Alone in a Crowd
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Sailor

Teresa Selfe

Very slender, almost fragile in appearance, and soft-spoken, she defies all the stereotypes of tough lesbians.

I remember having friends of mine changing tires and being extremely impressed at their abilities and thinking I wanted to be able to do that and why not? But I'm very slight physically and had always assumed I was not strong enough to attempt any type of labor that involved physical stress. It didn't really scare me. It's just that I basically didn't like to work and avoided it as much as possible, only making enough money to take trips and things. The financial aspect was a hell of a lot of the reason I got into non-traditional work. I was tired of not having made enough money and having traveled enough and lived long enough that I was coming more realistically to terms with the amount of money needed to survive. I mean, I have picked cherries in the Okanogan and later cucumbers, worked in restaurants a whole lot, sold shoes, and worked in a bookstore. Yeah, that's about it. And with the way wage scales and everything go, what was a livable amount of money back then would not be now. I wasn't really poverty stricken but it was always very difficult for me to make enough money to save any or to even think about buying a car. I probably lived on anywhere from say three hundred fifty to five hundred dollars a month.

One of the things I particularly disliked, aside from the money involved, was that a good percentage of what I had to do was inside, and there were only minimal rights for my fellow
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employees and myself. It was very limiting to have to be focused into using only certain parts of myself. I was also very rarely given anything to do that made me feel I was really accomplishing something. It was always the kind of never-ending tasks that just go on forever.

Over the years I have known men who were involved in various aspects of construction and always seemed to have enormous amounts of money. Never wanted to spend it on you, but always had amazing amounts of money. Always had suntans and muscles and cars and seemed to have a more general control over what was happening to them. They could change jobs, and that always made an impact on me. I was also involved for a while with a woman who worked in the water department and made extremely good money. She was the first woman who I knew intimately who was involved in a non-traditional trade. That influenced me, made it a possibility. But it wasn’t until I moved to Seattle when I was surrounded by organizations and groups that seemed encouraging of this—just seeing flyers about workshops on women in non-traditional trades, having Mechanica available where you could learn the details about steps in joining a union. That’s when it became a real possibility.

In the summer of nineteen seventy-nine I needed a job very badly and was thinking very seriously of getting one outside, when I saw this huge apartment building being renovated really close to where I lived. There were a few women working there, and at that point in time it seemed exactly what I should try. I was persistent in going back and asking for a job, so I was eventually hired. I did a lot of painting, basic sanding, put in baseboards, countertops, linoleum, deadbolts, rehung doors, did a substantial amount of finish carpentry, built a railing, and did a lot of sheetrock. The work involved all kinds of tools—everything from very sharp saws to certain kinds of power tools, that I
had no familiarity with before, to certain kinds of chemicals, to odd balancing situations where I had to do a lot of heavy stuff, dropping things on my feet, hammers and nails, sharp, sharp, heavy things that I could not anticipate how they would respond.

Quite frequently I had to ask someone for help in figuring out how to do something new. Rather than have the men acknowledge my question, I would sometimes have to ask them two or three times because they were ignoring me. Then instead of simply answering my questions, I would have tools actually physically removed from my hands and the job practically done for me, and I’m talking about things that were very simple to do, that would involve only a small how-much-of-this-should-I-cut-off type of thing. At first I just allowed that to happen. After a certain amount of time, when I got to know the tools of the trade a little bit more, and I knew the question I was asking was something that could be easily answered, I would very often express irritation at them taking the tool out of my hands—almost to the point of sometimes taking the tool back and saying, “That’s all you had to say,” or “I can do that myself, I’ve done that before, I know how to do that. You don’t have to show me. Let me do it myself.” Some of them got angry to the point where they would not speak to me for two or three days afterward. I didn’t pay much attention to their reactions.

I met a man working at the company who told me about a seamanship school he had attended in Ballard. He was just working construction while waiting for NOAA [National Oceanographic Association] to call him. We had many discussions about the frustrations of trying to get your Z card. To work in the marine industry you had to have a Z card. But if you don’t know anybody, or haven’t had a substantial amount of experience on the private level, or aren’t willing to put out two or three hundred dollars to bribe someone, you can’t get a Z card and can’t work. But this man mentioned there was this school
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where I could get my Z card if I graduated. Now I had always liked the sea and wanted to travel, so I decided it was time for me to see what I could do about getting my Z card once and for all.

