

Chapter 1

It was a dark and stormy night. The submarine came to the surface, hoping to be hidden by the waves, or at least confused with a surface contact. Twenty foot swells threw the Sailors from side to side like lottery balls on Thursday night, water crashing down the hatch each time a wave broke over the bridge.

“This movie sucks,” he said. “Want to just go home and play chess?”

His girlfriend moaned. “You never let me have fun,” she complained. “You promised you'd take me out for a movie. Please!”

Aaron sank lower into his seat, fuming silently. He couldn't take much more of this. Watching a movie like this was bad enough, but paying twenty dollars for the privilege was too much. He fidgeted, causing his seat to creak loudly. She girlfriend ssshed him. He apologized. She ssshed him again.

In other words, the date was a disaster. It was even worse when they got home.

“I'm leaving you,” she said.

“What?”

“I'm leaving you. Goodbye, it's over, toodles, see ya later. Bye.”

“You're leaving me?”

“God, I thought you were smart. Yes, Aaron, I'm leaving you.” She pulled her suitcase out of the hall closet.

“But... Why? I thought you loved me!”

“Jeez, Aaron. Did I say that? I probably meant you were cute.” She looked at him, and cocked her head slightly. “Yeah, you're cute. But you're a fucking train wreck. You're a geek with no life and no future. You're no fun to be around, and you aren't going anywhere. I can't take it anymore.”

It was true. Aaron was a true geek. He had no life. And he'd been working for various software companies for three years, since he graduated college, and still only made enough to ride the bus to work. So after watching her pack her bags and walk out the door, he did what any geek would have done in that situation. He picked himself up, dried off his tears, and downloaded porn off the Internet. However, this time it didn't seem to do much to make him feel better.

The next morning Aaron walked down the street, between blooming flowers and singing bluebirds. The sun shone brightly, illuminating children gaily playing football in the street. Aaron saw none of this, more concerned with his sore arm and his sore head, the latter from a hangover. His primary goal in walking down the street was to find his apartment, because while he couldn't recall leaving his home last night, he was certain the park bench wasn't where he wanted to wake up.

“Mornin' son!” cried a chipper voice. Aaron ignored it.

“I said, 'Mornin' son!’” the voice repeated. “And isn't it a fine morning, too?” Aaron turned to face the man who was such a poor judge of age. He was a Sailor, dressed in a white uniform that vaguely resembled an ice cream salesman. Aaron would have guessed him to be twenty-five at the most, barely a year or two older than himself. His chest glistened with ribbons, although whether they were for brave combat or superior toilet cleaning Aaron had no clue.

“I'm twenty three.”

“Pardon?”

“I'm hardly your son. I'm twenty three years old. You're in your early twenties, right? So I can't be your son.”

The Sailor looked confused. “Look, it's not important how old I am. The point is, you look down on your luck. I can ---”

“But it is important. You can't just go around claiming familial relations with people you don't even know, especially if you'd have to be fathering them when you were three.”

“I don't think I understand what you're talking about....”

“Look, the human male reaches puberty at twelve or thirteen, right? Let's say the second sigma occurs somewhere around age eight; gestation is approximately around a year, and I'm twenty three... That makes you thirty one years old. Are you thirty one?”

“Uh, no, I'm twent--”

“See, that's my point! You can't be my father, so you shouldn't go around calling me son.”

“Look here, now, it's just a figure of speech. I was trying to say what a fine morning it was.”

Aaron paused. “What difference does it make, anyway? Fine morning or shitty morning, I've still got a hangover, and an oddly sore right arm.”

“Well, son, what if I said I could offer you a life without hangovers?”

“I don't do drugs,” Aaron replied, “and I not interested in buying anything.” He patted his rear pocket. “I don't think I could if I were, anyway. You haven't seen my wallet around, have you?”

“No, I haven't, and I'm not selling anything. I'm simply offering you a life without hangovers. I'm offering you a life of excitement. I'm offering you a free cruise on a luxurious ocean-going liner. How's that sound?”

“Sounds like a scam, if you ask me.”

“Tell you what, son, you look like you've had a hard night. Why don't I buy you a beer?” And he did.

