JERRI BELL

Bringing Home Baby

Adak, Alaska.
April 1985.

Petty Officer Rachel Schneider stepped out of the rust-orange VW Beetle and looked back down the slope at the foot of Mount Moffett toward the ocean surveillance monitoring site at the edge of Kuluk Bay—one of the safest places in the Navy. Coils of barbed wire topped the two concentric rings of chain-link perimeter fence; armed watchstanders manned the quarterdeck of the larger of two windowless concrete buildings in the center. The young woman in charge of the operations floor wore a holstered Colt .45 during her twelve-hour shift to guard the terminus of the top-secret acoustic hydrophone arrays as carefully as if it were a nuclear missile silo. Rachel always chose duty stations in the most remote, wildest outposts: Barbados, Bermuda, Bimini, Nova Scotia, Iceland, Eleuthera, Guam. The farther from Virginia Beach and Naval Security Group Northwest, an antenna farm growing out of the sand and swamp on the Virginia-North Carolina line, the better.

Rachel's sponsor, Petty Officer First Class Ellen Caldwell, got out of the driver's seat and walked around the front of the car to join her. "Sure as hell ain't Guam."

Rachel had crisscrossed nine thousand miles of ocean—how many days ago had it been?—from Guam to Adak via Tokyo, Seattle, and Anchorage. She hadn't yet adjusted to the changes in time zone or temperature. A cold, damp wind left salt on her lips. The panorama of sea and stone below her seemed to shimmer and shiver. Her knees wobbled.

"You probably can't wait to get out of here," she replied.

"After a year up here unaccompanied? You bet your sweet ass." Ellen beckoned Rachel across the road to a path that led uphill through knee-high brown grass to a dense, scrubby clump of dark evergreens clustered in a shallow ravine.

Rachel pulled the collar of her jacket tightly around her neck against the Arctic wind roaring down through the western islands of the Aleutian chain. She peered at the wooden sign in front of the copse:

You are now ENTERING and LEAVING the Adak National Forest.

Stepping back, she craned her neck to look up over acres of tundra and rock to the dormant volcanic summit, an ice-capped peak that appeared and disappeared behind a boiling gray layer of clouds. She shivered.

"Dan found us a house in Virginia Beach," Ellen said. "Fifteen minutes from the base at Dam Neck, good schools for the kids."

The Navy could make Rachel an admiral and she still wouldn't set foot in Virginia again. Too many memories from her brief first assignment as a cryptologic technician. "How many kids you got?" she asked Ellen.

"Four. Five years between the oldest and the two youngest—my twins. A real handful. You got any?"

Rachel rubbed slowly at the right side of her neck. "I'm widowed. No kids."

"Aw, shit. I'm sorry."

"It was a long time ago. Is it like this all year?" Rachel gestured at the gray sky, the snow-covered ridges across the bay. Twenty-five miles away a curl of steam rose from the peak of the volcano on Great Sitkin Island. Rachel pictured the hot, molten rock seething under the crust of ocean floor where copper cables as thick as her thigh and

encased in black plastic snaked from the compound, through the muck under the iron-gray water of Kuluk Bay, to the floor of the Bering Sea. There they ran east and south through the narrow Kagalaska Strait, diverged like octopus tentacles, and terminated at the edge of the continental shelf, the sensitive hydrophone arrays on their ends positioned at the perfect depth to detect low-frequency sound waves made by the Soviet nuclear submarines patrolling hundreds or even thousands of miles away. Listening, always listening, for the boats carrying enough ballistic missiles in their bellies to turn the entire United States into a radioactive desert.

"Nah. The sun comes out for a few days in midsummer. In winter it's dark most of the day, and the wind don't stop howling. Right down off the polar ice cap, a hundred miles an hour sometimes."

Rachel turned back to the trees.

Ellen said, "Some Army general planted 'em during the Second World War to remind the boys of Christmas back home. These are about the only ones left."

The survivors, Rachel thought.

The sign swung and crumbled bits of reddish volcanic rock rattled under her boots.

"Was that an earthquake?"

"Just a temblor." Ellen waved a dismissive hand. "Haven't had a real earthquake in years, though they say we're due for a major one." She pulled a pack of Marlboro Lights from her pocket, lit one, and offered another to Rachel.

Rachel took the cigarette with shaking hands, flicked her lighter, and inhaled gratefully. A patch of fog shifted to reveal a small white cross at the edge of the copse. Dozens of them.

"Is that a graveyard?" She made her way through the grass and read the inscription on the first cross: *Chip Walton, 1925-1945.* Then she read the second and frowned. Dates on the crude markers indicated short lifespans. Nicknames. Some of the little graves were fenced with rusting black chain run through knee-high wooden posts, their white paint peeling. "Were these soldiers killed in the war? Surely not—children?"

"Base pet cemetery." Ellen pointed at another inscription: *Navy*

K-9 Corps. "And military working dogs."

Rachel let out her breath and rubbed at her neck. "Well. Thank God for that."

The rumbling recommenced. Harmonic resonances of low-frequency energy passed through Rachel's boots, her teeth, her skull; she pictured them printing across a LOFARgram writer, irregular waves across the gray static of background noise. When the ground shook, the women pitched forward and stumbled to regain their balance.

