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Dead in the Head

Laura Bender

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“Attention on deck.”

“Carry on, thank you.” I look at the watch stander who called it. He holds his index finger in the air.

“That’s one point for us, ma’am.” I grimace and shake my head.

As sailors move again, I take the third step that puts me officially in the neutral zone. Every day is like this. The command requires the watch call, “Attention” for commanders and above when they appear on the quarterdeck. My office door is two steps within the realm of the quarterdeck. Every time I leave my office, fifty sailors on their way through have to freeze in place.

This time my destination is the head, thirty steps away.

“Name and rank.”

“You know me, I’m Chaplain Bender.”

“Sorry, ma’am. I have to ask, and I have to get you to sign in before you can use the head.” I’d forgotten we had been posting guards on the heads at the end of the workday.

“They still haven’t caught the phantom shitter?”

“No, ma’am. So, we have to record everyone who uses the head, then go in and check all is clear when they leave.”

“Isn’t it the male heads the phantom has been using?”

“We can’t discriminate, ma’am.”

“You know what, I’ll save you work. I’m headed home after this, anyway. You have a nice night.”

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“You too, Chaplain.” This is the third year in a row we have had to deal with the smart ass who periodically craps on the floor. Since students graduate Power School every six months, by my calculations our never-to-be-identified culprit must be a staff member.

I sneak around the corner and slip into my office unheralded. Then I look out the door at the watch stander and put my finger in the air. “My point this time.” I hear the watch standers groan. The one by the door calls over to the one at the desk.

“I didn’t think she’d come back so quickly.”

“You have to pay attention. She’s faster in her white shoes than in her black.”

“You know I can hear you two, right?” They giggle. I’d arranged this scoring system a few years back to help the watch deal with the silliness of announcing my every move. If they catch me, they get a point. If I slip past, I get a point. They sometimes miss the skipper and almost never notice a visiting admiral, but me? I can’t grab a copy out of the printer or pee without fanfare.

“Are you going home now, Chaplain?” a student asks as he leans against the wall across from my door.

“Why, do you need to make an appointment?”

“No, I just want to be the one who calls it.”

“Hey, he’s not on the watch team, how come he gets to do it?”

I toss a piece of hard candy to each sailor in view. Since they can’t eat it on the quarterdeck, each slips it in a pocket for later. “You guys on watch can call it when I walk back in to retrieve whatever I forgot, okay?” They grin and nod.

“Attention on deck!”

“Carry on, thank you.” I head for the front door.

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I am in my last assignment before retiring from the navy. It is at the most academically challenging of all military schools, including the service academies. The Naval Nuclear Power Training Command or Nuke School is where highly intelligent Sailors train to become Nuclear Operators, those responsible for the reactors on carriers or submarines at sea. Since a reactor gone bad has the power to blow the crust off the earth, it is vital that the navy entrust this task to only the most competent and reliable people.

The students at Nuke School work long days learning their material. After early morning chow, they spend eight hours in class, take part in mandatory physical training, and maybe eat a second meal. In the evening they return to the classroom for required study hours which, depending on their current GPA, can last past 2200. Then they prepare uniforms and themselves for the next day, before catching a few hours of sleep and starting the process again by 0500. The stress of maintaining that schedule for eighteen months would take a toll on anyone, but nukes are not just anyone.

As a chaplain, it is routine for me to counsel sailors as they transition from high school student to responsible adult. At the Nuke School, this takes on a whole other form. This “league of extraordinary gentlemen and ladies” with whom I speak daily often has photographic memories, can grasp complex concepts with ease, and likely has achieved great academic success sans studying before joining the navy. But what often accompanies these enviable traits are other, less helpful ones: a lack of social skills, a shortage of common sense, and an overabundance of eccentricity.

“Have you eaten anything today?”

“No. I’ve figured out that if I eat only every third day, I will recoup enough time to write my sonata.”

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“You say your parents punished you often when you were a child, and that’s why you can’t make eye contact with your supervisor. Did they yell, hit you, restrict you? How were you punished?”

“They disallowed me to do math.”

An officer student is having a problem handling all of his responsibilities.

“What does your family require of you outside the classroom? Do you have children?”

“I’m not married. I’m the dungeon master of my apartment. My roommates and I live Dungeons and Dragons. Once home, we don our costumes and stay in character until morning. The battles are requiring too much of me and I get little sleep.”

A sailor comes to see me because I am in charge of the command’s symphonic band. He wants to join.

“Which instrument do you play?”

“All of them. Which one do you need?” He joins the band and plays the tenor saxophone. He also composes pieces for us to perform. A brilliant musician, he attends band practices in his pajamas with mismatched socks, and concerts wearing a bright yellow Pikachu onesie.



