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**Tugboat Mate**

**BETH GEDNEY**

*At twenty-four, Beth Gedney feels she has done pretty well for herself. She has a house, a career, a husband, and children on the way.*

My father is a sea captain. I don’t know if I was just pig-headed or what, but all I ever wanted to do was go to sea. We were always taking trips with Dad. I remember talking once to my sister, who is several years older than I am, and saying I wanted to go to sea, but at that time it wasn’t a viable option, so I didn’t know what I was going to do. Then, when I was a sophomore in high school, California Maritime Academy accepted their first women. I applied about a year later.

My mother thought it was terrific, but it took my father awhile to get warmed up to the idea. At first he said it was over his dead body. Then about six months later he decided it was okay and took me down and introduced me to all his buddies at the Academy. Later he helped me with my studies.

I started at the Academy in August of nineteen seventy-five. The school used to be a technical program. I was in the second class to get an accredited bachelor’s out of it. My B.S. is in nautical industrial technology. The school was divided into deck and engineering programs. I chose deck because I’m more of a thinking person than a hands-on person. And, you know, engineering is a hot, dirty, uncomfortable job most of the time. So I studied navigation, cargo handling, ship stability, and enough general education to round it out for the degree.
Once I decided to go to the Academy, I pretty much forged ahead. I do remember the first morning I had to report to the Academy driving across the bridge and looking down on the campus, and going, "Oh, my God, what have I done?" And it got worse when I walked in and realized there were only three other women out of a class of two hundred. We lost one girl the first day and that just gave everybody tremors. They broke us up into divisions, so the first couple of weeks you were so busy with your division that you didn't even see the rest of the gals except as we passed each other while brushing our teeth. It was pretty intimidating.

We went to school eleven months out of the year. But one semester we took a ship to sea and that helped us get through the rest. We had classes from eight to five on weekdays. As freshmen we weren't allowed to leave campus except from five to midnight on Wednesdays and from five o'clock on Friday to five o'clock on Sunday. Actually it was pretty good, because you didn't have anything else to do so you got really good study habits.

I feel like I got a good, usable education. Didn't have any trouble finding employment, unlike a lot of college graduates these days. And just the living conditions were very educational. I feel like at this point I could handle just about anything. You were in such close contact with so many people and so many were male. Like when we were on ship we girls had our own little area, but it was only separated from the men by a canvas sheet. If I had been a very private person I would have quit the first day.

And learning to deal with men's attitudes was a whole other education. I mean some of those men we went to school with were so pig headed. Even after four years, when you were doing a pretty good job and were obviously going to make it, some of them were still terribly unaccepting. We had a demerit system at the school and some of them would try to find little things. I
don’t know if they were trying to get you to quit or just ruin your day, but for four years they did their bit to make your life impossible. God, they’d give you demerits for anything—wearing earrings, having hair under your collar, not making your bed, being late for class, not having your car parked in the right spot. . . . I learned in school that a woman had to do twice as much as a man. You had to paint twice as much as some guy did just to prove that you were equal.

But when I graduated from school I had the choice of three different well-paying jobs, which is something everybody should have. I chose a tugboat line.

I would say there’s around three hundred employees that actually work on the boats. We have sixty-four boats all together, but there’s only eleven of what we call outside boats. Those are boats that run from Seattle to California, Mexico, Alaska. The rest of them are the harbor boats that you see all the time working in the harbor, and then we have a lot of little one- or two-man boats that work logs in Everett. This is a kind of a catch-all phrase, but it’s pretty much the oldtimers that have the inside jobs. Fellows with seniority like those jobs because you only work fifteen days a month and are guaranteed wages for that fifteen days. Whereas the outside work is catch-as-catch-can. A lot of times in the summer you’ll think, “I haven’t had a day off in so long I think I’ll die,” and then in the winter you think, “I want to go back to work or I’m gonna starve to death.”

When I went down to start work it was real funny, because my folks were teasing me because I would have to have a roommate. Tugboats are real small and there was only a grand total of three or four women working on the boats. So my folks kept teasing me that my roommate would be bald, not have any teeth, and suck on a whiskey bottle all night. When I got down to the boat the first day, the skipper was there and I was the first one to arrive, and he said, “Well, you’re in the forward cabin.”
And I go in there and think, “I’m done.” Hard bunks; not only am I going to have one bald-headed guy that sucks on a whiskey bottle, there’s going to be three bald-headed guys, so I was really nervous. Since I was the first one there, I took the bunk I wanted, the bottom one. I was tucking a sheet in and bending way over reaching into the back corner of the bunk when I hear this voice behind me go, “It’s gonna be a long trip.” And I just went, “Oh, no! What have I gotten myself into?” But he ended up being a real character and we got along well.

There were three able-bodied [seaman], myself being one, and an oiler who worked in the engine room in the cabin. The AB’s, as able-bodieds are called, turned out to be terrific, but the oiler did not say one word to me for the entire twelve days we were out on the trip.