Silence followed. The raucous sea birds had gone quiet. Wind soughed across the tundra.

"Welcome to Adak," Ellen said.

Back in the Bering Hill bachelor enlisted quarters, the single framed photo on Rachel's desk—a photo she carried in her hand baggage every time she relocated—had fallen facedown. It was the only décor among the Navy-issue furniture and bedding. She checked her small bathroom and shower, and the sprinkler that ran across the bedroom ceiling: no damage. She pulled down the graying shade across the window overlooking the bare courtyard between two of the nine barracks buildings, then picked up the plain gold frame to stare at the photo for a minute. She set it upright again and wondered when she'd ever be far enough from her past to set it right, too.

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After breakfast, Rachel waited for the shuttle outside the Bering Hill galley in the chill, gloomy half-light. A gregarious SeaBee named Ed drove the rattling, navy blue school bus with "NAVFAC" hand-lettered on a cardboard placard in the front window. He advised Rachel that the best French fries on base could be found at the four-lane bowling alley, and that the command authorized "sunshine liberty" on the rare summer days when the cloud cover lifted and the thermometer broke sixty. She was relieved to learn that the cryptologists at the Naval Security Group Activity had their own compound up by Clam Lagoon and mostly kept to themselves, though she doubted even the old-timers there would remember her or Clyde.

Before the week was over the evenings began to stretch out

long and empty. Nothing on TV held her attention. Although she'd been a teetotaler for eighteen years, on Friday afternoon she asked Ed about the base clubs.

"Ladies avoid the Tundra Tavern. The SeaBees and the Marines drink there. Fights almost every Friday night. You go to the Husky Club down on the main base, you won't be able to buy yourself a drink."

Rachel doubted that. She'd never been pretty, and was at least ten years older than most of the single sailors. She'd stopped trying to hide the kinky strands of gray springing out of her straight, dark hair.

The Tundra Tavern, a small, smoky room in the Quonset hut where the Marines were billeted, fell uncomfortably silent when Rachel entered. Ed and his wife Maria, a tiny Filipina woman at least Rachel's age who worked at the base dry cleaners, sat at a Formica-topped table. They waved her over.

"Living dangerously," Ed said.

"You bring *her* here." Rachel nodded at Maria.

"I been in way rougher bars than this," Maria said.

A beer Rachel didn't order appeared at her elbow. A Marine at the bar raised his glass in her direction. She lifted her own in reply and took a small sip, grimacing at the sour taste of Budweiser. "They seem like nice guys," she said.

"You don't want to be collateral damage in a fistfight."

"I've been knocked around before."

Maria sat back in her chair and folded her arms. "And you wanna get knocked around again because why?"

Rachel shrugged and lit a cigarette. "If a fight's brewing, I'll leave."

Half her beer had disappeared. She lifted the glass and peered at it suspiciously. "How the hell did that happen? I haven't been a drinker for years."

"Lotta things change when you been on Adak a while," Ed said.

A SeaBee from the NAVFAC maintenance shop sent Rachel the second beer.

She took a sip. "Christ almighty." Her face felt numb. There was a time when she'd put away the better part of a six-pack to get that effect.

Ed excused himself to make a head call.

"Looks like you a new Adak Ten," Maria said.

"Adak Ten?"

"You and me, we ain't so young anymore. But I fix myself up 'cause I got me a younger husband. You ain't fixing yourself up none. No makeup. Old jeans instead of a pretty dress."

"It's too cold for a dress."

Maria shook her head. "You ain't even spending ten bucks on a Cross-Your-Heart bra to lift and separate." She pantomimed the effect. Rachel laughed aloud. Several men looked their way with interest.

"You ain't looking for a man. Stateside, you maybe a two or three on a scale of ten. But guys on Adak got on island blinders, so you're a ten."

Rachel tried to refuse the third beer.

"You'll disappoint the guys," the waitress said.

By the end of the third beer, Rachel was at the bar with the Marines and was on a first-name basis with everyone in the room. She swayed when she slid off the barstool. "I think that was another earthquake. Gotta go."

Ed and Maria showed her the dimly lit passageway under the road between the barracks and the galley, blessedly short and straight.

When she reached her room, her late husband's smiling face stared back at her from the photo frame. She'd been looking down when the shutter snapped. Clyde had stared straight at the lens of the camera, his chin pressed against her temple, his arms wrapped around her while she held the baby. He had a beer in one hand, a lit cigarette in the other. She wished, not for the first time, that she could cut his image out of the photo without snipping herself in half.

When she set the frame back on the dresser, the room spun around her. *That's no earthquake. You shoulda remembered what drinking does to you.*

Clyde's face, frozen forever in time, continued to smile. *Woulda, coulda, shoulda.*

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Rachel knew all the submarines in the Soviet Pacific Fleet as well as the characters in her favorite movies. She learned the locations of Adak's hydrophone arrays and the best ways to use them to cover thousands of square miles of ocean. She became a watch supervisor in record time. She insisted her subordinates stand a professional watch, give a thorough and detailed turnover to the oncoming shift, and keep the spaces pristine.

Every day before watch she made her bed, swept her floor, and dusted her desk and bureau. She cleaned the framed photo last.

