

## Making Saltwater

By Annie Baumm

I remember the summer from its smell: salt crystals embedded in decayed flesh. My father told me to get rid of the creature but I didn't want to.

Summers meant we were out boating all day with snarled, salty hair that whipped through our *Wicked Motion* winds. That was the name of our boat: *Wicked Motion*. It had a too-large engine that slunk in the back when it was tied to the dock. But my dad liked to go fast. He breathed a different kind of air: one that snapped back at him. Adventure bled through his veins. Everything we did had to be intense, one hundred percent or absolutely nothing.

We kept our boat tied to a creaky dock. The boards were uneven. When I walked along the warped frames I stomped on the lifted ones, smacking them down to feel them bend under my weight. My brothers smacked along the dock in front of me. Our boat had a plaque in front of it: a white background with soft blue lettering. We threw our shoes off on the dock, sometimes our sweatshirts too. I never once feared they would be stolen from me. The marina was my backyard, my playground, my untouchable space.

We held on to sun-kissed metal railings as *Wicked Motion* smashed through wave after wave. Knees bent, feet firm, our bodies swaying with the ocean. We stopped around lunchtime, opening up a sticky cooler to suck on frozen red grapes. We jumped off all sides of the boat, hurling ourselves into icy Atlantic water with twists and tricks. My dad was famed for backflips. My second oldest brother was known for the corkscrew. Some days we were joined by other boaters: my dad's friends. We would tie our boats up next to each other in the middle of the ocean and sway with the current. I would hop from boat to boat, rifling through everyone's coolers for ice cubes.

We came back to our warped dock and white plaque right before the sun fell into setting. As my brothers got older, they learned to dock the boat; sometimes the bow smacked into the wood, leaving a chip that my dad cursed at. I admired the way their hands grasped the wheel. Their fingers would go

white from gripping too hard and my oldest brother twisted his lips into a corner of his face. I always wondered what color my hands would be, how my face would contort. But I never learned how to dock the boat.

The day I got my pet was the same as all the other boating trips. We came back, my oldest brother docking with only a few bumps. I tied the boat - circling around three times and pulling the rope through while my dad watched with a golden smile.

We were walking along the docks, our last few steps as sailors. As the waves inched away, wooden piers exposed their mucus green slime and knobby barnacles. Low tide always felt like a new world had opened that paused, held its breath, and offered a flirty glimpse. On this day I soaked in every moment of the temporary world. I was watching one pier when I saw a flinch of pink. I screeched without realizing it. Everyone stopped and I pointed, squealing, "Starfish."

My dad's back arched like a dolphin as he slid into the water. I reached my chipped, nail polished fingers to my face, wiping his splash away. His glistening arms slipped through the water and propelled him away from me. Within seconds he had stripped it from the post and glided back through the water to me. I crouched down, staring at the prickly thing. I ran my finger across its tentacles as giggles vibrated in my throat. My dad flipped it over and I nearly fell over. White legs wiggled in varying directions and I felt the combination of horror and awe.

"Can we keep it?"

"Honey, no. It won't survive away from its home."

I did my best to summon tears.

"Maybe for a day or two," he said.

I placed a bowl on the windowsill of our living room. It was right in the nook of the room where ceiling to floor windows poured an endless golden warmth. The eggshell couch soaked the sun like a sponge as I leaned my arms over the back. The starfish was limp inside. I assumed it was pretending not to move. I placed rocks around its tentacles in an attempt to make a home. I shook salt crystal into

the water, then dipped and swirled my finger around to soften them. They fell on the knurled pink skin in blocks. I rested my head against the back of the couch and waited.

The next morning the room held a salty air. I took one of our glass jars, filled with seashells, pottery shards, and various colored glasses: our summer treasures. I carefully pulled items from the jar and placed them around the bowl. I even put our special red piece next to him. Red is the rarest form of sea glass. My dad and I cherished it.

“Just get rid of it already,” my brother said.

“No,” I sassed back.

I swiveled around as my dad walked into the room.

“Dad, come on. That’s just not right,” my brother said.

My dad looked at me and I pleaded my blue eyes.

He sighed, saying, “I think he needs to go back today.”

“Why?” I asked.

“He won’t survive here, honey. I mean, what would we even feed him?”

“We’ll find something,” I said eagerly.

Fifteen minutes later I jumped in the front seat of my dad’s too-fast car and thumped my feet against the floor as he revved the engine towards a pet store. They didn’t have starfish food. Fish flakes seemed like a close second.

I bounced home to find the starfish a different shade of pink. He was fading. I moved the red sea glass closer to him. I sprinkled flakes in, even turned over the tentacles, helping him to feed. The white legs weren’t as wiggly. My brothers scoffed at me and left the room.

I curled up next to my dad on the couch, leaning my head against his tanned and salted skin. My dad had gorgeous eyes. Blue, with a circle of fire around the iris. In this moment, they were closed. His breath was heavy, sucking in decayed starfish and exhaling a sweet cinnamon rum perfume. I snuggled into his body and let my knotted hair bind with his.

“Dad?” I whispered.

I held my breath and waited for an answer. I turned my eyes up to my dad's. His breath made me scrunch my face. I let my eyes, my head, and my breath fall back to his arm. I squeezed my arm around him, then lifted my hand, shaking salt crystals onto the rise and fall of his chest.