ONE

Valet Parking

A SHIP ARRIVES

Most people board a cargo ship on a gangway, a safe, though perhaps steep, ramp that goes from dock to ship's deck with just enough metallic, rickety sounds to make it feel unique and even romantic in a nautical sort of way. Then there's how I'm about to board a ship with port pilot Captain Ron Rogers: we'll do it, like pirates, by climbing up a ship's hull on a wet rope ladder dangling above a sloshing ocean 2 miles from shore. And, oh, by the way, I'm told it's kind of dangerous.

This has me a little distracted when I walk into the port pilots dispatch office. As busy as the Port of Los Angeles is on paper, I'm a little surprised at the sleepy calm here. I had expected the chaotic charm of an air traffic controllers' tower—after all, the office oversees the six thousand ships that enter the port each year, sending out its cadre of fifteen captains to guide the vessels into their appointed berths. But on this day it might as well be a doctor's waiting room.

Dispatcher Beth Adamik, a tall, middle-aged woman with a friendly, grandmotherly voice, stands to shake my hand and then sinks back in her chair before a computer monitor that displays a jagged graphic of the California coast, the port, and a constant line of rectangular ship

icons stuttering through a designated shipping lane. Instead of being made to feel like an intrusion, I'm told to relax, as if I'm a guest in Adamik's living room and we're here to hang out over coffee.

Sitting between two sets of living quarters for pilots, the two-story dispatch office looks through a wall of windows over the entrance to the port's Main Channel, a bright, glary view that's less informative than it first seems. Even on clear days such as this, the air has a translucent quality, so Adamik and the other dispatchers instead watch their monitors for the ships entering the harbor and look out only if they have a moment to check the weather while listening to the Sirius Radio Love Songs channel that plays off a television in a back corner.

The port requires all deep-draft vessels (any ship needing 55 feet of water to float) to be guided from open water to final docking by a port pilot. Nearly all ports in the world do this, and the reason is simple: for someone in a large ship accustomed to navigating the open seas, approaching the unfamiliar Port of Los Angeles is like driving a bus from an empty stadium parking lot into a narrow, dark alley full of unknown, hidden obstructions. Without a port pilot's local expertise to direct the ship through the harbor's unique currents and park it at the correct dock, the world's fleet would probably be dented and mangled (and the world's ports in far worse shape). For this expertise, port pilots are paid $150,000 to $300,000 a year.

Adamik points at the computer monitor and tells me that they've chosen the *Wan Hai 312* as the ship I'll be boarding. It's going to the back end of the port, she says, and that'll give me a long ride to soak up all the details I can. At the moment, the *Wan Hai 312* is easing down the California coast at 9.5 knots. We know this because information on each vessel is radioed from the ship via a mandatory Auto Identification System to the Marine Exchange, a nondescript building on a hill above the harbor, and then relayed to the dispatch office. On the computer monitor, each ship icon jerks in short steps down the grayed-out shipping lane, the traffic sometimes so heavy that vessel names overlay one

another. Adamik can select any ship on the screen and with two mouse clicks determine its speed and distance from the port.

Just then, the captain of the *Wan Hai 312* radios to the dispatch office as required when the ship is 25 miles from the port entrance.

"Please prepare ladder on the starboard side," Adamik says crisply into a large microphone, referring to the Jacob's ladder constructed of rope and wooden rungs that Captain Rogers and I will use to board the ship. "Starboard side ladder one meter above the water, and call us again as soon as you enter the Precautionary Area." The captain repeats the instructions.

"Also, are your bow thrusters in good working condition?" Adamik asks. The *Wan Hai 312* is small enough that it will need only one tugboat to steer it through the port complex if the bow thrusters (water jets used for maneuvering) are operational.

"They're in good working condition, over."

"Thank you for that, captain."

I don't want to seem too concerned about this rope ladder business, so I ease into the subject as if I'm talking about the weather. Adamik plays along and implies that this is like a rite of passage for some at the port. Board a ship by scampering up its hull, and you've got the kind of minor bragging rights that impress just about everyone outside of the Coast Guard. That it has that kind of cachet has me a little worried.