When she and Clyde had been cryptologic technician collections analysts at Naval Security Group Northwest she'd excelled at reading radar frequency displays, her work better than his despite her lower rank. In high school she'd studied music, had earned A's in science and mathematics. She loved the trigonometry and physics of radiant energy, the complex geometry transforming the intersection of lines of bearing into the probable location of a surface target, the calculus that unlocked the mysteries of its movement across the ocean through time and space. The skills had translated well to hunting submarines.

At the NAVFAC she worked two-two-two and eighty: two day shifts, two evenings, and two midwatches, with eighty hours off to rest and recalibrate her circadian rhythm. After her last midwatch, she would wake up in the late afternoon disoriented and logy. She'd shower, snack, and then drive down to the surveillance site in the beat-up old VW bug she'd bought from Ellen—her "island bomb"—to read message traffic and review submarine tracks for an hour. The operations senior chief, having noticed that Rachel came in on her days off, took her aside and told her to get a life.

So she began to bake from scratch in the unreliable oven in the second-floor kitchen of the enlisted quarters. Breakfast muffins for the day shift. Cookies—hearty oatmeal raisin or delicate madeleines—for afternoon snacks. Cakes and pies to give the midwatch a rush of sugar when the soporific humming of the ventilation system and acoustic processing equipment made them drowsy. The chief petty officer in charge of the semiannual physical fitness test ordered her to cut back

on the baking before the whole command ended up on the remedial physical fitness program.

Next she put together an advancement training program with a Jeopardy-style trivia game from the rate training manuals. She coached the young watch officers on writing good personnel evaluations and award citations, checked their outgoing messages for errors in format and spelling, and reminded them to coordinate with the deployed P-3C submarine hunter squadron and with the intelligence analysis center in Honolulu. She even nagged the maintainers and SeaBees, who preferred working with their hands, to study for the advancement exams a few hours a week.

The operations officer, a lieutenant commander, offered to make Rachel a day worker. She declined. Commander Parker left her on the watchbill, put her in charge of all the training as a collateral duty, and nominated her for Sailor of the Quarter.

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In May, Maria and Rachel drove up to Mount Adagdak on the island's north coast and climbed down to Horseshoe Bay, where the Bering Sea lay blue and benign at their feet. They hiked across the promontory at the western end of the cove to the hot springs, shallow pools of water eking out of fissures in an old lava flow. Rachel rolled her pants to her knees, stuck her feet in, and sighed in pleasure. Maria stripped down to a black one-piece bathing suit and eased herself almost to her neck in a bathtub-sized pool. A crosshatching of scars on her wrists and forearms shone white against her brown skin.

Maria followed her gaze. "If I hadn'ta met Ed when I did, I'd have figured out how to do it right." She held out her arms and looked at her wrists. "Started trying the morning after that first battleship come into Subic," she said. "I was twelve."

"Oh, my everloving God," Rachel said.

"God don't go to Magsaysay Drive," Maria said.

When they started back toward base, Rachel turned her head away from the Naval Security Group Activity compound—the Wullenweber antenna up in the ravine, its circle of poles spiderwebbed

with black wire a miniature of the massive site at Northwest. Clyde had been thrilled when she turned up pregnant three months after the wedding. He said she'd be happier putting all her energy into their home and the baby. She knew *he'd* be happier when she wasn't running circles around him at work.

Maria pulled over near the south end of Clam Lagoon and they got out. The surface reflected a cloudless dome of blue sky. The reflection dissolved into ripples that emanated from a small creature floating in the lagoon, its head just above the surface.

"The sea otters are safe in here," Maria said. "Out there—" she gestured to the open ocean beyond a thin strip of land on the far side of the lagoon—"killer whales and things eat 'em."

Rachel squinted. "What's in its paws?"

"Either a sea urchin—they crack 'em open with rocks to eat 'em—or she's carrying her baby on her stomach. They're good mamas. Keep the babies warm and dry till they learn to swim."

Rachel drew a deep breath. "Did you and Ed want children?"

Maria shook her head. "I grew up in a big family. Kids are always underfoot and expensive. Hungry bellies, doctor bills, and hair-pulling, all the damn time."

"Clyde and I were only children, so we wanted a big family. But Clyde and the baby—" she swallowed—"Clyde and Ronnie died in a car wreck. Ronnie was nine months old."

"That's too bad." Maria patted Rachel's shoulder, then pulled her in for a one-armed hug. "You was in the Navy then?"

Rachel stepped away. "I was a cryptologist for two years. Then I got pregnant, and back then they made you quit if you had a baby. I reenlisted as an ocean systems tech after the accident. Got eighteen years in now." She reached up to touch the scar on her throat. "They cleaned Ronnie up and brought him in so I could say goodbye. But then they took him away for an autopsy. All I wanted was to go with him, wherever he was, you know? But he wasn't in that little blue body. Or at the morgue. Or in the little urn they gave me a week later."

The otter turned something between its paws, poked at the object with its nose, and gnawed at a vulnerable spot. Then it rolled over and dived beneath the surface.

"Gone fishing," Maria said.

