

From *Boreas and the Seven Seas* / Copyright Mina Witteman, Ploegsma Children's Books.

It's been dark for a while now. I don't have to go to bed, says Mom, because of summer break. That's my first unexpected stroke of luck. My 'school' won't start until September, just like at home, but where everyone back home still has to go to school, I don't. All I have to do now is learn English, so I can talk with people all over the world. Everyone speaks English, right? I have a stack of English books on my e-reader to practice. Is that what you'd call it? A stack of books on your e-reader? I don't know, but I've got a lot of books and they're all good. As a writer, Mom does know about books. Another stroke of luck.

So, I read a lot. Not much else you can do on a ship, except for staring at the sea. Not now, though. Now, I am at the helm and need to pay attention. We're not docking for the night, because we've done this first part of the journey hundreds of times before. Boring, says even Dad. He sits inside to keep an eye on the radar.

But sailing through the super crowded English Channel—the narrowest part of the sea between France and England—is dangerous. The Channel's shipping lanes are the busiest in the world, easily. Cargo vessels that are so big the Argo is like a toy ship have to sail these routes. I mean, normally, you hardly ever meet another boat at sea. Here everyone's on top of each other. A sea of lights around us and a sea of tiny lighted dots inside on the radar screen, busier than a Monday morning rush hour. At times, ships are so close I not only see its lights, but also its outline, towering up like a skyscraper against the night sky. Gi! Nor! Mous!

My job is to navigate the course Dad has charted. Every now and again, he calls out that I have to tack more to starboard or more to port, or that I have to watch out not to steer too close to a passerby. If I would, these gigantic ships will crush us like an elephant would pulverize a toy car. The ship's captain would not even realize we were there. We'd disappear to the

bottom of the sea without anyone noticing.

“A ship at two o’clock, Boaty,” Dad calls up from the saloon below deck. “Looks like she’s on collision course.”

Collision course? That means that she’s coming right at us. And two o’clock means she’s coming at us from starboard. I peer into the dark. “Can’t see her, Dad.”

“Get the night goggles. She’s about half a mile away. Less even.”

I get the night goggles and look again. “Nothing at two o’clock. The ones I see are much farther away and they’re all going the same direction as we.”

“Shoot,” Dad mutters. He storms out, yanks the night goggles from my hands, climbs onto the side deck and rushes to the pulpit at the bow. He’s back in ten seconds and pushes me away from the helm. “To the radar,” he commands. He holds the helm with one hand, steadying the night goggles in front of his eyes with the other.

I climb down and stare at the radar. He’s right. There *is* a ship closing in on us. Not fast, but definitely on collision course. The dot on the radar screen is smaller than the other dots.

“She’s still there, Dad, and she’s coming closer.”

“Emma!” Dad roars. “Em!”

Mom stumbles from the fore cabin. “What’s going on?” Her voice croaks from sleep.

“A ship on collision course,” I say. “But we can’t see her outside. Only on the radar.”

Mom doesn’t say a thing. Instead, she flies past me and up to the cockpit.

Dad spins the steering wheel and the Argo veers sharply to port.

I grab the chart table to hold myself up. “She’s still coming closer,” I shout. The red dot on the radar screen creeps toward the bull’s eye in the middle. And the bull’s eye... that’s us.

“I don’t see her!” Dad shouts back. “Luff up. Em, the jib.”

The winches rattle when Mom pulls the sails tight.

I stick my head out.

“Stay on the radar, Boaty,” Mom says. Her voice is calm and warm, like always, but she works the winch like a madman tightening the sails.

I swivel back to the radar. “Close!” I yell.

“Close, Joe,” Mom repeats.

“Where?” Dad thunders. “Where is she? Starting the engine.” He opens the throttle, as Mom releases the sails. Ropes and sails clank as the wind tries to get hold of them again. The Argo speeds forward.

And then, like magic, the dot disappears from the screen. All that’s left are the dots of other boats, each and everyone of them a safe distance away from us.