I was pretty nervous about being the only woman doing the work. Aside from doing my watch in the wheelhouse, I went down on deck when we were handling lines or hooking up the tug, which involves a lot of heavy work like dragging this chain around. I didn’t want to make a fool out of myself doing the physical work.

Just the nature of the job can be pretty dangerous. You got a barge moving down a river alongside the boat and you have to get from the boat to the barge, so you’re jumping over a distance greater than you actually feel comfortable with. I don’t know if it would be classed as dangerous, but one of the worst habits you get into involves something which is known as a tow shackle. It is a big steel shackle which weighs ninety-five pounds and is used to shackle two chains together. Of course, one of the points of merit to being a deck hand is whether you can pick up one of these tow shackles. Everybody had to prove they could pick one up. I mean, really for somebody my size picking up ninety-five pounds of steel is ridiculous, but of course you had to do it to prove you were just as good as the rest of those jerks. The fellows shouldn’t be lifting the ninety-five pounds either, but they do.
But I think some of that wears off after awhile. You see too many people get hurt or almost get hurt by sheer stupidity. Just standing in the wrong place is the biggest problem we run into. It's especially dangerous working up north where you have two or three inches of ice on deck and the snow is blowing and things are extremely slippery. Then it's pretty hairy.

A lot of times I have to take somebody aside that works for me and say, "You're not going to do that any more because it's dangerous. I don't care what anybody says. You're not going to do that." Proving yourself is something that everybody, not just women, do. It's something about being a macho tugboater.

Let me describe what the boat is like. The last one I was on for a year and a half is pretty typical. I had a cabin that was about seven foot long and about five foot wide and contained a bed, desk, drawers, and a locker to hang my gear in. When you were out of bed there was about two square feet to move around in. I shared a bathroom with the skipper and chief mate. I was the second mate. We were up on one deck, and the rest—the engineering and cook and deck hands—were all down on the next deck and had their own head [bathroom]. Then the wheelhouse was up a couple decks. It has a big console with windows all the way around, throttles, your two radars, all your gauges for your engine, and two big chairs, which we sit in. That is real unusual. On most ships you literally stand up for your four-hour watch. It's real nice on tugs because you get to sit down, and most skippers don't mind if you play the radio on deck so you stay informed about the news, which is really good. On watch you're basically looking out the window to make sure that you don't run into anybody. You keep a watch on your radar and once an hour, sometimes every half hour if you have a lot of current, you get a position off the radar or off the navigation equipment to make sure you're going the right way.

We haul just about everything imaginable. On the last job we hauled bulk cement, eleven thousand five hundred tons of it.
On top of that, when we went to Anchorage and Kodiak we’d take thirty-four house trailers along on racks. As I said, I was pretty constant on this run. We’d go to San Francisco, pick up the cement there, and take it to foundries in California, Seattle, Anchorage, or sometimes Canada.

One of the joys of tugboating was the work schedule. When you came home, sometimes you knew you were only home overnight or twelve hours or whatever. Other times you were supposed to be home overnight and it turned into a week, or into three weeks, and you just never knew when you got off a trip when they were going to call you back. If you weren’t steady on one boat then, Lord, anything could happen. You could come and go. They might call you at midnight and ask you when you could be there. They do that a lot. It’s just the condition of the business. Things happen at all hours of the day and night. But the pay helps make up for that. I earn ninety-five dollars a day. On top of that we get five extra hours off for every eight we work, so it’s around a hundred and ten dollars. You can’t throw stones at that.

I’ve served with seven, eight different skippers. I would say fifty percent of them were terrific and easy to get along with and compliment you on a job well done. The other fifty percent were impossible. I mean, they weren’t going to accept you if you carried that barge on your back. Part of it’s being a young kid. Anybody under forty years old to those guys was just a whip-persnapper, but I would say most of it was being female.

Surprisingly enough, I had trouble with skippers’ wives as much as with skippers. One skipper’s wife said that he didn’t work on a floating bordello and she wasn’t going to allow females on his boat. Luckily I didn’t have to do anything. The company told him, “You take women.” I ended up refusing to take another trip with him. He made my life impossible. Oh, he was on my case about everything right down to how clean I kept my cabin, whether my bed was made every day.

But I was in a better position than some of the other gals that
work as deck hands. They can be shit on a lot easier than I can. You know, there’s a dividing line between officers and crew, so they couldn’t mess with me as much.

The last skipper was the one I worked with most, and it’s funny, he was one of the most outspoken ones about not having me on the boat. When he went into the office and they told him he would have to take me, he thought the roof was going to come down. But after two days, he actually called me into the wheelhouse and said, “You do the best job of any second mate I’ve ever had. You can come back any time.” That was the nicest thing that happened in the three years I’ve been at sea.

The most subtle way they show appreciation that you’re doing a good job is the fact that they leave you alone instead of, when you’re navigating, being up there every fifteen minutes to make sure you’re doing a good job. Not seeing the skipper is the best vote of confidence, especially on the Inside Passage up to Alaska. It’s a real narrow channel, and if they let you take the way through it by yourself, it’s a real pat on the back. With one skipper I ran into a fishing boat fleet of about two thousand boats, and he was up there every time I changed course, whether it was two or three degrees or a lot. Every time he came up to see why. By the end of four hours of that, you don’t even trust yourself.