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In June Rachel's libido, suppressed for two decades, resurfaced. The low-frequency throb of a submarine propulsion plant through headphones could make her twitch and cross her legs in her chair. Alone in her room, she would put the framed photo facedown on her dresser and slip into bed naked to seek the lassitude that would finally lull her to sleep.

She began flying with the P-3C Orion submarine hunter aircrewmen on her days off, trading a pan of warm, gooey brownies for a mission tracking a nuclear ballistic missile submarine. She shivered in the plane's ice-cold cabin while the crew tracked the submarine churning along to its patrol area deep under the sapphire surface. While the radar operators heaved cylindrical sonobuoys into their launch tubes, she watched the boomer's acoustic signature scroll up the neon-green video display, across the chattering LOFARgram writer onto paper, and into the slowly turning reels of audio tape.

One crew invited Rachel out to the cabins on Finger Bay for the squadron Independence Day picnic.

She awoke that morning from her annual Fourth of July nightmare: her son's incessant, needy howls; her inability to reach through the fog to soothe him; fireworks; the car speeding through swamps and sandy farmland on dark, two-lane roads; the eighteen-wheeler crossing the yellow line at sixty; the bank of the ditch rising to meet the front of their car; and finally her husband's open, lifeless eyes and her child, limp and cooling in her arms, his head at an unnatural angle.

A residue of terror and anguish clung to her spine even when the sun broke through the blanket of maritime fog and rain. She couldn't shake it off even when she joined the aircrews unloading cases of cheap beer from the Exchange, bottles of liquor, and bags of burger patties, hotdogs, and chips at the picnic tables outside of a ramshackle primitive cabin above Finger Bay.

After lunch she snagged a full bottle of Johnnie Walker Red and

wandered out of sight of the cabin, finding a soft hummock of grass in a patch of lupines the color of the icy shadows on the stony mountain peaks. Charcoal smoke and grease wafted by on a light breeze; sea birds called overhead. She took a deep swig of whiskey and closed her eyes to savor the burn. When she opened her eyes, three men—a flight engineer, a chief petty officer sonar operator, and a wrench-turner—had joined her with a bottle of tequila.

The bottles went back and forth. The lively argument that erupted between Rachel and the chief over the acoustic signatures of attack submarines ended when the chief grabbed Rachel in a careless liplock that provoked a tingling sensation along her nerve endings like a cascade of cavitation bubbles rising toward the surface to burst.

The flight engineer slid a hand up under her sweater. The storekeeper pulled off his own shorts, and then hers.

The sloppy, happy foursome, fueled with tequila and sunshine, wrote itself across Rachel's consciousness as acoustic signatures: the flight engineer's steady piston-pumping, a four-cycle marine diesel engine; the chief's smooth easy thrusts, a reactor coolant pump; the storekeeper's odd yawing motions and irregular pushing, the transient mechanical vibrations of a poorly-tuned motor banging away randomly against the hull of the boat. Her orgasm radiated from her center like low-frequency energy entering the deep sound channel, going on and on for thousands of miles before attenuating into nothingness.

Then something soft hit her on the chin. She opened her eyes. The chief had tossed her panties at her head. "Better get dressed," he said.

She realized that the men were struggling to their feet in alarm. The temblor was so strong that the ground seemed to shift back and forth. Somehow she managed to pull on her shorts and t-shirt by the time it finished.

The storekeeper helped her to her feet and she brushed off the backs of her legs in the awkward silence. "I guess the earth moved?" she offered.

"Um, I knew I was good," said the chief. "But not *that* damn good."

Rachel giggled and felt around in the grass for her glasses,

finding them with one bent earpiece. She knew she'd be sore by evening even though her partners had been gentle. She refused to feel shyness or regret. The aircrewmen, no longer meeting her eyes, gathered up the bottles and paper plates. Two of them, having left wives back in Barbers Point, asked for her discretion. They wished her well; they promised not to tell a soul.

The rumors got around, of course.

"Coulda been worse," Maria said one Saturday morning over coffee. "Just three in a day ain't so bad."

"Tequila sure makes you do some crazy shit. But they were nice guys, considering."

"Lotta them sailors off the ships at Subic was nice guys too," Maria said. "The young ones who hadn't done it yet was all kinds of grateful."

"Like Ed."

"Green as a jackfruit," Maria agreed, chuckling. "Couldn't even grow a mustache back then. Didn't know the first damn thing. So I raised him just like I wanted him, eh?"

Something flickered in Rachel's mind, weird and eerie as the purple and green bands of the Northern Lights. "Brung him up just like you wanted him. Huh."

The enlisted men's wives and most of the women she worked with began to avoid Rachel. Guys in the next P-3C squadron to rotate through said they'd heard a woman petty officer was into multiples; on learning that Rachel was the petty officer, they backed down quickly. Even Ed asked if he could help her scratch her itch—she asked if he wanted her, or Maria, to cut off his balls. An earnest watch officer asked if she was okay; she said she was fine.

She took a regular lover, a married senior chief petty officer from the maintenance department with half his future pension check invested in discretion. Twice a week he parked his car by the chapel at the end of the street, as if to attend choir practice, and slipped up to Rachel's room. Once she saw him looking at the framed photo on her dresser; he didn't ask, and she didn't volunteer. She started dropping the photo into the top drawer of her dresser before he came over. Once, she forgot to take it out for a week after he left.