I'm here for one main reason: I want to see what it's like for a ship to enter the Port of Los Angeles, slowly sailing past the dozens of piers and docked ships. I figure if I'm writing a book about the country's largest port, I need to know what a ship captain sees for the first time as he (not many women captains out there) leaves the comfortable open water off the California coast and snuggles into a berth for two days. The experience should give me a picture to paint that involves people and not just tons of steel.

Unfortunately, the carriers—the companies whose ships take cargo from point A to point B—weren't interested in letting me ride for awhile

on one of their ships. Come to think of it, just about everybody in the ultra-competitive shipping industry, from the carriers to the shippers (those who hire the carriers to move their cargo) to the railroads who haul the cargo to the rest of the country, stiff-armed me every time I humbly asked for a little access. Seems they were worried I might inadvertently reveal to their competitors some profitable technique that had saved them a penny or two in costs per container. If that sounds like a flimsy excuse, they also threw out the security rationale, which these days seems to trump all else. While no one accused me of wanting to enter a restricted area (pretty much the entire port) with explosives strapped to my body, they politely treated the request for a visit as though as I were indeed a terrorist. In truth, most companies rarely give access to reporters unless there's a commercial or public relations angle, and apparently neither need jumped out at them when I called.

Finally, with help from the Port of Los Angeles communications department—which indeed saw a PR angle—I was able to arrange to ride with a port pilot and get the sailor's view of entering the world of the port. Attaching myself to Captain Rogers gave me an end-around on all the secrecy, and, for a few smug moments, I felt like I had sneaked past the gatekeepers.

As more ships enter Adamik's screen, she writes their names and estimated arrival times on a whiteboard behind her and then slides a magnetic name tag for one of the port pilots opposite each ship name. The list grows from five ships to a dozen, the last one arriving after dark. For the *Wan Hai 312,* Adamik fills out a green dispatch slip that goes to Captain Rogers, indicating where he's taking the ship—in this case, berth 139 in the West Basin, an odd-shaped parking lot for ships off the Main Channel.

Bringing in a cargo vessel is a complex, coordinated effort between the ship's agent and dozens of entities. Tugs are ordered. Longshore linesmen are scheduled; they tie up the ship to the dock. A longshore lashing crew, charged with unlocking the containers from the deck, as well as crane drivers and all the other workers required to unload and

load a ship, are scheduled through the union's Local 13 dispatch hall. Clerks, who manage the paperwork and oversee the cargo operation, are brought in through the Local 63 dispatch hall. Chandlers, who supply ships with fresh food and other supplies, are told when to arrive at the docks. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) may be called if a crew member is sick. Captain Jim Morgan, manager of the Los Angeles Pilot Service, tells me later that he once counted all the steps involved in bringing in a ship and came up with two hundred phone calls.

Because time spent idling in port is costly, most ships try to arrive so that they're at the dock and ready for the longshoremen's 8:00 A.M., 6:00 P.M., or 3:00 A.M. shift start time. Getting in too early or too late can mean sitting for money-eating hours before the unloading and loading begin. As for the *Wan Hai 312,* it's headed for a 2:30 P.M. arrival, in time for the longshoremen's night shift, or so the captain hopes. The ship, capable of holding some thirteen hundred 40-foot containers, was built in early 2006 in Singapore's Jurong Shipyard for Wan Hai Lines. As it has done for most of the sixty-six ships in the Wan Hai fleet, the company gave it a prosaic name, *Wan Hai 312* (the one built before it was the *Wan Hai 311*). With a maximum 23-knot speed, the ship took eleven days to cross the Pacific Ocean from its last stop at Pusan, South Korea.

At about 1:45 P.M., Adamik calls Captain Rogers and tells him it's time for us to leave. He and I walk a short distance to a 52-foot boat with a two-man crew that will shuttle us 2 miles to the ship. As the boat approaches the *Wan Hai 312,* Rogers zips up his dark blue port pilot jacket and comes out from the cabin. He leans against the portside railing to get a better look, occasionally gripping it when the boat hits a chop, while the pilot boat circles from bow to stern.

