down a hallway. The afternoon was a blur of faces I'd only ever see one time: the man who confirmed my information, the woman who printed my ID card, another in scrubs who gave me a vaccination for something I'd never heard of.

Still rubbing my sore arm, I was directed into an auditorium where I found dozens of other people out of uniform, duffel bags and luggage of every description at their feet. A couple of young people wearing badges that said "Intern" in block letters at the bottom counted heads and passed out pamphlets. Liability waivers, next of kin, direct deposit information, W-4 forms, the usual—as well as a contract that was 20-some sheets of paper, front and back, single-spaced. Just as I was starting to read it, the lights went down.

A young man in pressed khakis and a polo shirt bearing the Oto Klein logo—"OK" surrounded by the symbol for a molecule the later news reports said is Silicon—was spotlighted, already in center stage, and launched without preamble into a presentation on Artificial General Intelligence, and the burdensome nature of narrow-minded regulators trying to limit the horizons of the human future. But OK had a solution: the freedom of the open ocean,

of course, beyond the boundaries of any regulator's ability to apply red tape. Using redundant satellite internet connections and a massive bank of "raw computing power," our mighty ship, the *MSC Roark*, would be a bulwark of human freedom and achievement, and we, its loyal crew, would have our names emblazoned in the annals of history for our tremendous daring.

For the remainder of the time, the young man ran through a pretty milque-toast slideshow about nautical terms—port, starboard, bulkhead, all that—and the basic safety procedures of life aboard ship. My ears perked up when he explained that fighting shipboard fires was the duty of every sailor, standing in front of a high-resolution photograph of two people in firefighting gear spraying water into a hatch through which flames roared. I wondered what kind of training we would get.

The presentation ended in applause from all of the interns and members of management, stationed at the ends of the rows. After an uncomfortable moment, we newly-christened seafarers joined in.

I followed the line of people—my fellow sailors, now—out through the side door, through a long hallway with scaffolding and rails, and out into the dockyard, where we finally laid eyes on our vessel, the *MSC Roark*.

It was *ugly*. There was no way around it. The flat deck of a barge, with a rectangular, flat-white superstructure up front, and a larger one in the rear, bookending what looked like an oil refinery—vent towers and support struts and generators and storage tanks—in between.

I felt a pinhole open in the balloon of my enthusiasm. In my dreams of being a sailor—only two days old—I'd imagined my ship to be, if not sleek, maybe stately, or to at least look like a ship. This looked like a platform for machinery. Where was the bridge? Where were the engines?

Men in security uniforms waited on the decks holding rifles in gloved hands, their faces covered by black surgical masks. Were we going to war? Why the anonymity?

There were two names on the cabin door, mine and Janelle Smith. I opened the door—bulkhead, I guess, according to the orientation video—and found

her sitting on one of the two beds. I smiled, set my bags down, and held out my hand: “I’m Katrina! You must be—”

“Janelle, nice to meet you Katrina. Some ship, huh?”

“Yeah, it’s, uhh...”

“Hideous?”

We shared a laugh.

Janelle was from Kansas—I refrained from any *Wizard of Oz* jokes—and had heard about this opportunity from an ad on social media. Just like me, she’d left her job as a hospital custodian, sick of doctors and nurses looking down their nose at her, taken an interview with Bill, then packed up her little life and headed out here for adventure on the open ocean.

I woke up with a start in my bunk, nearly falling out of it in a panic. Something was wrong. The room was pitch-dark, Janelle still snoring lightly—it took me a moment to sort out just what was going on.

We were *moving*.

Wow.

I got dressed quietly, using the light of my cell phone's screen to find my clothing, put my badge around my neck, and stepped outside.

I walked in the direction we were moving, coming around one of the cooling towers for the massive computers on board, and saw that we were being pulled along by two tugboats. I wondered how long they'd stay with us; were we going to be partners for the whole journey? How much of a journey was it going to be?