I went to the school with only the expectation of getting my Z card—seaman's papers. I did not know enough about the marine industry at the time to know it would be extremely difficult for me to get into the unions and work even if I had my Z card. I was not aware of the way the marine industry had changed and how difficult it was going to be for me.

There were a few other women in the school, but they were mostly in the engineering program, while I was in the deck program. The engineering program is more concerned with the mechanics of the ship, whereas the deck is more concerned with navigation, meteorology, road-map type of stuff, laws, rules of the road concerning behavior towards other ships, legalities involved, signaling, and nautical terminology. The school really did try to cover just about every aspect of working on ships that one could encounter and that could be presented in a classroom form. I also thought that in actuality they were fairly encouraging to women in the school. You didn't find yourself completely blacklisted or getting automatic bad grades or having people slashing your tires so you couldn't make your class.

But when dealing with men there are a few guaranteed things that come up to one degree or another, particularly if they feel you are entering into an area they have designated as their own. I can remember numerous incidents where I felt that as a human being I was being singled out to have fun poked at me in one way or another. You know, just for the fact I was there, or my response was being looked for, searched for, either by somebody provoking me or attention being called to my reaction. They would insinuate that something I asked was a dumb question or continually turned the fact that a woman was in the classroom into a joke situation. When someone said, "seaman," another
would say “seaperson” and kind of joke about it or they say, “With ladies in the room this or that is goin’ on,” and act as if they were doing me a big favor by pointing out that I was there. They never seemed comfortable with me being there. I was either an entertainment or ignored. That is except for the navigation teacher and the meteorologist. These two men were very objective in their treatment of women.

There were a couple teachers in the engineering department who fancied themselves to be ladies’ men to some degree, and I thought their choice of humor was extremely tactless. I've blocked out a lot of the crap they said, but all I will say is there were continual references in class to women’s bodies, other women’s bodies, my woman’s body. You were always being called “cutie” or “good-looking.” A number of the women in the school were continually being asked out socially by these men. It was just a very general lack of respect. It was like being in a Green Bay Packers locker room and either being ignored or on stage.

There were two other lesbians in the program at various times. One was in engineering class and just quit coming to class one day. I don’t know why. The other one was in the deck program. She was in her early twenties and very much a soft-spoken pleaser, not one to confront anyone with this issue. I’m sure no one else there knew she was a lesbian. We didn’t have much in common, so I stopped extending myself to her just strictly because we were lesbians.

The straight women were mostly supportive of my being there. Of course, they didn’t know I was gay. Like most straight women, they were much more concerned with what the men thought of them and their interaction with the men than their interaction with me. They did not treat me unkindly. It’s just that interaction with me was not a top priority for them. They basically seemed to enjoy being in a majority-male-type situation, incredible as that seems. There were a couple women in
the program that I became close friends with. As far as support went, I relied mostly on them. My roommate and ex-lover was pretty supportive, too. But in general, the area itself was so foreign to people outside the school that talking with them was pretty useless.

I did learn in the school how self-destructive it is to continually keep your mouth shut just to keep harmony. Maybe expressing your opinion is better. I remember one incident, a pretty low-key one, where a teacher in the middle of a marine law class began going on at great length about this woman who had been a secretary of his and didn’t shave her legs. He kept going on and on about how disgusting that was and equating his disgust at her not shaving her legs to her complete person being distasteful. I didn’t say anything, but it hurt so much. I had come from a very isolated lesbian community and had not had much daily contact with men for a long time and generally found their presence disruptive to my peace of mind and self-worth. I learned how to ignore certain actions and comments that were not worth being unsettled about as long as the school was important to me. The actual school situation was a lot more like daily life a woman would experience in the city than the extremes my jobs were. As such, I wasn’t really prepared.

In the spring the oil company comes to the school to recruit new employees. Their method was to hire people as summer workers and try to lure them into becoming permanent employees. They specifically came with the intention of hiring women and other minorities. I was interviewed and hired as a summer employee in the spring of nineteen eighty.

I went out to sea on an oil tanker in June. I had not anticipated the cumulative effect of being away from all support systems other than those that could be found on the ship. Other than that everything I encountered was pretty much what I had expected. I had expected to enjoy the sights and sounds of the sea and the various animals, to find a fairly monotonous
routine, a regularity about life, every day being the same; a separation from events on shore; emotionally, intellectually, as well as physically, an increasing introversion with myself. I expected to learn a lot about myself through contact with people from many different walks of life and areas of the country. I did. I also expected a substantial amount of harassment from the men in being female and as a being which can be approached sexually. I expected to have my capabilities invalidated, which frequently happened. It was fairly much what I expected in a lot of ways. It was only my actions that I had not expected.

