

Karla G. Orozco

New Beginnings

I stepped foot on USS The Sullivans on December 15th, 2010. It was a dark and cold night, I felt shivers and goosebumps all throughout my body. I wasn't entirely sure if my nerves were just getting the best of me or if it was actually as cold as I remember. The moon was, "a perfectly round cheese," as my grandmother would say. It was so bright it enlightened the four ships along the pier. As I continued walking down the pier, I held my head high, I looked up at the beautiful dark sky and noticed three little stars. I felt as if those three little stars watched over me... I felt comfort from them, as if they were telling me everything would be ok.

I was wearing my crisp new Dress Blue Uniform and I carried a heavy dark green sea bag on my back. In that sea bag, I carried my black steel toed boots, three different uniforms, jackets, shirts, running shoes, sweats and toiletries. The bag had to be over thirty pounds, it had everything I needed to start my new life in the United States Navy. As I walked by the second ship I could feel eyes on me; I felt judged. I knew that whoever was watching me was probably calling me a "booter". That's what they called a person that was fresh out of boot camp. I didn't know what that term meant back then but either way, I knew that

whatever they were talking about had to be about me. My heart started beating faster by the second, and I was anxious to get to the ship that would soon become my new home.

From a distance, I started to see a long white banner with letters that read, "USS The Sullivans (DDG-68)". This ship was made of steel, it was 505 ft. long. The dark night made it difficult to distinguish the ship's actual color but it seemed to be a dark shade of gray. It was unlike anything I've ever seen before. As I approached the ship, I held back many tears. I didn't want anyone to see how home sick and terrified I actually was. I walked up the stairs and again, I felt eyes on me. That whole time I walked with my eyes glued to the ground but when I looked up I saw two females greeting me with a warm smile. One of them said, "Hi, welcome to USS The Sullivans, are you checking in?" "Yes, I am." I answered in a very low voice. I wasn't even sure if she heard me, but I was too nervous to care.

She introduced herself as Petty Officer Mendez. She looked Hispanic, she had dark brown eyes and jet-black hair that was pulled back into a low bun. I could tell she was a "squared away sailor," as navy sailors called someone that looked sharp and well put together. She said, "We've been waiting for you. It's too late for you to check in today but I can take you down to your bed so you can put your things away, and get settled down. Get some rest, I'll go get you in the morning so you can start your check-in process." She took me down through some very tight hatches. I felt like I was going through a hole made by a groundhog. I had to take my sea bag off and put it through the hole before I could even start making my way down. The hallways were very narrow. If I tried to fully extend my arms out, I wouldn't be able to. I suddenly felt trapped and overwhelmed by my surroundings, I wanted to run out of there as fast as I could but there was no going back.

We finally arrived to berthing, where all girls slept. The beds were staggered, one on top of the other. Three beds high, twelve in one single hallway. The beds had just enough room for you to breathe, they were more like coffins, not beds. A sheet, a blanket, a pillow case and a pillow were nicely placed on the foot of my bed. No one else was there except for me and Petty Officer Mendez. I wondered why that was but I didn't want to ask. I just said, "thank you," and she left a few moments later. I took a deep breath, put down my things and all of my emotions poured out of me. A waterfall of tears kissed my cheeks that night. There I was, alone with no family, no friends, not even a single star to look over me.

Petty Officer Mendez showed up at exactly 7 o'clock in the morning. I was already dressed in my Navy Working Uniform, not ready to see what the day had prepared for me. She walked me to the mess decks, which was the navy term for cafeteria and we sat together and had breakfast. We exchanged a few words, mostly about me. She asked me if I slept ok, if I was nervous and if I had called my parents to tell them I made it ok. "*I can't believe I didn't even think to call my parents!*" I thought to myself. The only thing I told her was that I had decided not to call because it was already very late.

After we finished breakfast she gave me a tour around the ship. She introduced me to around twenty people and took me to the admin office to get checked in. I guess she expected me to remember the way around the ship from the tour she gave me earlier that morning because she left me there like a dog on the side of the street. I had no clue how I was going to get around on my own but I kept my calm and pretended to be fine.