The doorbell rang six months later. Aaron answered the door to find the mailman standing there. "How's your headache?" asked the mailman.

"Better, thanks. I think the lemon did the trick, thanks."

"Anytime. Oh, and I need you to sign for this letter." He did. "You have yourself a good day, okay?"

"Sure thing, thanks."

Aaron shut the door behind him as he walked back inside. The letter looked very official. He put it on top of an empty pizza box and returned to his video game. He was between jobs; dot-com programmers had a hell of a life. One minute up to his neck in stock options, the next no place to work. It didn't matter, in a few months the cycle would repeat and some new startup would overpay him to redo the same work he'd done before for the last company. A giant ogre crushed Aaron's character. "Dammit," he muttered aloud. The letter continued to look very official.

"Alright, fine, what is it?" he asked the letter. The letter did not respond, but remained resolutely official. He snatched it up and tore it open. He stared at it. "There must be some sort of mistake," he mused. "I'm pretty sure we stopped the draft after Vietnam...."

"Yes, Sir, we stopped the draft after Vietnam."

Aaron held the phone up to his ear, still clutching the letter in his other hand. "Then what exactly is the meaning of this letter telling me to report to Rhode Island?"

"Tell me one thing," asked the other end of the line, "Does the letter look official?"

"Yes, very."

"Ah."

"Ah? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Ah? Nothing, really. It's just an exclamation used when the speaker realizes the significance of a previously unknown or misinterpreted fact."

Aaron shook his head in frustration. "No, what's the letter mean?"

"Can you read me the number written where it says 'Order Number'?" Aaron did. Typing ensued, followed by another 'Ah.' Aaron did not ask what the 'Ah' meant. "Well, it appears you joined the Navy six months ago, and now your class is convening in Rhode Island."

"I joined the Navy? Impossible, I think I would have remembered that!"

"Not at all. It's actually quite common. Do you remember having beer with anyone in uniform, say,

six months ago?”

“No, I don't think so...” Aaron thought. His head and his arm hurt. “Oh, wait, maybe. But I didn't join the Navy, I'm pretty sure.”

“Do you happen to remember how many beers you drank?” asked the other end of the line.

“Um, no... Oh, shit. I joined the Navy?”

“Yes, it appears you did.”

Both ends of the line were silent for several minutes.

“Uh, Sir? Are you still there?” Aaron didn't respond.

One month later Aaron had caught a bus to Rhode Island and was standing in front of a very serious looking gate. The gate looked serious. The guard was an unarmed off-duty cop who happened to be picking his nose. If the gate didn't scare you away, the guard didn't have a chance.

Aaron wasn't scared. He was simply going to have to find this “Officer Candidate School” and explain what happened. After all, nobody got Shanghaied anymore. A few minutes of chatting, a few forms, and this could all be sorted out quickly. The first step, of course, was getting past the guard.

“Halt!” said the guard, who had finished cleansing his nasal tracts and noticed Aaron standing patiently. “Halt immediately!” he repeated when Aaron made no effort to modify his motionless stance. “Have you got a military ID?”

“Uh, no,” responded Aaron.

“I'm afraid you can't come in, then,” the guard apologized. “In fact, I'm going to have to ask you to get as far as possible from the gate, for, um, force protection purposes.”

“Force protection?”

“To protect the forces, yes.”

“Excuse me,” asked Aaron, “but aren't the forces in question the Armed Forces? Shouldn't they be doing the protecting? Haven't they got all the guns?” Aaron looked the guard over, noticing for the first time his lack of armament. “Oh,” he said.

The guard sighed. “Yes, it's quite sad, isn't it?”

“Yes, I can see your dilemma. I really wish I could help, but you see, I've got my own problem. I'm trying to find the Officer Candidate School. How could I get in to talk to someone about it?”

“OCS?” the guard responded in alarm. “Why didn't you say so in the first place! Come right on in!” The guard looked Aaron over. “Um, do you want me to send for a driver?”

“A driver? No, I can walk myself. No worries.”

“Are you sure? I can send for a driver.” The guard paused. “And a car.”

“No, that's quite alright, but thank you.”

