

## Feeding the Stingrays

It started when I threw up on my professor.

Actually, that's not quite true. The danger signs started before I even stepped on board *The Wanderer*. But I ignored them. This was my first sailing expedition, and I couldn't have been more excited for the two-day long sail into the Gulf of Mexico with my USFSP Nature Writing Class.

The night before, my dog tried to warn me not to leave. She snuck into my duffel bag, pulled out my bag of pens, and raced into the other room – knowing I couldn't go on a writing/sailing trip without a pen. I didn't listen.

That morning, I grabbed my duffel bag – which was 10 times bigger than I – and arrived 15 minutes late to the dock. I was assigned to *The Wanderer*, a 37-foot-long keel boat that looked like a tiny pirate ship. Most of my friends from class were on board, along with the captain and my professor, Dr. Hallock.

I was prepared for anything. Sleeping bag, sleeping pad, pillow, trail mix, new notebooks, three types of sunscreen, half my wardrobe, brand new sunglasses. Even a white shirt with "Captain" written on it. As soon as I stowed my things below deck, Kat and I found the best spot to sleep on the ship. I told her I was afraid of getting seasick.

"Well, if you do throw up, at least you'll be feeding the stingrays," Kat said. She's 24 - an environmental science major with a dry sense of humor.

But I didn't plan on feeding any stingrays. I'd been looking forward to this trip for weeks – the long writing workshops, our visit to the hauntingly beautiful Egmont Key, and especially the chance to bond with my class.

The waves were choppy as we left the harbor. Kat rescued a box of English muffins from tumbling overboard. We all shared muffins and fruit and drank ice water. Captain Zack handed Dr. Hallock a sharp knife to cut up the pineapple. The knife was wrapped in a dish towel in case the boat rocked.

We glanced over the side of *The Wanderer* and saw a school of stingrays gliding past. They surrounded our sailboat like giant brown lily pads.

"A school of stingrays? That's a university," April said. She's 35, a graduate student and a former analyst for the police. Red-haired and quick-witted, April isn't scared by anything. But today she was worried about Rogue Waves. She'd

just watched a documentary on them. They come up out of nowhere and capsize boats, she explained. That's why they're Rogue.

Captain Zack said not to worry about Rogue waves. He looks like Jesus.

I started regretting the English muffin. The further we sailed into the Gulf, the choppier the waves got. Up, down. Smack. Up, down. Smack. I took deep breaths – up – Dramamine – down – ginger ale – up – more deep breaths – down.

April was shaking all over. "I can't do this," she told Zack. But even he couldn't calm the waves.

The sky was overcast, the sea grey and heaving. I knew you were supposed to stare at the horizon to fight seasickness. My eyes latched onto the Skyway Bridge – just hazy lines in the distance. I memorized every inch of that bridge. Cars crawled across it like tiny blue ants. I envied them.

Then I threw up. All over the side of the boat but also all over my shoes and my shirt and my shorts and my acupuncture no-nausea-wristbands and the lifejacket next to me – and my professor.

"Now we're friends," he said.

Imagine having the flu on a rollercoaster with all your colleagues staring at you. That was me.

Kat shuttled back and forth between April, quaking on one side of the boat, and me, throwing up on the other.

"You look really green," she told me. I tried to reply but I'd lost my voice. She misunderstood me and thought I'd made a hilarious joke – some kind of play on words involving the environment and sailing.

I warned her not to use the life jacket next to me.

"Dude, you guys got all of them," Kat said. "April got that one, you got this one, and I think Trina took out the other one."

Zack turned the boat around, and for the first time in two hours I caught a glimpse that made me less forlorn – shore. We docked outside a Holiday Inn resort and sneaked into the pool. April and I decided not to return to the sailboat.

"At least we're both in the same boat," April joked.

"We gave it the college try," I teased.

"You're really good with those word puns," Kat said, thinking of my environmental masterpiece.