Of course, I also help students deal with “normal” issues such as the death of a parent, a breakup with a significant other, or high stress levels. But interspersed are sailors dealing with

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tragedies like “someone looked at me” or “somebody rearranged the stuff on my desk.” There are also the “stump the chaplain” concerns:

“The three of us are a couple. We want to get follow-on orders so we can continue our throuple. Will the navy consider us married, even if only two of us are licensed?”

“My same-sex lover is angry with me because after our date ended, I put on my snow leopard costume and had sex with a red fox. He said I was cheating, but I don’t think so because I was in my furry identity when I was with the fox. Therefore, it wasn’t really me who was cheating. What do you think, Chaplain?”

One “try to stump me” question is often asked after midnight, when the caller is so worried he can’t sleep.

“Hi, um, Chaplain, um, I have a problem.”

I look at the time as I take the cellphone out of the bedroom so my husband can continue sleeping.

“Another one? Just hang up,” he says as he rolls over and pulls the blanket over his head.

“Is this about a photograph?”

“How do you know that?”

“It’s a scam. Ignore it.”

“But the man said he would tell my commanding officer if I don’t send him money.”

“You’re being scammed.”

“But what if he does? I’ll lose my career.”

“You won’t. It’s sextortion. Let me guess. You photographed your junk and emailed the photo to the sweet young lady who asked for it online. Then her father called you to tell you she is only sixteen.”

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“And now I am going to be in big trouble.”

“Here are two things to consider: One, what concerned father would trade his daughter’s virtue for money? And two, when you took said photo, was it only of your junk, or was it full-body to include your face?”

“Just my junk.”

“So, who can ID you solely by looking at that photo?”

“Um, my mother used to diaper me.”

“But that wasn’t any time recently, right?” He had better say that’s right.

“I guess no one.”

“Then hang up, so we can both get some sleep. Don’t send any money and visit the JAG’s office in the morning so he can add you to the list of those being scammed.”

He hangs up and sends the money anyway, to be safe. Before the scam ends, 400 service members in South Carolina will send \$560,000 to inmates of the state prison system with access to smuggled cellphones. I think they should get extra jail time for recurrent disturbances of my sleep.

Despite the frequent late-night calls, I love working with these incredible personalities; they are unique, like snowflakes. Although my earlier assignments afforded me variety-of-mission and once-in-a-lifetime experiences, this one makes me the “Mayor of Sad Pandaville,” and gives me the opportunity to spend each day locked in a small windowless room talking with a continuous stream of interesting characters.

“I can recite PI to a hundred decimals.”

“I just built a mandolin.”

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“I am in trouble for wearing a tail to study hours. The watch stander told me to take it off, but I couldn’t because, it was, um, attached, um, chaplain, can I say butt plug in front of you?”

I never know what issue is about to walk through my door, plop down in the chair, and present itself. I should not be surprised. This is the only command in the navy that has an instruction prohibiting light saber duels in front of the chow hall and needs a sign saying, “No LARPing (Live Action Role Play) on the Tennis Courts.”

One Tuesday morning while meeting with those who recently married so I can tell them about the counseling resources on base, I ask a general question. “When did you get married?” I expect most tied the knot the previous weekend.

“This morning. My roommate is Wiccan. He got ordained on the internet yesterday and married us this morning on the smoke-deck.”

“Shipmate, it is 1000. It is still morning. Where is your bride?”

“I had to put her on the school bus.”

One afternoon, I am walking between buildings. To my left I see the riding mower, half submerged in the pond. To my right, I see six sailors sitting around a maple tree. As I watch, they each reach forward, pick up a brightly colored leaf and stow it in the plastic bag in their other hand. Then they lean forward and grab another, and another. Soon I see the command master chief coming toward me.

“CMC, could you explain this to me?” I point toward the pond.

“The sailor was wearing headphones while mowing. Near the pond he saw the alligator. He got confused and forgot how to turn the steering wheel. He is off getting a rope and a few more sailors to pull the stalled mower out of the water.”

“And this leaf game?” I point to the encircled maple tree.

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“They were told to remove the leaves from around the base of the tree. I thought it was strange when they didn’t ask for rakes. They’re getting the job done, though.”

A few weeks later, a freak storm drops eight inches of snow on our base on the north side of Charleston, SC. For three days, we shelter in place. On day four, we return to work. The command does not have snow removal equipment, so they send sailors out with brooms to sweep the heavy accumulation, now laden with a coat of ice. When that does not work, a staff member gets a forklift, places a wooden pallet on top of its tines, then puts two cement blocks on top of the pallet to hold it in place. A northerner, I am curious about this makeshift plow and I hang around to watch. As he drives the forklift forward, the snow pushes up over the pallet and covers the cement blocks. This is a good start. If he continues, he can at least clear a pathway between buildings. Instead, he calls two sailors over to remove the blocks, dump the snow off, and return them to the pallet. They repeat this maneuver many times, but they clear very little snow.