Aaron held the official looking envelope. It continued to look official, although it also now had a worn look about it. It had the demeanor of a historic document in a museum; old and wrinkled, slightly faded, yet weighty with officialness. His intention was to find someone senior enough to fix his problem, and be back on the bus home by noon. However, the only person he could find wearing a uniform was a young fellow, several years his younger, wearing a khaki uniform. He didn't look old enough to have graduated high school, much less be able to solve Aaron's problems.

Before Aaron could find someone to solve his problem, he had to find the Officer Candidate School. He approached the young khaki wearing Sailor for directions. “Excuse me, could you direct me to the Officer Candidate School?” he asked.

The Sailor looked him over with a sneer. “You're looking for OCS?”

“Yes,” Aaron responded. “Could you please direct me toward it?”

The Sailor scoffed a noncommittal harrumph. “I'm not even going to talk to you until you fix your gofasters. You can't wear that slimy lace job here.” He pointed down at Aaron's shoes, or gofasters as the sneakers were apparently christianed.

Aaron looked down. The laces looked fairly clean. The shoes themselves had a little of the grass stain about them, but were overall fair to middling in condition. “Slimy lace job?” he asked.

“Outboard over inboard.” Aaron continued his confused stare. “Outboard laces go over inboard laces. God, you *are* a slimy civvie, aren't you?” The Sailor's impatience was as obvious as Aaron's confusion.

“Look, I just wanted to find the building to explain an error, that's real--”

“Outbound over inboard!” screamed the Sailor. “I'm not going to fucking tell you again!”

Aaron looked at his gofasters again. The laces were done somewhat haphazardly, with laces alternating on top of each other. On his right shoe a eyelet had been skipped. In retrospect, he should have noticed they weren't laced very well, and he really should have paid more attention to them. However, he had never heard of anyone refusing to hold a conversation until the other party corrected their shoelaces. On the other hand, relacing his shoes seemed easier than walking around randomly looking for OCS. He bent over and began unlacing his shoes.

“Now! Like it's already happened!” The Sailor in khaki was not particularly patient, Aaron noted. He also noted that lacing shoes without taking them off was more difficult than one might suspect. After several minutes, he managed to complete the task.

“Alright, now will you show me where the Officer Candidate School is?” Aaron asked. Thinking it might forestall any further verbal abuse, he added “I wanted to explain this error, you see.”

“Follow me,” curtly replied the Sailor, who took off down the sidewalk. Aaron did, trying to catch up, envelope in his hand, still looking official. “Starboard side!” shouted the Sailor, without turning around.

“Say wha?” asked Aaron.

“Get your slimy ass on the starboard side of the sidewalk! Now!” Aaron stopped and looked around. There were no signs to speak of. He stepped to the street side of the sidewalk, which to his recollection was toward the East, under the logic the stars would be visible in the East before the West. “Goddammit, I said starboard side!” shouted the not-too-nice Sailor. Aaron relocated to the other side of the sidewalk. “That’s better! Now stay there and follow me!” Aaron did. Or he at least stayed on that side while following.

After about a block, the Sailor in khaki stopped again. “Inboard over outboard!” he barked.

Aaron stopped. “I already did the damn shoes, cut me some slack!”

“Inboard over outboard!” he repeated.

Aaron looked at his shoes, carefully laced outboard over inboard. “Now wait a second, you definitely said ‘Outboard over inboard.’ I remember it quite clearly.”

“That was out there. You’re on the blue sidewalk now! Inboard over outboard!”

Aaron looked around. The curb had been painted blue, as if it were a handicapped parking spot. “Now look here! This is just getting stupid! Can’t you just take me to this OCS like a normal human being?”

“Inboard over outboard!”

And so Aaron did. And they progressed, on the starboard side, inboard over outboard, up the blue sidewalk to a large building, which looked as official as the envelope clutched in Aaron’s hand. More so, when you considered the envelope was now slightly sweat stained in addition to some wrinkling.

“Right in there,” pointed the Sailor.

“What’s the catch?” asked Aaron. “Should I turn my socks inside out, or turn my shirt around first? Perhaps I should go up the stairs backwards?” The Sailor gave Aaron a clearly malignant look, but said nothing as he turned on his heels and left. Aaron wondered if all the Sailors were this unreasonable, and if they were, how hard it would be to explain this mistake.