I had just come from an extremely upsetting personal situation with my ex-lover. I was physically and emotionally drained, so when I got on the ship my self-image was not particularly high. I was frightened about being around so many men and nothing but men. I also worried about the effect my being a lesbian would have on the people around me and, therefore, their treatment of me. I had very mixed feelings about whether I should come out to anybody there. That first trip I only came out to a couple individuals and not for quite some time.

Being on a ship is very confining. The hallways are narrow. The rooms are narrow, so you are constantly hitting things because it has an unbalanced state to it. You are constantly being walked past or walked around or having to walk around. You are dealing with materials that are always metal or plastic or wood—usually metals that are very cold or very hot and are usually heavy. There's a lot of dirt, especially on a tanker. There's grease on the floor. There's always grease somewhere. It's very difficult to stay clean. There's a strange physical sensation of a large body trying to suck you into it, becoming one of the masses, because it is very hard to get away from anybody. It's difficult because you are never really physically alone. You're either completely alone in your little room or you always have somebody next to you, in front of you, or behind you.
When I was working in the galley my specific duty was to serve food to the officers and clean up afterwards. Most of the non-white people on ship ended up working in the galley. Most of the people in positions of authority in the galley were, in my opinion, completely crazy in a really negative way. One steward with a hair-trigger temper used to sit and glare at nothing for hours, constantly repeating nonsense to himself. Another one that comes to mind was a man who was extraordinarily obscene, and to the point where a good percentage of the other men on the ship actually thought the guy was gross, which really says something. He insisted on doing things like discussing his first sexual experience when he was eleven years old in the alleyway with a number of other guys and some young girl who was giving them all blow jobs. He discussed this in great detail with the man who was washing dishes in the sink beside me, and when I asked him if he could please continue the conversation at some other time, he asked me why, and I said because I found it extremely offensive. He then said, “Good,” and that I should go somewhere else. I did.

When I worked on the deck my specific duties were to stand the eight-to-twelve watch both in the morning and the evening, to help with the tying up and un-docking, to stand various bow watches, to take in and put out fire hoses and other fire equipment, to degrease decks, and to keep the upper deck, the interior upper deck, and the crew’s lounge clean. The big, heavy ropes and lines you are pulling in are extremely heavy, particularly when they’ve got ice frozen on them. I damaged my wrist that way. You’re constantly under physical strain—in part because the number of days off are very limited, so it had a cumulative effect on you. But also you have to carry big boxes of Chlorox around and pick up seventy-pound cargoes and haul them up and down ladders. It’s hard on your body.

While on the deck crew I had an extremely nice, older man, who was Swedish or something, as boatswain. He was very
quiet in his dealings with us. That was in marked contrast with all the other men in positions of authority. I appreciated that man very much.

The other part of the ship I worked in was the engine room. There I had to clean the lower deck, laundry room, and exercise room. Then I did anything else that was requested of me. Mostly it involved painting walls and machinery in the fiddly, which is part of the engine room. It's very high up and extremely hot. I also degreased decks, cleaned up oil spills throughout the engine room, cleaned up any messes involving insulation, changed the filters on the big oil fuel transfer pumps, let people know if there were any leaks, swept up behind the boilers, cleaned out the big inert-gas-system fans that had this very abrasive, poisonous soot on them that used to get on your skin and burn it, and anything else I was told to do.

In the engine room I worked under the first assistant engineer. He was a bright, energetic man who had a thing about women—liked them socially, but basically, I think to be very honest, did not like them at all as people. He was extraordinarily offensive to me and used to make comments about my breasts being small. At one point he said to me that he didn't know I had a hysterectomy. Somebody, I guess, had told him about that, and he then proceeded to go into great detail about how he had noticed most women walk a little funny a few days out of the month, and he had noticed that I didn't walk funny. Then he started talking about how amazing it was that some women could fit two Tampaxes, one right on top of the other, in there and wasn't that an extraordinary thing. I replied that I was not in the least interested in discussing female genitalia with him in any way, shape, or form. He later approached me to come up to his room and play my fiddle for him and asked me to give him a kiss. I ignored him. There were comments like that going on all of the time on the ship.

