

# A Marine Cook on Turbulent Waters

**Terry C. Bursey**

For three days, Ryan Benjamin Keats thought that he was a sailor. On the fourth day – covered head-to-toe in his own vomit – he knew better. When he had first laid landlubber eyes on *The Ackvik* – moored at the snowy port in Harbour Grace – his brazen twenty-five-year-old chest swelled with pride and his smile was as broad as the sky above his head. It was his first stab at being a marine cook – trained only as a land-based apprentice who was fed up with working for a meagre fifteen dollars an hour in a socially-obsessed three-star kitchen.

Marine cooks were infamous for cooking bland simple meals – he knew – and Ryan was eager to outperform all cooks who came before him on *The Ackvik* – stocking the fridge and freezer with a cornucopia of well-planned ingredients that were versatile, interchangeable and especially nutritious. It was a December voyage on *The Grand Banks*, and though he was loathe to be missing Christmas ashore with his closely-knit family, Ryan salvaged some cheer by planning a magnificent Christmas dinner for the crew of the thirty-foot trawler; a veritable fine-dining feast complete with yorkies, Sunday Dinner and three massive deboned trussed turkeys.

For Ryan, the opportunity to cook aboard *The Ackvik* wasn't just an adventure to speak of at dive bars to dampen the legs of potential bedpartners or a means of making enough money to safely escape his abusive girlfriend... but the start of an extremely rewarding career path that would ultimately break the Keats family cycle of poverty. Eager to prove his worth at sea, Ryan

had vowed not to make a single misstep aboard the trawler. He had double-checked the inventory and helped load the galley himself. He had sought advice from the old salt of a cook who had recommended him as his relief. He had checked the crew for allergies, diabetes, irritable bowel syndrome and whatever else he could think of. Indeed, Ryan thought of everything, but what Ryan Benjamin Keats could never have anticipated was the complete and utter inability to get his sea legs... and the omnipresent seasickness that came with it.

Granted, his family doctor had tried to warn him that it might happen. *"You've got a very unique ear structure, Ryan. Apricot ears like yours are a common Newfoundland trait, but sometimes the structures of the inner ear can be affected as well. You have a history of motion sickness, vertigo and dyspraxia... which might be the result of inner ear abnormalities."* But Ryan hadn't listened; lost to the throes of ambition and determination.

Now, as yet another wave of water and nausea overtook him inside his sick-covered galley, he cursed his stubborn pride. He was well and truly miserable, and the job was far more herculean than he had anticipated. Aboard the Ackvik, Ryan had to cook six meals per day rather than three; him alone feeding a crew of forty with naught but six hours of sleep under even the most perfect conditions... and conditions were far from perfect aboard The Ackvik.

Ryan had a rounder body than most – more akin to the trunk of a large oak than a slab of granite – and each night the rolling waves would roll Ryan too; straight over the plank guard of his bunk and onto the linoleum floor, where he struggled to naught but cry; so tired, sore and sick as he was. He counted the hours of sleep each night based on adding the minutes of sweet oblivion between rude awakenings and concluded that it was most often three hours or so, but sometimes less than one... and all the while, he was forced to work like a joyless oft-kicked dog.

*How do they do it? How are they not in pain? How are their legs not rubber? How does their vision not twirl in their heads? How does their gorge not rise? Are they even human?*

Inside the tiny filthy galley where checkered dishcloths hung from dark

green twine on the walls that Ryan stood upon as often as the floor; his stomach heaved again... and the vomit seemed to float in midair before flying back into his face – knocking him down. He slid on his back to come crashing against the stove, where boiling soup sloshed from the loosening lid of a large steel pot – splashing down on his shoulder to scald him. Ryan screamed a curse.

“That’s it! I’m done for the day! This isn’t worth the money! How the frig can this be worth anythin’! I’d pay every red cent I made thus far just to go back home! Just for one decent night’s sleep! Just to have enough food left in me belly to move me arms wit’out forcin’ ‘em to move! I’m done! Frig the poor safety standards of OGI! Frig this archaic, outdated job! It’s not worth it!” Ryan shouted, meaning every last tear-stained word.

Using the angular momentum from the ship being tossed in the waves like a child’s toy, Ryan didn’t so much spring to his feet as he did simply aim them toward the floor with a hopeful heart. Sticking the landing, he rushed to the white chipped-paint handle of the galley’s hatch before he could be thumped back on his arse... and held on tight. It wasn’t as bad as the night before – when the waves were actually choppy – but this average day aboard a trawler on The Grand Banks in December still required every movement to be carefully calculated.