Wearing slightly tinted aviator prescription glasses, he squints a bit on this bright, hazy day as he inspects the hull for any damage that could compromise his ability to pilot the ship into port. He also checks the depth markings on the hull to ascertain how low in the water the ship is riding. This isn't as important for a smaller ship such as the

Wan Hai 312, but the larger, heavily loaded vessels can come scrapingly close to the minimum 1.5-foot keel clearance the port requires between the ship's underside and the bottom of the Main Channel. (The Main Channel, which is the port's major arterial but isn't a natural body of water, was dredged with even sides and bottom to make it as simple as possible to navigate; pesky currents aren't a problem.)

Maybe it's because I'm not a mariner and don't know how to appreciate a ship's attributes, but the *Wan Hai 312* isn't much more to me than a big truck piled high with 40-foot containers. The red, green, and blue containers are crammed onto the deck as many as six high, looking like shoe boxes from a distance; and the ship itself, while as sleek as it needs to be to efficiently cut across the Pacific Ocean, looks so utilitarian that its only remarkable feature is its size. The *Wan Hai 312* is a monster, a metal mountain the length of two football fields that has no business floating. And yet, in today's shipping world, it's half the size of the current behemoths that are too large for some ports.

Rogers says little after he eyeballs the *Wan Hai 312.* He's a wiry sixty-six-year-old, and he comes across more like a grandpa hanging out with one of his grandkids than a man responsible for parking some of the world's biggest ships. He's almost serene in the wind and spray, a man so comfortable after fifty years on the water that he's like a veteran shortstop confidently strolling onto the ball field, ready to react to anything hit his way but also pleased just to be there. He casually mentions retirement as though it's something he should do eventually, like eating more vegetables, but he exudes such joy and energy for his job that I can't believe he's serious. Indeed, port pilots are known to work into their seventies or eighties. One octogenarian Japanese pilot is famous for being so frail he has to be carried up the gangway when he boards a ship.

Rogers started his maritime career in 1958, when he was sixteen, working on Island Boat Service passenger boats that made their summer runs to Catalina Island, a resort 22 miles off the coast from Long Beach. I'm tempted to romanticize this as some childhood passion to

be a sailor, but Rogers doesn't get so carried away. It was just one of those happy accidents that plop into people's lives like a winning lottery ticket. Three years later, he more or less stumbled into tugboats after he checked into the longshoremen's hiring hall looking for work and saw a notice for a relief deckhand. He ended up working for Red Stack, which eventually became Crowley Tugs. "No one ever said, 'You're a permanent employee,'" he tells me. "I spent twenty-nine years, ten months there. They never told anyone they were permanent in those days."

In 1990, Rogers decided to leap from tugs to the maritime world's top spot, port pilot. That meant starting at the bottom and training for two years with established pilots, gradually going from smaller ships to bigger ones. Rogers, even with his experience, had to complete one thousand ship moves before he could graduate from trainee to port pilot II. Now a senior pilot, he's required to attend a training course every two years. He seems especially proud that he just came back from Port Revel, a tiny lake in the French Alps, and the location of perhaps the most elite course for port pilots, where captains drive 40-foot models designed to handle like real tankers and container ships.

The pilot boat continues around the *Wan Hai 312* to the starboard side. We approach this way so that any wake the speeding boat creates on the port side will be muffled by the ship's hull. Also, this is the lee side, where the day's gentle breeze is blocked by the ship, making the seas calmer than on the opposite weather side. The water needs to be as still as possible for one good reason—to keep Rogers alive. The only true danger in the job is boarding the ship, which requires that Rogers, then I, step from the (ideally) steady pilot boat to the ladder without falling into the cold ocean.

The boat slows to match the ship's 5-knot speed, and in the surreal moments when our relatively tiny vessel bangs up against the ship's massive hull, it seems as though we're not even moving. With two members of the ship's crew peering over the railing and the mate of the port pilot boat standing behind him, Rogers casually but quickly grabs onto the rope ladder, curls his fists around the rope, and then lightly steps

off the boat. He has about 15 feet to climb. He's not wearing a flotation device, but no one seems to care; if he fell, he could be crushed between the two vessels before he had a chance to drown. In the past year, four pilots in other ports have died after slipping off the ladder.

The pilot boat continues to bump against the ship's hull while Rogers, wearing black, rubber-soled shoes, scampers up the ladder, his back slightly arched while he tries to keep his chest as close to the hull as possible. He hits each wooden rung with just his toes, and he struggles for a moment when he hits the top, where a chunk of deck railing has been removed to accommodate the ladder. He briefly straddles the top before saying hello to a crewman in dirty coveralls and a third mate sent to escort him to the bridge.