When she set it back up, she realized how the colors had faded, the lines softened and blurred. But her memories still cut like glass.

The commanding officer at Northwest, once an enlisted man, had lectured Clyde on the foolishness of trying to support a family on a third class petty officer's salary and let Rachel stay in for the paycheck until she could no longer hide the pregnancy.

Overnight she went from being a skilled cryptologic technician to a Navy dependent, stuck in enlisted family housing. She learned to drive a stick shift and dropped Clyde off at work on the days she needed to shop at the commissary or run errands.

Money troubles followed quickly and Clyde volunteered for a year in Vietnam to get the danger pay. He left her six months pregnant with his truck leaking oil and no friends in the enlisted wives' community. She'd felt only relief.

No, she didn't miss Clyde. She dusted the frame and set the photo carefully back in its proper place.

In August, when the senior chief and his wife left the island, she only missed the sex.

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At a boating supply store in Anchorage, she bought new gloves, gyro-stabilized binoculars that would steady the view despite the gusts of wind, and thirty feet of lightweight nylon rope that she stashed in the top drawer of her desk. She scheduled weekly lunches with Maria.

"Some people get all depressed on the island. Me, I don't like cities. Bright lights, lotsa noise, trash on the sidewalks."

"Not too many sidewalks in Adak," Rachel said. "Did you grow up in a city?"

"A farming village near Baguio. My uncle told my parents he'd send me to school in Manila. We went to Olongapo instead."

"Is that where you met Ed?"

"He was a regular in my uncle's bar. Worked at the base, not on a ship. When he paid my bar fine, I told him it was my first time and made him buy me dinner." Maria winked.

"He ever figure it out?"

"He said it didn't matter. Courted me for a whole year. Even sent me to school after the wedding."

"He's a good man," Rachel said.

"Was your Clyde a good man?"

Rachel shrugged. "He wanted to be a better one."

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She began spending her days off alone Clam Lagoon. The binoculars worked so well she could almost count individual hairs in the otters' fur. They came to the surface with sea urchins, turning them carefully to avoid embedding the purple spines in their paws and pressing them against rocks held on their bellies to crack them open. They rolled, dived, surfaced, wrestled, and nipped each other. When she sat still, they came so close she could make out sparkling black eyes and webbed paws.

Rachel's breasts tingled and her nipples tightened when she heard the otter pups' high squeaks and yips carrying over the still water—*Maaah! Maaaah!* The mothers fascinated her. They carried the small, fuzzy pups on their stomachs, licked them to groom or soothe, blew air into their fur to keep them dry until they gained enough body fat to stay warm in the frigid lagoon, and taught them to swim and dive. They were attentive mothers, far more attentive than Rachel had been.

She'd felt enshrouded in a cold gray blanket of fog and despair after Ronnie's birth. When it had weighed her down too much for her to offer the baby a breast, he'd become expert at finding her nipple on his own. Her body had soldiered on when her mind shut down, giving and giving, carving from her own flesh to make milk when she couldn't eat until her ribs began to show.

She breathed easiest when the otter mothers held their pups and slept floating on their backs, safe from orcas in the chilly kelp beds. Sometimes a mother wrapped a pup in a strand of kelp on the surface of the water to tether it while she dived for food.

But only speed and submersion could save otter pups from the sharp-eyed eagles looking for prey to feed their nestlings high in the rocky crevices of Mount Adagdak. One afternoon Rachel saw an eagle

swoop down to snatch an otter pup that had strayed too far from its mother. The pup writhed in the steely talons. Its screams of fear, pain, and despair reverberated in her ears even after she ran to her car and slammed the door shut behind her. She needed both her shaking hands to turn the key in the ignition.

Back in her quarters, she pressed her photo to her chest and screamed silently. Even when she didn't look at it, the image was indelibly printed on her mind: the too-thin father smiling at the photographer, the mother's head bent tenderly over the baby. Ronnie, forever in profile: a fuzz of black hair, one wide-open eye, upturned bump of nose, soft round cheek.

The pediatrician at Portsmouth had seen what he expected to see: another uneducated, lazy sailor's wife cowed by his rank and importance. He'd rambled and pontificated about Doctor Spock, some mothering instinct she was sure she didn't feel, and the importance of making friends with other young mothers in the wives' club. At her nadir she'd pictured herself abandoning Ronnie. Just walking out and leaving him. He'd left her instead. *A mother will do everything she can to keep her baby safe,* Rachel thought, *but not everything is under her control. Things can go wrong—fatally wrong—in an instant.*

She decided not to return to Clam Lagoon. The air was getting too cold, the hours of daylight too brief.

She opened the top drawer of the desk and carefully laid the photo in it, face up atop the neat coil of rope. She shut the drawer and turned out the light.