A couple of the other men in the engine room refused to look
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at me or talk to me the whole time I was there. Actually the ignoring didn't bother me that much. I would rather have them ignoring me than trying to interact with me personally. I mean they're a lot less trouble to deal with if they're not trying to get into your pants. I just have certain reactions to male heterosexuality obsessions. Specifically, there were men in the engine room that were very sociable to me until they found out I was gay and after that refused to have anything to do with me. I just basically figured that when people are acting like twelve-year-old children who are angry, then you've got enough negative reactions in there. I wasn't going to lower myself to that level.

I was on a ship for a while where there were four other women. Also at one point I was the only woman on the ship. Basically the women got along fairly well. A good percentage of the time we would be spread out. There would be a female radio operator; there would be a woman working the galley; and maybe one on deck or whatever. In situations like that, the women had a tendency to get along quite well. Most of the women that I saw on ships were much more interested in their relationships with the men than they were with the other women, so they were just as glad the other women were working in other departments so they could be the center of attention in the particular department they worked in. It changed a bit when you got a number of women working in the same department. Nine times out of ten there was a lot of competition among the women for the men's attention. If a man appeared to get along with or like another woman, the first woman would flirt with him, try to be more attractive, and make sexual inferences. You know the way straight women have a tendency to be.

This whole situation was very difficult for me for many reasons. Until I came out I had a terrifically hard time dealing with my own conscience because I was not being honest about my sexuality, and that was difficult because I had been an active, functioning homosexual for a while. It was hard for me
to be in a situation where I had to shut up about it. There was nobody to reinforce my visions of what was going on. I felt very alone. These people were functioning in a very different reality than I was. There was nobody there to tell me that I was okay, that I wasn't sick, and that I wasn't strange. You know, I didn't see any happy homosexuals around me, and therefore it was very difficult for me to maintain any kind of positive self-image because I certainly couldn't relate to the role models around me, the straight people. My discomfort came out in various physical ailments. The first summer I was out there my stress was such that my hair started to fall out. I was getting tremendous rashes and not sleeping well. I was having nightmares and felt like some kind of semi-freak. I declined any offers of friendship because I didn't want to get close enough to anyone so I'd confide. I thought at that time being out of the closet probably would be, in the long run, much harder. After the first time out I decided to come out. It was easier to live with myself. Then I was ignored—hostilely ignored, but ignored. That wasn't such a difficult situation because I am moderately accustomed to negative reactions from people.

As far as my treatment by the other women, there's a few things I have to add here. The first time out there was a woman that I knew slightly from the school. I did not know at this time if she was gay or not. She knew I was and happened to be of the temperament that she needed a lot of attention from everybody and had enough homosexual tendencies to be jealous of any other friendships I had on the ship. The first couple months were extremely difficult for me because she would flirt with me and even ask me to sleep with her, and yet she was doing so only to get some kind of attention, and when it came down to being supportive of me in any respect, she was not there.

The other straight women also were flirtatious with me if they knew I was gay. They somehow thought of me as some kind of sexual ego gratification on their part. They got a kick out
of me thinking they were attractive. They just basically treated
me in many ways the same as they gamed around with the men.
You know, flirting and even coming into your room at night.
They enjoyed watching me open up to them emotionally, be
drawn to them, and then immediately would retreat back into
their safe heterosexual role. That took a lot out of me even
though these things are more easily dealt with when you’re out.
If women are the only people you’re inclined to open up to or
feel any emotional attachments to, the double message really
takes its toll. It was very difficult being on ship with other
women and having their attention directed to the males that
were around them.

There is another thing about a lot of straight women on ships.
Many of them didn’t try to do their jobs competently. They
liked taking long breaks and to do whatever because they knew
that as minorities, if they got fired, they could throw sex dis-
rimination at the company, so the company wasn’t likely to
fire them. See, most of the minorities there could get away with
a lot of stuff that a lot of the basic white males could not, and
that’s another reason why the basic white males resented
women and minorities.