Now it's my turn. I stuff everything but my camera into the pockets of my fleece jacket, hang the camera around my neck, and step up to the ladder. The pilot boat's mate can't really do much to help me, and before I have a chance to get a close look at the ladder, he yells at me to grab it and climb without stopping. The rope is rough, almost too thick to grip tightly, and slickened with seawater. Immediately I feel the ladder pulling away from me. The rungs bang against the hull, and I wonder if I'd be able to grab the rope and stop myself from falling into the water should my foot slip from a rung. I pause about 5 feet up to make sure my fingers aren't sliding on the wet rope, and I can hear the mate screaming to keep moving. While Rogers scurried up the ladder with what I now understand to be as much survival instincts as seventeen years of practice, I deliberately, slowly haul my butt up, hyperaware of every slippery surface I'm touching, how my tennis shoes slide from side to side. I ease over the side onto the deck trying to look like that was no big deal, but the two crew members are barely paying attention.

The third mate escorts us up a steep, narrow, steel stairwell to an elevator not much bigger than a refrigerator box, which takes us to the ship's bridge. Captain Shen Kuo Chung greets Rogers with a broad,

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Captain Ron Rogers scampers up the slippery Jacob's ladder and boards the ship.

stained-teeth smile and then amiably shakes my hand. Rogers routinely uses this moment to gauge a captain's comfort with a stranger coming on board to control his ship as it moves into the port. While Chung is still ultimately in command, he seems momentarily tense until Rogers, a gregarious fellow who's both professional and relaxed, engages him as if they're longtime associates, even though they haven't met before this moment. The captain answers Rogers's questions about his trip, whether he had any troubles along the way, and whether the bow thrusters are working properly. When I ask about his eleven-day trip across the Pacific Ocean, Chung shrugs, "Not so bad."

The captain's body language finally eases, and he glances at the port with its skyline of cranes, still a hazy 2 miles away, perhaps relieved he doesn't have to pilot the ship himself into the harbor. No taller than Rogers, Chung has a crew cut and a wispy tuft of gray hair below his lower lip. With wire-rim glasses and a khaki shirt and pants, Chung—who's Taiwanese—has the moody look of someone who enjoys giving orders. He's been a captain since 1998.

After Rogers looks over the bridge to see if there's anything he'd like to change—such as switching the radar from a 6-mile scale to his preferred 3-mile, for its greater detail—he goes to a starboard-side counter covered with navigational charts to pick up a laminated copy of the pilot card, which lists the ship's dimensions and engine stats. He studies it for a moment and then has Chung sign a contract agreeing to the port's tariff, the terms and conditions that go with entering the port and using the pilot services. This includes pilot fees based on the ship's length and gross tonnage. Wan Hai Lines will be charged $1,326 for the ship's length (213 meters, or almost 700 feet) and $95 for gross tonnage.

Once the paperwork is finished, Rogers gives his first command to the quartermaster, a tall Asian man wearing jeans, a gray hooded sweatshirt, and an orange Wan Hai coat that goes nearly to his knees. "Starboard twenty!" Rogers says with a mixture of soothing authority and geniality. He means turn to the right twenty degrees.

"Starboard twenty!" Captain Chung barks out.

On the ship's bridge, Rogers calls out commands to the quartermaster.

After a short delay, the quartermaster returns, "Starboard twenty, sir!"

"Thank you," Rogers says when he sees the ship change course. By international rule, ships must have one person on the bridge who speaks English. According to Rogers, Russian ships are the worst when it comes to language barriers. Ship owners, he says, have cut costs by hiring crew who can't always communicate in English. On the *Wan Hai 312,* it's not clear if the quartermaster actually understands anything but the commands Rogers gives him. However, Captain Chung speaks English smoothly, with only the occasional syntax error, and seems at ease with

the language. Nevertheless, Rogers keeps his commands crisp and short and always double-checks to be sure they've been followed correctly.