I leaned my forearms against the rail and looked into the black water below. Just a short fall really, then swept underneath, knocking against the bottom of the ship—barge, whatever—and then back up, gasping for breath, hoping someone could hear you scream over the sound of the engines. Could you make it to shore from here?

Shaking my head to rid my mind of these thoughts, I returned to my cabin, kicked off my slippers, and swiftly found sleep again.

The next morning, at an all-hands meeting on the foredeck (I was already picking up the nautical terminology), we were separated by the colors of our

badges. I learned for the first time that the light pink of mine meant “environmental services”, and was excited for a moment that they were going to make me a technician on the ship’s desalinator, or its air filtration devices, or some other part of the machinery that made life at sea possible.

Not exactly.

“Environmental services” is, it turns out, a new-age euphemism for being a janitor. A cleaning lady. A maid.

Again.

Janelle and I shared a knowing glance as our supervisor, Rory, a twenty-four year old with a fresh crew cut and bad skin, explained that our critical duty aboard the ship was to empty garbage cans, maintain common areas, and launder the linens.

We’d be working twelve hour shifts, with twelve hours off, every single day.

They couldn’t have explained this while we were still on shore? I probably would’ve still come, but waiting to spring this schedule on us when we were at sea, without land even in sight anymore, felt like an ambush.

The weeks that followed were mostly a blur as I adjusted to life aboard a ship. My body acclimated to the 12/12 schedule faster than I'd like to admit. I got my first paycheck, and while it wasn't exactly Wall Street money, since I wasn't really spending anything aboard the ship, it was a good living. I weathered my first storm, gale winds gathering as my shift came to a close and battering the ship all through my 12 off, making the lights in the dining hall flicker and rocking me to sleep in my bunk. The most exciting part was the training to fight fires aboard the ship, being timed as I leapt into the clunky boots and heavy jacket and snugged the respirator over my face before spraying flames that jetted from a propane tank on the helipad.

The lifeboats hung on racks high above the deck, pointed straight into the sea. They'd shown us a video, then walked all of us up the gangway to look into the lifeboat, and pointed out all the controls for the engine and the steering, and shown us the big lever that you pull down on to drop the whole thing into the sea. Rory, wearing his other hat as Emergency Operations Manager, complained that even in international waters, there were some burdensome regulations that just couldn't be escaped.

The next day, I helped secure lines to the rails as a supply ship came alongside, and watched a school of jellyfish float by between the two massive vessels.

And I started to heal from my previous life. I felt like I was pushing out the jagged shards left in the frame after a window was broken. You have to do that before you put a new one in.

A few days after we set sail, we crossed the magic line into international waters. I watched a team of men deploy a “sea anchor”, meant to fix us in place in the middle of the ocean, and some of the computer engineers broke open a bottle of champagne into red plastic cups, announcing that their operation had begun. I was on duty, hauling a linen cart to the aft bunkrooms.

No champagne for me.

I watched the tugboats sail over the horizon, and for the first time I felt trapped.

Weeks blurred to months, and I had settled into this new life. I had begun reading, something I hadn't done much of since high school. The ship had an

extensive library, new editions of many of the classics all similarly bound, and a couple of handsome leather chairs with a lamp and a table between them. I rarely saw any of the computer engineers in there, and definitely none of the security guards.

I lost myself in Charlotte and Emily Bronte, I read *Moby Dick* and some Hemingway books, I discovered Deborah Magpie Earling and Elise Blackwell. The library became a personal haven for me, a private reprieve from Rory's ever-swinging moods—Janelle and I speculated that he thought “environmental services manager” meant what we thought it meant—and from the leering computer engineers who stared at my ass every time I went into the server rooms to clean out the garbage cans full of empty energy drink cans, candy bar wrappers, and microwaved food containers.

One night, under a full moon, a garbage bag in each hand headed for the compactor, I caught one of the security guards with his pistol out, a silencer on the end, shooting at fish jumping in the sea. He caught me staring and looked at me like he had something to say, then went back to what he was doing like I wasn't even there.