And so, official looking envelope proceeded up the stairs to the official looking building, held by a very unofficial looking Aaron, gofasters laced inboard over outboard, but without socks inside out or shirt backwards. The bearer of the official letter did not walk backwards up the stairs, either.

Aaron opened the door at the top of the stairs, not sure what to expect on the other side. When he saw the interior, he was relieved. Desks were arranged in a very serious pattern, each with a young Sailor

behind it. Most had computers, although a few still had typewriters instead. None of them wore the same khaki uniform of the insane prankster that had directed him here.

“Um, excuse me?” said Aaron.

The closest Sailor, dressed in a light blue shirt that reminded Aaron of an old-time gas station attendant, looked up at Aaron. He seemed to make a quick assessment, then glanced at the official looking letter. “Good afternoon, Sir. May I see that official looking letter, by any chance?”

Aaron breathed a sigh of relief at this unexpected civility. “Of course,” he responded, handing over the letter. “But you need to understand there's been a giant cock up, I was never supposed to join the Navy.”

“Hmmm,” said the clerk, reading the letter. “I see your predicament, then. Let's just see what we can do to help you out then, shall we?” Aaron didn't mind the second person plural conjugation, as long as this clerk was helping him out of the mess. “You don't happen to have a picture ID, do you?”

Aaron handed over his driver's license. “You see, this is all just a terrible mistake. If you could just undo this letter, I'll see myself back home and we can put this all behind us.”

“Uh-huh,” responded the clerk. “Yes, we'll definitely be able to take care of you. Could you do me a giant favor, please Sir, and roll up your sleeves for just a second?” Aaron couldn't think of any reason not to, so he did. Hands gently held on to his arms, and someone behind him began writing on his arm. He glanced down, and saw his social security number, blood type, and birth date written in permanent marker. The author continued on his other arm, starting with his gender.

“Oh, for crying out loud, I don't think you need to write my sex down on my arm!” he exclaimed.

“Please don't be bothered by it Sir, it's just standard procedure. We'll get this mess resolved in no time, just don't you worry.”

“Well, alright,” said Aaron, unconvinced. More information continued to adorn his arm.

“Yes Sir,” said the clerk, “we can have you taken care of in no time flat. But it turns out this letter has to be taken care of by someone else. If you would please be so kind as to step through these doors, I'll have him assist you.”

Aaron remained unconvinced, but this fellow was so much nicer than the maniac outside, he was willing to forgive his fetish for writing on arms. The doors stood at the far end of the room, big and blue. They didn't look very official, but they didn't look ominous, either. If Aaron had been less confused and paying more attention, he might have noticed that neither the official looking letter nor the driver's license were currently in his possession. Instead, he followed the instructions and walked through the big blue doors.

Once on the other side, Aaron found himself in a very sterile hallway, much like you would find in a hospital, or a very scary elementary school, except without crayon posters on the walls. Directly in front of him stood another young Sailor wearing the same khaki uniform as the maniac outside. The khaki Sailor looked him up and over before screaming at the top of his lungs, “Up against the bulkhead, slime! You're in my Navy now!”

“Oh, bugger,” said Aaron, “not again.”

“I said up against the wall, redneck mother! Are you stupid or just deaf? I'll bet stupid! Are you stuck on stupid, stupid?” The Sailor did not appear to have a volume control, and was stuck on eleven.

Aaron considered his options. Getting up against the wall, or bulkhead as it was apparently called, seemed to be the easiest. He braced against the wall.

“Zero four inches! Get your ass zero four inches from the bulkhead!” Aaron scooted forward. The Sailor stepped in front of him. His nametag read “Smith,” which was not, Aaron reflected, very apropos to his demeanor. Smith sounded like a fairly reasonable fellow, which this particular Smith did not appear to be. “You're slime. I could smell you before you came in. You'll be out of here in four weeks, I'd bet my life on it.”

“Four weeks?” asked Aaron. “I'd be happy...” But he was unable to finish the sentence, as a loud bell drowned him out.

“Move your ass! Zero four inches from the bulkhead, follow it down to the next station! Go!”

And that was when Aaron realized, 'Oh, shit. I'm in the Navy now.'