PARALLEL PARKING 700 FEET OF SHIP

Captain Rogers has a problem. He first notices it when Captain Chung's otherwise stoic face tightens, looking like he has a bit of indigestion, though it's hardly the sort of grimace you see on a ship's bridge unless something really, really bad is about to happen. Rogers calmly asks if there's anything wrong, and the captain tells him the ship's engines have just died. His 698-foot container ship is technically adrift in the port's Main Channel, a 1,000-foot-wide lane lined with piers and docked ships; it's moving so slowly that even the rudders are useless. By the strange physics that govern these moments, the ship is heavier and harder to stop because it's in shallow water. If a strong wind slapped the ship's broad hull right now, Rogers would be fighting nearly 28,000 wayward tons with very little to keep the *Wan Hai 312* from plowing into a dock, a ship, or a crane.

The only way to steer is with two tugs and bow thrusters, and at the moment, there's just one tug at the ship's bow, starboard-side. In any case, neither the tug nor the thrusters can do much to move the ship forward. You need engines for that, and at the moment, the *Wan Hai 312* is bobbing about the Main Channel like the biggest piece of flotsam you'll ever see.

Rogers's usually jovial face contorts between concern and slight amusement, a practiced reaction, he told me earlier, that is mainly for the benefit of the ship's crew—a calm, nearly impassive demeanor demonstrating that he's so much in control, the worst that could happen won't. His eyes narrow, but a half smile puckers through as he starts to talk. He stands directly behind the bridge's broad window to watch for the second tug he's ordered on a cell phone he keeps with him but rarely uses (it messes with the ship's electronics). This doesn't mean he'll necessarily get a tug right away. Tugboats aren't always available

on such short notice, given how many ships are sailing in and out of the port, and he may end up having to wrestle the ship down the Main Channel with just one tug and bow thrusters.

I glance at Chung, who looks like someone who can't find his car keys, pacing for a moment before standing at one instrument panel or another, almost embarrassed at what has happened. He should be worried. In 1996, a fully loaded Liberian bulk carrier, the *Bright Field,* temporarily lost power just like this while sailing down the Mississippi River near New Orleans. The ship struck a wharf where a shopping mall, a parking garage, and a hotel were located, causing sixty-two injuries and $20 million in damages.

A few minutes later, Rogers asks, "What caused the problem, captain?"

"The signal," Chung says tersely. A faulty sensor detected a phantom pressure drop somewhere in the engines and shut them down, using the kind of electronic logic with which the system was designed.

"We'll work it out," Rogers tells Chung reassuringly. Chung turns off the sensor, and Rogers proceeds by giving commands to the engine room "the old-fashioned way," as he puts it.

Unfortunately, you don't just crank up a 34,000-horsepower engine as if it were some Ford in the garage. Starting a diesel engine this size requires a strong shot of air to get the pistons turning, something like the starter in a car. Under the circumstances, this shouldn't be a problem, because a ship usually has enough compressed air stored in tanks for seven starts (the first try doesn't always work). Then again, that air is also used for other systems and could be depleted just when it's needed the most. In any event, this is going to take a few minutes. For the first time, Rogers seems a little tense as we enter the West Basin while passing another ship being piloted out.

I have to admit this makes the ride into the port a lot more exciting for me; while I stand beside Rogers taking notes, I'm already figuring out how I might write a lead for my chapter on port pilots. No, I'm not so shallow that I want this little mishap to lead to the *Wan Hai 312* taking out a pier; I want to tell a story, not witness destruction. But just the

same, I feel a need to behave calmly and appear detached so Rogers doesn't think I'm actually enjoying this.

I join Rogers for a moment at the window, but the shipping containers block out most of what we can see from the bridge, including the tugboat on the starboard side, so we walk out to the bridge wing—a metal balcony jutting out on either side of the bridge—for a better view. On larger ships, the containers are often stacked so high that the port pilot has to lean out from the bridge wing just to see ahead. Above him, as a courtesy to the port, a U.S. flag flies, hung higher than the flag of Singapore, which flutters with a snapping sound from a separate pole. A steady hum surrounds us, the combination of ship sounds, water splashing against the hull, and the wind blowing in my ears. I can smell an oily, briny odor but only if I take a deep whiff, and even then it seems more like an olfactory illusion than anything real.

Rogers looks astern to a thin foamy line trailing behind the ship on either side, called the history, which is made from bubbles kicked up by the ship as it plows through the water. If he needs to, he can use this to visually confirm that the ship is headed in the direction he's commanded to the quartermaster. The history can also indicate if there's an unseen, rare current that pushes the foam to one side.