Steadily and cautiously, he made his slow progress toward the hold, where he could do the only thing possible to ease his suffering for even the briefest of moments aboard his hell; smoke a rapidly dampening cigarette while staring at his beloved ocean. Ryan tentatively pried the L-shaped lever of the hatch, and it flew open abruptly – crashing against the metal wall of the hold’s interior. Expenditiously, he leapt backwards to avoid losing his fingers just as the heavy door came thundering back into place with the force of several hundred pounds per square inch.

*This is an average day... how could I’ve been so naïve?! So stupid! Ryan thought bitterly, gritting his stomach-acid-worn teeth in anger.*

As the door swung open again, he seized the opportunity to duck outside and grab onto a nylon rope attached to the wall; wiry, mint-green and thick as a rattlesnake. The forces of the sea banged the hatch shut again, and Ryan

expertly brought the outer lever down to secure it.

As per his usual hapless routine, he coiled the prickly rope tightly around his forearm several times over to prevent being tossed into the sea, and fumbled in his pockets for his lighter.

“Aye! Cookie! Ya smokes too much, b’y! And works too little! We got a supper for t’night, or wha?!”

*Finn.*

Ryan glared at the spindly black-haired man who had become his personal tormentor aboard *The Ackvik*. The creature was brainless by any measure – which was common enough among the crew – but stupidity was endearing when paired with a big heart... and Finnegan Tyler Power had no heart to speak of. Ryan ignored the baiting, but Finn wouldn’t allow it.

“Just so ya knows, ya can’t cook for the life o’ ya! Chinese food? Yes, b’y! This isn’t China! This is Newfoundland, ya mainlander h’idiot! We wants rough grub, Cookie! Ya ‘ear me wit’ them small ears? Rough grub! If ya can’t boil spuds ‘n turn-up, then what’s the good o’ ya?”

“Ya don’t have to be good at somethin’ to want to do it, Finn! By your logic, you should quit havin’ sex if you want to enforce that standard wit’out hypocrisy! And I’m no mainlander! I’m from Gander, ya toothless friggin’ skeet!” fired Ryan, too pissed off and miserable to ignore him any longer – struggling to light his smoke in the saltwater wind.

Finn cocked his gap-toothed head to the side. “Wha?”

*This idiot doesn’t even understand the first part of the insult...*

“You’ll ‘ave supper! It’s turkey soup! I made enough for both shifts!”

Finn guffawed. “Laziest cook we’ve ever friggin’ had! So, ya mean t’say that night shift gets overcooked soup, eh? B’y the friggin’ jumpins! I’m soon gonna throw ya overboard!”

Something like a wire snapped in Ryan’s mind.

He threw his neon-orange lighter across the room, where it clattered with a crack against the rusted metal of the wall.

“Do it, then! Throw me overboard, Finn! Let me friggin’ drown! Let me finally rest! Let me sufferin’ be at an end! Put me out o’ me friggin’ mis–” was all Ryan could say before he began dry heaving yet again – tempest tossed

and plagued by nausea.

Ryan expected Finn to laugh. Finn had laughed before; on the first, second, third and fourth days whenever Ryan started to get sick. But now – on their twelfth day at sea – Finn remained stoic at the sight of his sick and miserable crewmate. A flame cloistered within filthy fish-smelling hands appeared before Ryan’s tear-blurred vision – surprising him. He lit his quivering smoke upon Finn’s flame, and a small sob escaped his chapped lips.

“You um... you’re actually ‘avin’ a real hard time out ‘ere... aren’t ya, Keats?”

It was Ryan’s turn to laugh, albeit laced with a despondent sadness. “Yeah... I am.”

“I ‘aven’t never seen nobody sick like you after this long. I thought – we thought – ya was fakin’ it all for the sake o’ laziness... but it’s real... isn’t it?”

As exhausted and wretched as he was, Ryan’s anger rose at the raw news of what the crew truly thought of him. He knew they hated him, of course. The crew mercilessly griped about the lavish meals Ryan cooked; all of them delicious and perfectly prepared despite the aquatic nightmare that he endured. Many of them told Ryan that it was too rich for their stomachs. Others complained of it simply because they had never eaten it before. Which Ryan had found incredulous; pizza, spaghetti and eggs benedict being commonplace... but laziness?

“It’s impossible to do this friggin’ job and be lazy at the same time! Friggin’ idiots!” Finn’s mouth curled in a sneer. “Well, what else was we supposed to t’ink?! Buddy, I’m only tryin’ to be nice to ya! Ya can go fu–”

“Power! Get back below, ya friggin’ dog! The freezers ain’t gonna load themselves! Your smoke break was done five minutes ago!” a sea-weathered gravelly voice boomed from the opposing door of the hold – none other than the old potbellied First Mate, John Hunt.