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Rachel's social isolation that fall translated itself into extraordinary professional acumen, as if she'd submerged into the frigid Northern Pacific and made it her personal underwater world. The surface teemed with container ships and fishing fleets; the submerged ridges, seamounts, and trenches became a pinball machine for schools of bluefin tuna and sparkling salmon, an obstacle course for athletic dolphins, a migratory highway for the humpback whales whose mournful songs appeared as distinct acoustic signatures on the

LOFARgrams. She sped up the tapes and donned headphones to hear the whales calling to each other across hundreds of miles in frequencies too low for the unaided human ear. In her nightly dreams they sang of long coastal migrations; sharks and ships; tasty plankton and silver menhaden; the longing to mate; duty to their herds, and concern for their calves.

Through it all, oblivious to day and night, American and Soviet submarines played cat and mouse. Slow, lumbering missile carriers tried to hide from the sleek fast-attack boats that stalked them. Rachel developed an uncanny knack for being the first to identify high-intensity patterns of acoustic energy in the random patterns of salt-and-pepper static inscribed electronically across wide swaths of paper unwinding from one long roll onto another. She tuned out background noise from Minke whales and snapping shrimp and trawler diesels to hone in on a muffled turbine turning at a steady speed, harmonics of the fundamental tonal decaying in fainter and fainter lines. She picked out reactor cooling pumps, auxiliary machinery, occasional bursts of cavitation rising from a propeller when a boat sped up or turned. Only with this knowledge could they prevent nuclear weapons from annihilating cities, polluting the atmosphere, and poisoning the water for a millennium and beyond.

Had it been like this for Clyde at the remote listening post in the Vietnamese highlands, listening to whispers all damn day and night, waiting for black-clad guerrilla fighters to slip through the wire and slit all their throats? Had he thought of Rachel and their unborn son? Or imagined the North Vietnamese families, the women with their babies, the taste of the rice and fish they cooked, the laughter of children herding the water buffalo with bamboo sticks, the scent of incense and the serene tinkling of temple bells?

You couldn't see in the photo that Clyde had left Virginia one man and returned as two ghosts: one drifting at home, the other tethered in Vietnam. Instead the war was refracted through Rachel's spring-wound posture, the bones of her knuckles, her desperate grip on Ronnie, her reluctance to look directly into the lens.

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She hit the Tundra Tavern almost every night off shift that fall, drinking scotch on the rocks, to the edge of oblivion. She'd retained the skill to unconsciously sense the increase in tension, the change in vocal inflection, the electric silence that signaled an impending brawl. She'd been able to read Clyde as easily as she read Little Golden Books aloud to Ronnie, too young to understand the stories but soothed by her voice. The story always opened with petty grievances: leftovers for supper, the baby's soggy diaper, piles of unwashed or unfolded laundry on the sofa, overdue bills, a tough day at work, Nixon promising on the campaign trail to end the war. Rachel became responsible for it all. She kept bags of peas in the freezer, bought cheap concealer at the Exchange, stayed home for weeks after an eruption. The war wasn't Clyde's fault; neither were the unkempt house, the uncooked meals, the unhappy baby. In the aftermath, she'd hold Clyde to her breast like Ronnie while he cried and promised to become a better man.

If she could intervene at the Tundra before fists flew, Rachel began dragging drunken sailors and Marines back to their rooms. She fed them Excedrin and water, pulled off their shoes, and tucked them into bed.

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The November night when Ronnie would have turned eighteen was also the eighteenth birthday of the youngest Marine on the island. After the third drink on the route to oblivion, Rachel saw this as a portent: eighteen years before to the day, two women bore sons in military hospitals thousands of miles apart (the Marine had been born in Okinawa). She'd never been able to throw Ronnie a birthday party, or buy him any presents. So she bought the next round for the young Marine. And the next.

Instead of taking the young Marine back to his room and tucking him into bed, she stumbled with him to hers. Naked on her clean white sheets, he showed her his new Eagle, Globe and Anchor tattoo and asked for a goodnight kiss. She put her glasses on the nightstand and leaned in to kiss him on the lips. He pulled her on top of him with muscles freshly sculpted on Parris Island. The next

morning he was horrified and she was hung over. When she came out of the shower he was long gone.

She opened her desk drawer, turned the framed photo facedown, and began to cry: deep, wracking sobs, her teeth bared in a feral grimace.

She began to seduce sailors whose time on Adak would be brief, junior enlisted men from the deployed squadron still in or barely out of their teens: aircrewmen still learning radar and sonar displays; maintenance technicians figuring out which end of the wrench to hold; rowdy miscreants who'd chosen military service over jail time. They got hammered fast on cheap liquor, came fast, and left faster. She didn't want them sticking around. On the mornings after, most of them didn't want to stick around, either.

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By the end of January it was dark three-quarters of the day and Rachel emerged from the windowless NAVFAC building during daylight only for smoke breaks. Her skin became almost translucent, like a ghost fish in a cave. Her irises, gray like the storm clouds whipping in from the Bering Sea to blow snow sideways at sixty knots, seemed to pale; eyestrain from flickering fluorescent lights, never seeing the horizon, and never focusing her gaze more than twenty feet ahead of her gave her constant headaches.

After watch she hit the club. Word got around: OTA1 Rachel Schneider liked to rob the cradle. She took home unpopular airmen who called her "coyote ugly" and joked that they'd rather gnaw off their own arm than wake her up the morning after. She accommodated homely young men whose pals thought they needed a pity fuck.