It was always very important to me to do a good job. Yet it
seemed like I got criticized more. In the engine room I got an
unfair evaluation from the first assistant I mentioned earlier
who was making the comments about Tampaxes. On the eval-
uation was a question which asked, “Is there anything about
this employee’s health which could make it possible for them
not to do their job well?” There were “Yes, No,” and “Unsure”
boxes. He checked “Unsure” and wrote, “Complains of chronic
tiredness.” I had turned down overtime a few times because I
was tired and that was all. There were men on the ship who did
not work much overtime, and there were men who were ex-
tremely materialistic and wanted to do nothing but make lots
and lots of money at the expense of everything else in their

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lives—their marriages on shore, their physical health, everything. This evaluation was even more unfair because the last few weeks I was on the ship I was the only wiper on board. The wiper is your basic engine-room “gofer” and does everything. During that last period I worked nonstop doing the work of three people because I knew we were coming into port, and the engine room had to be especially clean to make the first assistant look good. So how could he complain about my work? Then he gave me this big spiel that I might think the evaluation was because I was a homosexual, but the people on the ship were cosmopolitan enough to accept homosexuals, and my evaluation had nothing to do with my unwillingness to kiss him and play my fiddle for him in his room.

Everything that was going on during that time made me incredibly angry. But for the most part I could not express that anger without being fired or hit. I would never have survived then. I did occasionally make good friends. The first time out I became close to someone and the last time out also. In between, there were occasional people I found pleasant to me for varying periods of time depending on how long we had been out there. They became less supportive the longer we’d been out because they’d become more horny and interested in me sexually. You know, their human nature would start leaning over into the sexual aspect. How can I explain it? You’re in a situation where you’re constantly being disappointed, and it gets to the point where, because you’re being treated like shit, you start feeling like it and aren’t that surprised when people are unkind to you. You confide in people less and less so you’re being let down, at least in that respect, less and less.

I damaged my knees very badly when I was on the ship. While working under that particular first assistant I was going up and down extremely steep ladders, carrying heavy things, and developed severe tendonitis and chondromalacia [preternatural
softness of the cartilages] in my knees. They’re still affecting me after six months, and I’ve been going to a therapist, doing exercises, and trying to stay away from knee-stressing activities, but I’ve been told that probably all my life my knees will be sensitive, and I can expect this pain to be a recurring thing. I know it has a lot to do with how hard I was working, because when I had a different first assistant and kept up the same pace, everyone around me kept saying, “Why are you working so hard?” and “You don’t have to go so fast.”

It’s different now, in that I am much more in touch with Number One, just how miserable I can make myself if I’m not careful about what situations I involve myself in. I have shown myself through doing this what can happen when you start thinking in terms of money being the answer. Even though I have bought myself a truck and have a little bit of money in the bank and am grateful for these things, nothing could be worth to me what it cost me. My priorities are not in the area of material gain, and I have no reason to go back.

Now I’m much more conscious of my own efforts to treat myself well, and I am also kind of relearning to accept myself and like myself and trust myself and my feelings towards other people. I’ve also had to retrain myself to remember that if I don’t like a situation I am capable of turning around and walking out the door, that I am capable of walking away from that person. I’m not going to have to work with that person for the next three months and therefore must swallow my anger.

Basically my own self-image is the big point I’m working on. It went way down, and I’m working on getting in touch with it again, because I can’t remember what I was like before going to sea. It’s almost like watching a movie. Occasionally I will talk with an old friend who will bring up an incident from my past, and it will show a particular amount of self-confidence, and I will find it difficult to relate to. It didn’t happen that long ago,
but it is hard to recognize myself as being that person who could do confident things. It is like talking about somebody else completely.

I have a very deep sense of sadness at the human condition, the way humans treat each other, the way men are, and how possibly unchangeable that situation is out there. I have a fatalism about the marine industry, at least tankers. The young men that go out there become like the old men are. These old men have been out for twenty, thirty, forty years and they are the way they are, and they're not going to change, and that's definite, but the young men replacing them are becoming just like them. All this jive about young men being more open-minded is a bunch of shit because it's an extremely male-dominated environment. The men bring out and reinforce in each other these same male values, male attitudes, male emotional responses, male treatment of each other. They're just reinforcing it, and they've only got women there because they're getting tax breaks and have to do it.

I think the way to handle it would be to just stay away from it as far as possible. How do you handle Ku Klux Klan meetings? There's always people who are into it, and you can either choose to be there or choose not to be there. I do not choose to have it affect my life anymore. I used to feel a certain kind of semi-spunky, well, I'm doing this for the cause of furthering women's desires, choices to do new things, to go out here and have the opportunity to try this. I felt a certain sense of responsibility as a female and as a lesbian in that respect when I first went out there, but as far as I'm concerned, and this might sound a little strong, it's like being around some kind of rotting corpse. You know, you don't go in there and clean it up. You get away from it. There is no place out there for intelligent, sensitive people, much less women who give a damn about themselves.