Finn whipped around as if set aflame. “Aye!”

Power shot Ryan a dark look from his cold Atlantic-blue eyes as he pulled his orange rubber hood over his head and ducked off toward Hunt – loping effortlessly as the boat lurched and dove through the thirty-foot swells. Ryan was glad to see one problem go as he fought hard to keep his eyes open, the remnants of lunch in his stomach and the cherry of his cigarette lit. He wasn’t

much of a smoker, but smoking was the only respite he had from his hell on open water.

He turned to his right and beheld the sea through the wide-open stern. The sun was just beginning to set – igniting the sky in vibrant hues of red, orange and pink that had never graced Ryan’s eyes before. A second later, the sky was gone – replaced with a roiling slate-grey sea as solid and vertical as a wall of stone. Ryan felt his two-hundred pounds against the numb-sore soles of his feet as the boat rose to reveal the sky once again... and suddenly, Ryan was overcome with an odd serenity.

*The ocean is beautiful, despite it all. Ancient. Magnificent. So much bigger than I am. It’s the same feelin’ as lookin’ up at a clear night sky full of stars. Cold. Depthless. Dangerous and belittling. I’m a Newfoundlander born ‘n bred. I love the ocean... but she doesn’t love me back.*

Without thinking, he let his rope slacken and made his shaky way along the wall to the water; drawn toward it like a moth to a flame. Though his stance was as wide as a drunken boxer and his stomach still twisted and jumped with the waves, he felt strangely at harmony as he lumbered to the stern’s opening – wanting nothing more than a single solitary moment of peace.

A twisted shard of shredded metal jutted from his right like a tragic accident waiting to happen, and Ryan ironically used it to anchor himself safely in place with a grip that was altogether stronger than his biology should have allowed. A fine drizzle of ocean spray baptized him – slowly trickling into the reddish brown of his unkempt seaman’s beard. He sobbed hard.

*I’ll never make enough money to escape Trisha. I’ll never break the cycle of poverty. I’ll never find a good career. I’m not strong enough. I don’t have what it takes. If this is the hardship that one has to endure to get ahead in life... then what’s the point in even bein’ alive?*

The sea appeared. The sky appeared. The sea appeared. The sky appeared. And through it all, Ryan cried and smoked. It was worse than prison. It was worse than torture. And there was over two weeks left to their hellish journey before he could ever hope to return to dry land.

*There’s no way! I can’t endure that long! I’ll die! I’m not strong enough to ‘andle two more days! Let alone two weeks! I want to go home! I want to start over! I*

*can't!*

The sea called to him, and just as he was about to obey, a hum of hydraulics cut through the din of the ocean waves and the intrusive thoughts of his mind. The steel line of the net began to crawl backward into the trawler's hold... and Ryan followed its lead.

He flicked his cigarette butt into the water and shuddered out the last bitter breath of nicotine from his lungs. As the net began to rise over the slanted lip of the stern, Ryan stared at the load inside, horrified. The dragnet didn't contain just codfish, but a handful of mako sharks... along with an entire whistling and shrieking pod of –

“Porpoise! This dragnet is full of friggin’ porpoise!” he yelled to himself, aghast.

Ryan turned and ran toward the rightmost door of the bay – planning to notify anyone along the way about the dire emergency of the marine wildlife captured in the net.

*I don't know how to free them! But someone else will know! The soup is on minimum and shouldn't burn! Not yet, anyway! There's time to tell someone who can release the net!*

He raced up the narrow stairs to the upper decks of the boat on rubbery uncooperative legs in an ultimate effort to find the First Mate. The boat threw him against both walls of the passage in tandem, but Ryan pressed on – fuelled by spite and the cusp of madness – until he reached the open doorway of the bridge, where he clung like a white-knuckled barnacle.

“Mr. Hunt!” Ryan called, out of breath, “Mr. Hunt! There’s porpoise in the net!”

The old man with a sparse spikey grey crew cut turned and faced him. “Eh, Cookie? What’s that? Cookie! Why aren’t ya in the friggin’ galley?!”

“Frig the accursed galley! Mate, I’m tryin’ to tell ya that the net that was just brought up is full of friggin’ mako sharks and dolphins, man! Someone gotta release it!”

A sharp silence hung... until the Mate shattered it with a laugh. “First time on a fishin’ boat, is it? Did ya take any pictures?”

Ryan was dumbfounded. “What?”