The men I worked with either had the attitude that “In spite of that fact that she’s a woman she does a good job, so she’s okay,” or “I don’t care what she does, she’s a woman and she’s never gonna do the job.” What can you do? You can’t change these guys. And actually I ran into more trouble with people who were trying to be helpful. You know, “She’s such a frail little thing, she can’t lift that so I’ll do it for her.” I swear I spent more time telling somebody to get out of the way and let me do it myself. That, as far as I was concerned, was worse than the guy who said, “I’ll be damned if I’m gonna help her. I’ll just leave her alone.”

You keep eight people at sea without any companionship of
the opposite sex, the topic of sex is gonna come up once in awhile. It's pretty hard to avoid. But as far as anything directed at me, I shut 'em down right from the gate, so I never had any trouble. After living with all those guys at school, you just kind of learn how to deal with them. You make it clear that you're acceptable to some fooling around, but that's as far as it goes. That phrase, "fooling around," gets interpreted wrong. What I mean is statements and joking are acceptable, but no farther. And something that always amazed me is a lot of the men were very intimidated by my husband. He's a fairly large fellow, but I never thought of him as physically violent or anything. A lot of times he would carry my bag down for me on the first morning and talk to the fellows. If he didn't like one of their attitudes, he would say, "Don't let him get away with anything as far as pushing you around." He's very protective.

I've had men tell me, "Jeez, I'd ask you to fool around, but that big husband of yours would probably beat the bejeezus out of me." Having a husband made it a lot different than if I were single, which intelligently doesn't make a lot of sense, but that's the way they saw it.

I did have trouble getting the AB's I was supervising to do what I told them. Part of it was I had AB's forty years older than me, and they're going, "Well, this is just a stupid kid and can't possibly know as much as I do. I'm not going to do what she tells me." Some of the time I handled it on my own.

A lot of times I had the captain step in and say, "Look, you jerk, she's in charge and what she says goes." The worst instance I had was actually with a young black fellow that had a chip on his shoulder and was not going to do anything that I asked him. Luckily one day he started badmouthing me and didn't realize the captain was standing on the deck above him. The captain had him pack his bags when we got back. That was the end of that. The captains don't always back me up. It just depended on whether the captain wanted me there or not.
Beth Gedney, tugboat mate

There are certain runs that this company has never assigned women to. One run in particular is from Sitka to Adak, which is in the Aleutians. It is very strenuous, but it shouldn't be the office's position to tell you that you can't handle it. You should be able to say, either "I don't feel I can handle it" or "Let me try it and see if I can handle it." But the office never gave us gals the opportunity, and we didn't realize it until we got to talking together. Then we women found out none of us had gone on some of the runs. Most of the runs they haven't sent us on are the higher-paying runs, because you get paid more in Alaska and the North Strait, and just because those runs consistently have more overtime, which is a big thing for us. And a lot of times it came down to working that run or not working for a month. I guess in a way it is subtle discrimination as far as pay. I'd never thought about that before.

I know that I did go on our cargo-van run, which goes to Sitka, Juneau, the southeast towns, and when I came back from the run, the gal in the office said, "That's such a hard trip. How did you do it?"

I said, "That was the easiest run I've ever been on." Physically it was the least demanding, but she couldn't believe it, because everyone had convinced her it was too much for a woman.

I've never learned how to handle that. You can't go in and beat on their desk and scream and yell at them, because that's not going to get you anywhere. One of the gals that works with us filed a class action suit against them. Consequently she's usually on the bottom of some kind of list and has a bad reputation. All that because she has the nerve to speak out for her own rights. The men feel we should be happy and shut up because we have a job.

My being gone has been hard on my home life. Much as I try and deny it, I didn't want my husband to be doing anything enjoyable when I wasn't there. I'd call home after a lousy trip, and he'd be telling me about all these parties he went to. I didn't
want to hear about it. Also, it’s hard getting used to not being home for deaths in the family, illnesses, birthdays, Christmas, graduations. My in-laws just can’t understand why I’m not there at Christmas.

My husband’s pretty good about doing housework. A lot of times I can tell that he ran around for two hours and did three weeks’ worth of work before I got home. That’s okay. But I know a couple times I came home and had two or three days off and really resented the fact that I walked into a house that was a wreck and spent one of my two days off cleaning. That didn’t sit too well. The last thing you want to do is come home and clean, so he has tried to do more at home.

It would be really hard to go back to tugboating when the babies are born. I know how it felt when I was a kid to have one parent gone all the time. There’s some jobs available that are eight to five, like Washington state ferries, cruise boats, and tour boats. I’d like to keep my hand in, but be home at night. The other possibility is working shoreside in the office. A master’s in business administration or a degree in maritime law would fit into that very nicely.