She no longer cared that Ed and Maria disapproved, or that her colleagues shunned her. She burned with need for the smoky club, the maudlin country music, the sear of eighty-proof alcohol. For the quick strip and dive under the covers in the darkness of her room. For dampness and the sudden flare of energy when she discovered baby-soft skin in sensitive spots, and soft whorls of fine chest hair just growing in. She demanded that her partners suckle her breasts. When

she felt erect flesh inside her, she imagined her partners growing younger, smaller, fetal, embryonic—captured and held warm, safe, and sleepy in her womb.

Not one ever lasted more than fifteen minutes.

Afterwards, when they passed out cold, she preferred to think of them as having fallen asleep.

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In March, Ed and Maria transferred to Hawaii. Daylight crept in around the edges of the watch rotation. On the watch floor Rachel fiddled with tapes until mechanical noises stood out clearly against the background of low-frequency ocean noise. She suggested new configurations for the steerable hydrophones to catch submarines slipping out of the protected waters of Avacha Bay or leaving the cliffside tunnels of Petropavlovsk. She plotted out the flight paths of the Soviet submarine hunter aircraft and long-range strategic bombers whose simulated nuclear ballistic missile launches toward naval bases and major cities on the West Coast enervated and enraged her. After watch, Rachel drove up to stand among the tiny graves by the evergreens and look out over Kuluk Bay while damp Arctic fog flowed over her like a ghost river.

She sometimes felt she was preparing to defend the United States from its arch-nemesis singlehanded. On smoke breaks that April she kept lookout across the surface of Kuluk Bay for the conning tower of a submarine they'd missed. Or she scanned the slopes of Mount Moffett for a pair of Soviet bombers appearing out of the clouds to rain fire and destruction. She tried to counter the irrational fear by reminding herself of the sensitive early warning radar on Shemya Island; of the diligent intelligence analysts at the Fleet Ocean Surveillance Facility in Honolulu who kept track of all the boats; of the competence of Air Force fighter pilots who would scramble in time to shoot Soviet bombers from the sky before they could launch their nuclear payload. She imagined silver planes, blood-red stars painted on the fuselage, exploding into thousands of pieces and falling in slow motion into the icy gray Pacific.

Despite her diligence, every capable ship and submarine in the Soviet Pacific Fleet left port for the spring exercise in a surprise surge that began in the wee hours of the morning. Watchstanders guzzling coffee and counting down the minutes until turnover were suddenly glued to their LOFARgrams and computer consoles. The communications center buzzed with urgent message traffic. Sailors plotted and replotted lines of bearing; watch officers pounded keyboards with reports; supervisors called day workers in early. A second P-3C squadron from Barbers Point flew in to augment the deployed squadron. Planes launched and landed around the clock.

Rachel realized she could identify young aircrewmen while she parsed through aircraft debriefing messages by the sensor operators' ranks: AWAN Jones - an airman, eighteen or nineteen years old; AW3 Taylor - an antisubmarine warfare operator third class who'd maybe broken twenty. At the clubs she'd listen for the crew number in conversations, slide in casually, introduce herself, and buy a couple of rounds. Aircrewmen willingly followed her home one night and ignored her the next. She left hickeys the size of a quarter on their necks, red patches like the strawberry birthmark on Ronnie's thigh.

Off watch when the bars were closed, she felt lethargic. She drew her shades and lay in the dark with the framed photo clutched to her chest or belly feeling simultaneously hungry and dead. She wanted to cry and couldn't. She wondered if she'd wither and disappear in sunlight, or if a silver stake through the heart would put her out of her misery. Visiting medical to request antidepressants was out of the question. She needed a top secret clearance for her twilight tour, maybe in Hawaii so she could spend time with Ed and Maria and apply for a civilian job at the intel center when she retired.

Sometimes she felt that she was already on her twilight tour.

***

The countdown for the simulated ballistic missile launch that would end the Soviet exercise began. The watch officers invited Rachel to join the betting pool on the date and time when one of the three deployed ballistic missile submarines would launch a missile fitted with

dummy warheads into the empty reaches of the South Pacific. Rachel put twenty in the kitty and agonized over every line on the LOFARgrams, demanded minute adjustments to the hydrophone arrays, tweaked the displays to minimize outbreaks of seismic activity that threatened to obscure acoustic data from the submarines, and scolded seamen who failed to plot every new area of probability within a few minutes of her confirmation of its accuracy.

"You're working too hard," Senior Chief told her. "I'll take part of your shift. Go get some rest."

"With all due respect, Senior, I just need another smoke break." Rachel heard the snarl in her voice but felt no remorse.

The senior chief shrugged. "Suit yourself," she said. "But don't call *me* when you collapse."

Rachel won the pool even though the missile was a dud and the second stage failed. Only hard work, she thought, reminded her that she was still among the living.

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Rachel's mood eased in May, when green grass crept up tundra-covered slopes and icy gusts of wind no longer threated to rip her car door off its hinges and hurl it up the side of Mount Moffett. Only the frequent temblors still made her anxious: the wildflower-dotted Aleutian Islands appeared to float on lapis waves, but instead were barely anchored to unstable tectonic plates sailing on a sea of molten lava. One plate slid a few millimeters under another at a subduction zone; glass rattled in windows and the vents on Great Sitkin's flanks puffed and hissed.