My check-in process was completed and I walked aimlessly around the ship. I walked in circles many times. As I walked down the hallway I noticed a young man coming down the stairs. He appeared to be around nineteen years old, maybe six feet tall. He had enchanting light brown eyes. I tried to shift my gaze

from that muscular, statuesque figure but before I could look away, he gave me a very sweet, comforting smile. He didn't say a word to me as he walked down the stairs but his smile meant more than the twenty "Hellos" I had exchanged with sailors earlier that day. I didn't get a chance to read his name tag on his breast pocket, I was too busy trying to figure out where I was. I guess I could have asked him to help me out but I got nervous all of a sudden and I kept walking, as if I knew where I was going in the first place.

Two weeks passed and I hadn't seen this mysterious guy. "*What was his name? Why did he disappear?*" I kept asking myself. He was the only person I looked forward to seeing as I continued to adjust to the ship life and he was nowhere to be found. I was in berthing with a girl named Kelly when I thought to ask if she knew anything about this guy. I explained what he looked like and she immediately knew who I was referring to. She excitedly replied, "Valdez!!!" She appeared to know exactly who he was.

"Oh my God, He'll be back tomorrow! He is just on leave visiting his family in California!!!"

"Really?" I said.

"YES! Why in the world would I lie to you? AHHHHH! You like him, don't-cha?! You guys would make such a cute couple! He doesn't have a girlfriend!" She exclaimed.

"I just think he's ok looking, plus I don't even know the guy." I tried to hide how I really felt because I didn't know if I could trust Kelly yet.

Sure enough, this guy was back from his vacation the following day. I noticed him from a distance while I stood there gazing in his direction. He was standing behind one of the 25mm chain guns with a few of his friends. Whatever they were talking about had to have been hilarious because they were all laughing hysterically. He didn't seem to notice me at first but when he did, his eyes lit up with excitement. He rushed in my direction and said, "Hi, my first name is Isaac. I noticed you a few weeks ago but everything happened

so quickly that I kind of froze. I'm really sorry about that, you looked pretty lost that day, I wish I would have helped you out." I didn't realize that I looked so out of place that day until he pointed it out. I felt somewhat of a burning sensation on my face and I knew that my face was turning a bright shade of red by the second. I was so embarrassed for some reason. He took a quick look at my last name on my uniform and he read it out loud, "Rodriguez, huh? What's your first name?" My name is Grace I replied.

We started dating a few months after. We were moving "fast" according to some of our friends and family members. We didn't care what anyone else thought because we were young and very much in love. The problems started to happen when some of our higher-ranking personnel started to notice us together more often. We always went to lunch together, we sat together, we went to work together, we left together. Eventually, one of the Officers on the ship threatened Isaac and I with, "If I continue to see you two together, I will report both of you." We were much more careful after that. We minimized our time together at work and even had to start boarding and departing the ship at different times just so we didn't seem unprofessional.

Pretending not to know each other on the ship became frustrating. I was aware that relationships on the ship or in some commands were frowned upon and that we could get into extreme amount of trouble if we continued our relationship. It wasn't just any relationship for me. I had finally found someone who I could be myself around but here I was again, alone on the ship. Yes, I knew more people but what good was it when I still felt lonely? When we saw each other in the small hallways we had to avoid all eye contact. We had to walk past each other, couldn't even say, "*hello.*" Isaac had been on USS The Sullivans for three years, he couldn't afford to be kicked out of the US Navy, especially not because of me.

Despite all of those problems that we faced on the ship, we managed to work through it and stay together. It wasn't easy but I was only on the ship for two years before I had to be transferred to a different command in Jacksonville, Florida. My new command was only a thirty-minute drive from USS The Sullivans so Isaac and I continued dating, it was so much better that way since we were both in different commands and our relationship wouldn't be considered an issue any longer.

I will always remember how terrified I was walking onto the ship that dark and cold night but I also wouldn't have had it any other way.