“Chaplain, I can’t believe you are laughing at our sailors. That isn’t nice.”

I laugh so hard, I can’t even respond to my assistant. We head to my office and almost make it through the door.

“Attention on deck.”

“Carry on, thank you.” I gaze at the cardboard drawing of Bender, the robot from Futurama, wearing my nametag and a Santa hat, which decorates my door and I roll my eyes. Then I grab a cup of coffee, sit at my desk, and prop my feet. With a moment to relax, I think about our sailors. I remember our recently graduated lightsaber dancer who performed his routine, a combo of tai chi and sacred dance, with glowing swords each night outside his barracks. I picture the command’s Christmas tree, topped by a weeping angel and decorated with

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Dr. Who, Superhero, and Star Wars figurines intermingled with Pokemon cards. I remember the joy in the watch stander's voice when he announced, "Chaplain, my elf suit finally arrived!"

I am sure I will never forget these eccentric and delightful folks. There are probably those who will not forget me either, like the kind Sailor who complimented me, saying he loved to come talk to me because it was like going to see his own grandmother. (I let him live ...) Or the one who said he heard I was retiring and told me I should record my wisdom before I passed. (I checked my pulse after he left ...) As I reflect and drink my coffee, I do not yet know that soon there would soon be another sailor who would not forget me. This one, not because of something I said or did, but because of something he didn't.

On the first morning back after holiday stand-down, I attend our daily senior staff stand-up meeting with the commanding officer. Suddenly, I feel faint. Not wanting to pass out in the command suite and give them fodder for yet more old jokes, I walk down four flights of stairs to my office in case I collapse.

"Attention on deck."

"Carry on, thank you." My voice is weak. Nobody moves.

"She said to carry on."

I stumble into my office. Once there, I mistakenly think it prudent to visit the head where, with all that porcelain and tile, there can be no soft landing.

"Attention on deck." I make no response as I float off the quarterdeck and into the bathroom. When I come to, my first thought is that someone has lost their eyeglasses. Then I realize my nose is a few inches from the drain in the floor and the spectacles are mine. I hoist myself on to a toilet seat and wait for my brain to defog. It doesn't. Groggy, I try to walk the

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thirty steps back to my office. I manage five and pass out again, this time between the inner and outer doors of the bathroom.

“Chaplain. Chaplain.” I feel a hand shaking my shoulder. She moves it to my wrist, then my neck.

“I was an EMT before the navy. Let me ...”

I lose consciousness again. When I come to, there is a gaggle of folks watching emergency personnel readying me for transport.

“I think you’ve broken your ankle.” The Uniformed Emergency Responder points to my right foot. I reach down and, without thinking, snap it back into place.

“Okay then, I’ll splint it for the ride to the hospital. Your blood pressure is only 70/42, so you get to see the friendly people in the emergency room.” They transfer me from the floor to a gurney. The CO, XO, and command master chief are there to see me off. I remember we were all going to visit a classroom that morning to tell the students one of their fellow sailors had killed himself the previous day. I apologize to the CO about not being there to offer support.

“Don’t worry, we’ll handle it. You just get better.”

The EMTs wheel the gurney on to the quarterdeck.

“Attention on deck.” I raise an arm to wave the sailors out of their frozen position.

“If she’s lying down, am I supposed to call it?” is the last thing I hear before they haul me and my broken right ankle, sprained left ankle and wrist, and sliced-open face—from where it hit the hinge on the back of the stall door—off to the hospital for an overnight stay. After myriad medical tests, it is determined that all systems are normal. I am just prone to fainting as a reaction to abnormalities like dehydration or exhaustion. In this case it was triggered by a nasty case of poison ivy treated with too much steroid.

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A few months later, a young sailor stops to see me. “Chaplain, do you remember the morning you passed out, and they sent you to the hospital?”

“In a fuzzy sort of way, yes. Why?”

“I was the quarterdeck supervisor that morning. I was behind the desk near the front door when a female sailor tiptoed over to me, leaned forward and whispered, ‘The chaplain is dead in the head.’ When I asked if she was sure, she said, ‘I poked her and she didn’t move. I poked her again, and she still didn’t move. The chaplain is dead in the head.’ Then she tiptoed away.”

“What did you do when she said that?”

“That’s why I’m here. I need to apologize. As watch supervisor, it was my responsibility to see that the watch standers got lunch, and the floors got swept. No one had briefed me about what I should do for a dead person, so I did nothing ... I’m sorry I left you there.”

Just imagine, somewhere out in the fleet today is a sailor who may one day tiptoe over to her supervisor and whisper, “Um, there’s a problem with the reactor” and tiptoe away.

I will miss the crust of the earth.