She put in a request for follow-on orders and a chit for two weeks of house-hunting leave at the end of the summer. She made plans for a long weekend in Tokyo or Seoul. She even decided to start looking for a man closer to her own age—after she brought home one last airman.

She underestimated Rex: short and thin with translucent Irish skin, a dusting of freckles on his forearms, and a peach-fuzz five o'clock shadow across his upper lip. Within minutes of bringing him back to

her room she realized he was no cowboy at his first rodeo. He ripped at her clothes and ruined her only good sweater. He bit at her breasts. He pounded so hard she knew she'd bruise inside as well as out. He slapped her twice: once on her ass, once in the face. She thought he'd leave when he finished, but less than an hour later he came at her again. And a third time. She was glad the room next door was unoccupied; no one would hear the headboard slamming into the wall. She welcomed the bruises and the pain—she deserved them, she thought, for having been so ridiculous.

They slept well into the afternoon. When she rose and dressed in an old pair of sweats Rex remained tangled in her sheets. Deep in sleep, the muscles of his face were relaxed; his skin glowed, his cheeks curved gently over the sharp bones. He lay on his stomach, one arm under his chest, his rear jutting into the air. He snored softly.

She retrieved the framed photo from her desk drawer. On that last afternoon too, Ronnie had snored softly, asleep on his stomach with his little bottom in the air. When Clyde's shouts woke him up and made him cry, the foggy blanket of depression had weighed her down. Slowed her down. Clyde reached the crib first. He'd picked Ronnie up, holding him under his arms and shaking him hard. *Do you never shut up, you little fucker? Just once, can't I get some peace and quiet in my own house? Rache, you gotta do something with him.*

The tiny snap, like the wing of a butterfly battering the petal of a rose, had reverberated through her body all out of proportion to its volume. The silence that followed felt like a roar. Clyde thrust Ronnie into her arms and ran to start the car. *We gotta get him to the ER. Oh God, Rache, what have I done?* She wrapped Ronnie carefully in the blue flannel crib blanket, supporting his head. She couldn't scream. Couldn't cry. *Too far. Portsmouth was too far away.*

She climbed into the pickup truck. Clyde punched the gas. A bluish haze spread across Ronnie's tiny eyelids, the color echoed on soft lips that would never latch onto her breast again and the acorn-sized nose through which air no longer passed. Trembling uncontrollably, she clutched him in the crook of her left arm and hung onto the armrest on the door with her right hand.

She slowly realized that she was shaking in the present.

Windows rattled, a pencil rolled off the shelf above the desk, doors in the hall slammed open and closed. A phone rang somewhere. Rusty water began to drip from the sprinkler pipe on the ceiling. Someone pounded on her door: *Earthquake!*

She had to get Ronnie—no, Rex—to safety in the doorway. She reached for the frame laying on the desktop, but the room slid sideways around her. A prolonged tremor sent the photo crashing to the linoleum out of her reach. The glass shattered. Rachel grabbed the edge of the desk and slid to her hands and knees on the floor, then crawled toward the glint of the photo frame. The building swayed around her. The top drawer of her desk fell out, spilling rope in a gleaming white pile beside her chair. Glass cut the palms of her hands and blood dripped down her wrist but she felt nothing. The photo slid out of her reach again.

Women shouted in the passageway. Someone started a head count. Another insisted that everybody needed to get out of the building, that buses were coming up from the base to evacuate them to higher ground in case a tsunami was inbound. Still struggling into his jeans and flannel shirt, Rex pushed past her and disappeared out the door in a flash of denim and bare feet.

Rachel ignored them and tried to pull herself up on her desk chair, which lay on its side. Water dripped from the sprinkler pipe onto the chair, the floor, and the coils of rope that seemed to writhe in time with the waves of energy traveling up through the earth. She had to reach the photo before the water from the sprinkler ruined it. She fell forward into the spreading puddle.

When the tremor subsided, Rachel grabbed the photo. She hauled herself to her knees and righted the desk chair, now in the center of the room. She murmured apologies to Rex, to the other aircrewmen she'd brought home, to Ed and Maria, to the senior chief and her watch officer. Even to Clyde. But especially to Ronnie, the sweet baby boy she'd been unable to protect.

She gathered the rope, glanced up at the dripping water pipe, and lightly touched the scar at her throat. She considered the distance from the ceiling to the chair to the floor. But that, too, was part of the past. It was time to clean up the mess and reframe the photo.

JERRI BELL is the Managing Editor for *O-Dark-Thirty,* the literary journal of the Veterans Writing Project. She retired from the Navy in 2008: her assignments included antisubmarine warfare in the Azores Islands; sea duty on USS *Mount Whitney* and HMS *Sheffield;* attaché duty at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, Russia; and a collateral duty assignment as a Navy Family Advocacy Program officer, coordinating the response to incidents of domestic violence in a command of 800 sailors, Marines, and civilians. Her work has been published in a variety of journals and newspapers, including the *Washington Post,* and has twice been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She and former Marine Tracy Crow are the co-authors of *It's My Country Too: Women's Military Stories from the American Revolution to Afghanistan.*