At the same time, an orange Coast Guard Dauphin helicopter buzzes quickly overhead. "They're checking us out to make sure we're okay," Rogers says. According to the Coast Guard, a quick swoop overhead hardly qualifies as an inspection; it's just a look, if that, to make sure everything appears normal, at least from some 500 feet above. Then again, the major preoccupation these days is port security, and no matter how flimsy a feeling it is, there's still something reassuring about the Coast Guard looking down on us, if indeed the crew bothered to give us more than a glance.

With the engines restarted, we slowly move toward our eventual berth, and I take in my first shipside view of the country's largest container port. The place seems nearly shut down. The eight-story cranes, big enough to reach across the world's largest ships and pluck off the

containers one by one, stand like unused parking meters on a city street. The asphalt-covered terminals where ships dock—essentially huge waterfront parking lots for containers—have a few people standing about them, but no one acts as though they're busy.

After months of research and interviews, the Port of Los Angeles has been feeling to me like a place in constant turmoil. When seen under a microscope, conflict oozes and bubbles as if a flame burned underneath. The longshore union beefs about the employers—mainly the terminal operators and carriers—over everything from safety to benefits. The employers take carefully worded potshots at longshoremen for what they see as a lack of work ethic. Residents and environmentalists say the port is poisoning the local communities with air pollution. The entire nation, it would seem, frets about a terrorist attack on the port.

I know all this festers here, and yet, as we glide past the piers and ships, it seems as tranquil as an abandoned beach. In a way, I'm disappointed. I was hoping for a visual metaphor to show a ship entering the port from relatively calm waters into a scene of utter chaos that reflects not only how busy a place the Port of Los Angeles actually is but also how important it is. But this is what the world's sailors see—after all, that's ostensibly why I'm here, to get the mariner's view of the facility—and I wonder if, in their jadedness, the port looks just like any other or if the calm also strikes them as unusual.

This project began after I published a magazine piece about women longshoremen (their preference was to be called longshore*men*). The next day I got calls from two movie producers wanting to make films based on the article. While all the phone conversations and a lunch at a nice restaurant were lovely for my ego, when it came down to actually committing to anything, I swiftly realized that they were missing the necessary cash to do anything but talk and eat arugula salads. Nevertheless, the experience planted the idea that people might be interested in longshoremen and the port itself. So, finally, here I am aboard a ship—and all I see is a place on a coffee break.

As if he senses I need a little drama, Rogers begins telling me about

the hazards he worries about. For starters, although the Main Channel is deep enough for a fully loaded container ship, there's a danger that if Rogers sails in too quickly, the ship could push aside water so fast that it creates an aquatic trough of sorts, which the surrounding water can't fill in quickly enough. The ship could literally sink low enough to scrape the bottom, a phenomenon called squat. Wind is another factor. With so much hull and so many stacked containers to whack against, strong winds push ships about in the water as though they still had sails. If you happen to be following a ship during such conditions, you'd see the stern swing from side to side as the port pilot fights for a straight path through the Main Channel. I realize how lucky we are today that the wind is calm. With a strong breeze and the engines dead, Rogers might have watched the vessel slam into a pier or another ship.

The Vincent Thomas Bridge, a 2.2-mile suspension span connecting San Pedro to the port's Terminal Island and beyond to Long Beach, is a rare obstacle. On August 27, 2006, an improperly stowed crane aboard the *Beautiful Queen,* a cargo ship, hit the bridge's scaffolding underneath the roadbed. The damage was minor, and the road opened later that night. When we pass the still-visible damage, Rogers is almost amused. I don't think he's indifferent, but he's relieved it didn't happen to him.

Finally, there are the collisions, usually between a ship and a dock. Just three days before Rogers boarded the *Wan Hai 312,* another pilot underestimated how far the bulb—a kielbasa-shaped protuberance at the ship's bow—stuck out; and as he maneuvered into a berth, the ship plowed into some ten pilings.