“It’s gone!”

“What?” Dad shouts back at me.

“The dot. It’s gone. I not there anymore.”

Dad throttles down. And when he does, a thud sounds. A muffled thud in the fore of the boat.

“Dad!” I scream. “Dad, we’re hit.” I race up.

“It’s okay. Driftwood. It’s only driftwood.” Dad points at a wooden pallet that floats by. “I do not believe what these cargo shippers throw overboard. They’ve turned the ocean into one big thrashbin.” He shuts off the engine and spins the helm to steer us back on course. “We’re lucky it’s wood. Bo, pull the jib back in.”

I kneel down at the winch and wrap the jibsheet around. I throw the first ring and pull the sheet tight, when a cry sounds, almost drowned out by the rattling winch. It’s a cry that doesn’t come from my mother. Or from my father. Or from me. It’s the cry from someone in mortal danger. My heart stops.

“Dad! Dad!” I yell. “Someone’s in the water.”

Dad heard it, too. “Emma, take the helm,” he says. “Bo, the torch.”

I snatch the enormous torch from its spot near the ladder. Dad is already at the pulpit.

“Help!” The dark night carries the sound over the water to us. “Help!”

I switch the torch to life and shine its light over the endless mass of water. From where did the sound come? I shine around, but it’s impossible. There’s too much water.

“Bo, this way!” Dad points toward starboard. “Emma, the lifebuoy.”

I rush up to him. “Where? Where?” I circle the torch’s beam across the surface, in ever-wider rings. Nothing shows up!

And then the sound of coughing and gagging reaches me, and another weak cry. From close by.

I swerve the beam to it. For a moment, the bright light reflects in what I think are two eyes. “There!” I yell. “There he is.” I peer into the dark, but the waves have already hidden the eyes I just saw. Or has he sunk down? He can’t drown!

I thrust the torch into my father’s hands and bolt inside. I pull four lifelines from the cupboard and link them together and to my lifevest. I dash back out and hook the other end of the lifelines to the hand railing.

“Bo! No!” Mom screams.

“Someone’s drowning,” I scream back and without waiting I jump overboard. I hit the icy cold water, gasp for air as I go under. Cold. Too cold! I clench my jaw. My lifevest automatically inflates and pushes me back up. My teeth chatter when my head is out the water again. No whining, I order myself. No whining. Someone’s drowning. “Light the water!”

The beam swerves to a spot right in front of me.

“Call again.” Dad’s voice carries over the water.

“Help.”

It’s barely audible and, yet, it sounds close by.

Dad lets the beam travel the water surface. Just when I think that I have to get out of the

water because my toes and fingers feel like they're falling off, he yells. "There!"

I gasp for air but catch a wave of salt water instead.

"Where?" I cough.

"To your right. Two strokes."

I swim to the right.

Mom casts me the horseshoe-shaped lifebuoy. I grab it with my right hand and continue to swim with my left.

That's when I see him.

A dark boy, darker even than Mom, his eyes wide from fear. He thrashes around to stay above water. I thrust the lifebuoy in his hands. He seizes it and I wrap my arm around his waist. Agonizingly slow Mom and dad pull the line of the lifebuoy back in. Swimming, I push to help. Waves roll under the boat and with every one of them we come closer.

"Hang in there, Boaty," Mom says. "Hang in there!"

My arms and hands are stiff from cold. I try to swim with my legs, but they don't listen to me anymore. I hook my arm into the lifebuoy. Water flows over it.

Mom wraps the buoy's line around the winch when we're next to the boat. Dad drops down on the side deck. He slides his body way over the edge. With two hands he grabs the boy and lifts him from the water. He hands him to Mom. then he pulls me up.

It takes forever before I lie down on the deck, too.

Dad wraps his arms around me and hugs me. "Stupid, stupid, brave Boaty," he whispers in my year. "Stupid, brave Bo." He almost squeezes me to a mush.