“I said, did ya take any friggin’ pictures wit’ ya phone? Your contract specifically states you’re not to take any –”

“Why does that matter?! We got to release the nets! We gotta get ‘em back in the water before it’s too late! What... what’s wrong wit’ ya, b’y?!” Ryan roared.

The Mate laughed and shook his head – his posture that of cruel detached amusement. “Lemme tell ya somethin’, Cookie; what do ya t’ink porpoise eats? Fish, b’y! Fish! The less of them, the more there is for us! They’re the rats of the friggin’ sea, Cookie! Cod stocks is low enough as it is! What do ya t’ink keeps ‘em steady? What’s we gonna do, b’y? Stop what we’re at and waste money?” Ryan was mortified by the Mate’s words as Hunt ranted on:

“Where do ya t’ink you’re to, me son? Sin Jawn’s? We got families to feed! Now, give me your friggin’ cellphone!”

Ryan couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “I... I don’t have it on me. I don’t have time to even use it. I’m the cook.”

Hunt abruptly grabbed Ryan by the brown hair of his head and wrenched him down in a half-baked chokehold – using his other hand to frantically search through Ryan’s pockets.

“Get off me! Get off me, you old friggin’ weirdo!” Ryan yelled – struggling, panicking and in utter disbelief of what was happening to him.

Satisfied with his forced search, Hunt released him, and Ryan flew back against the far wall of the bridge as a particularly strong wave wrenched The Ackvik aside.

“Now you listen to me, Cookie! Forget what ya saw! And I’ll forget what I saw ‘ere on this bridge! If you so much as step one foot out o’ line again! Me and the b’ys is gonna give ya your birt’day bumps on deck and sling ya over the side! This is the open ocean, Cookie! A lot can ‘appen out ‘ere! Now, go!”

Ryan was seething. “Oh, I’ll go, alright. I’ll friggin’ go...”

Ryan Benjamin Keats turned and left the bridge... but not for the galley. His rubber legs made solid by fury, he passed the bright-red box affixed to the narrow white hall and abruptly thrust his elbow against the thin glass to shatter it. Hunt hollered out from the bridge – no doubt registering the sound of the glass – but Ryan ignored the braying, plucked the large orange

axe from its pegs inside the box and pressed onwards through the hall, down the narrow stairs, and out into the hold... where the net of porpoise and sharks still rested in agony.

“Don’t worry, b’ys!” Ryan declared to the intelligent mammals bulging through the loops of black nylon netting, “I’ll ‘ave yas back in the water in a minute, or die friggin’ tryin’!”

Ryan regarded the rope-thick steel wire that held the net to a winch further to the bow of The Ackvik, and prepared to cut. He raised the axe high above his head and brought it down.

“What are ya doin’?!” the Mate boomed behind him, outraged.

Ryan didn’t care. He brought the axe down once more; this time shredding part of the wire away, but not cutting through by a longshot. A sharp whistle sounded from behind him and he heard multiple footsteps approaching.

*One more! Use the g-forces of the boat! Use the water’s waves! Use the power of the ocean! Strike at the moment the boat begins to rise!*

The reddening sky appeared to his left. “Cookie! Stop! Cookie!”

And then... up rushed the sea.

*Now!*

The blow was galvanized not just with the added force of the waves, but with every red drop of anger, pain, resentment and grief that Ryan held. It came down harder than he ever thought possible, and the wire suddenly disappeared from his vision as if it wasn’t there to begin with – leaving only the sharpest sound that Ryan Benjamin Keats had ever heard in his life... followed by a likewise piercing cry of pain to his right.

*Yes!*

“No!” screamed The Mate.

Ryan cared not for whatever happened toward the bow. Instead, he watched with climbing glee as the net flattened like a balloon pressed against a table before tumbling off the stern of The Ackvik and into the grey deep – opening up wide as it went under. A smile split Ryan’s face; the first genuine smile he’d expressed since boarding.

Satisfied, he finally turned to the right of him and beheld Hunt; hunched with his legs spread wide and his rightmost hand quivering at covering his eye.

Pale-coloured rivulets of blood seeped through the narrow spaces between his sausage fingers.

*The wire cut the old man's eye!*

“Serves ya right!” Ryan bellowed, driven mad by days without sleep and a properly digested meal, “Serves ya right, ya friggin’ creepy old greedy old son of a –”

And the next thing Ryan Benjamin Keats felt was a blow to the back of his head... and his face rushing toward the kelp and coral strewn metal of The Ackvik’s accursed hold. Despite it all, Ryan chuckled as his vision faded.

*It's over. I can finally rest. I've cut my ties to the ocean... and given her a parting gift.*

Cradled in the loving arms of the sea that had once spurned him... Ryan Benjamin Keats finally slept.

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