Not that Rogers hasn't suffered his own indignities. He once had a ship nearly run aground, but that didn't stop him from coolly shutting down the engines, dropping anchors as fast as possible, and using the tugs to halt the ship before—according to him—it nearly sliced in half the port pilots dispatch office, which is only a few feet from the Main Channel. Seems he told the quartermaster to turn starboard, but the quartermaster went the opposite direction, and before Rogers could correct the mistake, the ship "hit the mud" before taking out any structures.

Rogers goes back inside. The captain offers him a cup of coffee, which a third mate brings a few minutes later in a white china cup and saucer. Captain Chung appears restless, distracted, as if he doesn't know what to do with himself while Rogers is in control. He alternately sips his own coffee and watches the view with crossed arms. We talk about his ship for a moment, and, without prompting, he tells me, almost as if he's speaking about himself, that the *Wan Hai 312* is "small, very small." But not so small that it can't crush a small sailboat idling on the starboard side of the Main Channel.

"Captain. One long whistle, please," Rogers says when he sees the boat. The warning lasts six seconds, a deep, steamy honk that prompts the sailboat's captain to radio Rogers and acknowledge that he sees the ship.

After more than an hour of moving down the Main Channel and turning into the West Basin, a Y-shaped bay that Rogers says was once a marsh, the ship arrives at berth 139, which is tucked against a sharp, currently empty corner. Rogers walks out to the port bridge wing to see the dock better. With a portable control box, he adjusts the bow thrusters' power and direction, using a large dial to slowly ease the bow alongside the pier. He clutches a walkie-talkie and periodically directs the tugboat, which is unseen on the other side of the ship, pushing against the ship's stern in concert with the bow thrusters. Whenever Rogers gives a command to the tug, the boat's pilot acknowledges with a peanut whistle, a shrill beep that echoes like it's coming from a distant calliope.

At one point, Rogers leans forward over the railing for a better view and grimaces. Only about 20 feet of water separate the hull and the asphalt dock. He warily nudges the bow thruster control knob, continuously fiddling with it but making no broad moves. The ship creeps forward and closes the gap between hull and dock by a few more feet. Captain Chung walks out from the bridge and stands beside Rogers. Aware that the pilot is concentrating, he says nothing and just watches. As the bow inches alongside the pier, Rogers worries about the front

bulb, which is used in the open seas to push aside water more efficiently but can't be seen because it's mostly submerged. If he misjudges how far the bulb sticks out from the bow, he could destroy the pier.

"Seventy-five feet to go, captain," he tells Chung. "That's the way to go," he coos, as if speaking to the ship. "Just like a little baby."

Waiting longshore linesmen walk to the pier's edge and watch for the ship's crew to throw them the narrow ropes called heaving lines, which are weighted at the end with so-called monkey's fists and tied to the much heavier hawser, a thick white rope for securing the ship.

"Finish engine," Rogers finally says after an agonizing half hour of maneuvering. The linesmen hook one of the heaving lines to a white Hummer H2 and pull it up until the hawser drags over the asphalt after being dunked in the water. It takes two men to wrap each of the four dripping hawser lines around a series of large, knee-high metal posts called mooring bollards. Rogers complains that the linesmen aren't taking out the slack enough, allowing the ship to move too freely, bobbing in and away from the dock. They finally tighten the lines and secure the ship.

Three U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents wearing dark blue uniforms, black boots, and small backpacks—two stern women and a younger man who looks amused, as though he's just heard a joke—watch the ship's crew struggle to pull the gangway out from the hull where it's secured and onto the terminal pavement. I can see a sidearm on one of the women. The three are here to check the crew's papers and other documents as well as to collect a tonnage tax, which the captain pays with a check. I'm not the sort to panic at the sight of authority figures, but in this case my stomach tightens. I had left my wallet in my car to leave room in my pockets for other things, and if they ask for identification, I'm screwed. After seeing their no-nonsense demeanor, I imagine strip searches, long interrogations, and finally getting home after a couple of months of detention at Guantanamo Bay.

Once the gangway comes down, the officers walk up and quietly pass Rogers and me. I later tell him I had no ID and wonder why they

didn't bother to ask who I was. "It's because you were with me," he says matter-of-factly. So much for security. In a moment, Jessica Bautista from the dispatch office drives up in a van to take us back, a ten-minute ride. Just as the sun is setting, Rogers gets a call on his cell phone, and he leaves to pilot another ship, this time to guide it out of the port.