It was one thing to pick up crusty socks and stained underwear from a bunch of computer engineers who were living like teenagers in their first apartment, but this shit turned my stomach. Freedom is a fine idea, but to use it like this?

The honeymoon phase had come to an end. The next morning, I started looking for other jobs. That afternoon, Rory took me aside, telling me he had heard I was looking for other employment.

No, he hadn't. I hadn't said a word to anyone. They'd been spying on me on the internet.

That was the last straw. I didn't tell him, but right then and there, I knew. As soon as my Shore Leave came up, I was never getting back on the *Roark*.

Turns out, that decision was made for me.

A summer squall blew salt spray across the deck, rocking the entire ship. It was a moonless night, and the exterior lights did little to illuminate my way back to my shared cabin. I rounded the corner behind one of the cooling towers and came upon a figure in all black, with a black backpack, face covered

with a mask except for the eyes, wide in astonishment as I'm sure mine were. Behind him, I saw one of those inflatable rafts with a little outboard motor on it. One of the security guards was in a motionless heap by the deck rail, and, inexplicably, I was not sorry to see it. We looked at each other for a long moment. He nodded at me.

I nodded to him, then kept on my way. Thinking about this moment later, I wonder how I knew that although he was dangerous, I was not in danger. Something in his eyes? I went through the bulkhead into my cabin, where Janelle was just getting dressed for her shift.

"Hey girl," she said, pulling her ID badge off the corner of her bed and placing it around her neck. I stood motionless in the doorway, no idea how to tell her what I'd seen. She looked up at me, then went still. "What's up?"

"I just, uhhh. I saw, uhmm. I think. I think somebody's going to sink the ship," I said, already feeling foolish. I had no way of proving that was their intention. But somehow I knew it, the way you know things in a dream, which is what this felt like: a strange dream you wake up and chuckle at yourself for and wonder how your mind comes up with nonsense like that.

“What?”

“Yeah, there’s. Uhhh. I saw a man in a ski mask. With a backpack. I think they’re going to sink the ship,” I repeated, a little more confident now with some detail behind my assertion.

Janelle stared at me, agape, for a moment before coming back to herself. “Did you tell anyone?”

“I came straight back here.”

She thought about this for a moment. So did I. As one, we went out the bulkhead, headed for the lifeboats.

The two of us buckled in, each with a hand on the lever that would upend both our lives for the second time this year, Janelle and I shared a look. On the count of three, we pulled it. The little orange boat dropped onto the rails, then slid down them fast, the hull vibrating beneath our feet. We plunged into the water, then just as suddenly were ripped back up, upside-down, and the entire craft flipped over backwards before landing upright among the waves.

Janelle's eyes were wide as coasters, and we laughed like schoolgirls, screaming out our frustrations and our exhilaration and Rory and every cum-soaked sock and shit-stained pair of underwear we'd picked up in the last several weeks. We laughed until our ribs hurt and tears ran down our faces.

The *Roark* was a few hundred yards off our bow. The radio crackled; Rory, demanding we return immediately, cursing our names, asking, "Do you even know how much one of those lifeboats costs? Do you realize this is *piracy*?"

Janelle reached over and turned the volume knob down until the receiver clicked off. I laughed; she looked at me and said, "He didn't want to listen to us. I don't want to listen to him." This sent me further into a fit of laughter, and as I doubled over, trying to catch my breath, flames spouted from the deck of the *Roark*, and a shockwave passed over us. Machinery twisted on its supports and tumbled into the sea, disappearing without fanfare beneath the waves.

We sat in stunned silence and I watched, mouth agape, as people jumped from the deck, some of them on fire, the ship already beginning to tilt to one side, and wondered what the dolphins would have to say about this.

About the Author

Bill Stickers is a writer and wilderness paramedic in the Rockies who believes everything to know about them can be found in their art.

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