

Sister-Ship

Subcategory: Short Story

Author: Janet Stiegler

Sister-Ship

“It is always so early here...before the crossroads, before the irrevocable choices. I am so grateful for this life! And yet I miss the alternatives...We do not actually know it, but we sense it: our life has a sister vessel which plies an entirely different route.”

[Excerpts from “The Blue House,” by Tomas Transtroemer]

Gina was tired—it had been a long day home-schooling three kids and giving back-to-back piano lessons—but she had to look her best for tonight's dinner party. Hosting the senior partners at Ward Rogers Law was something Sam had talked about for months, and she couldn't disappoint him. *But, oh!* It would be nicer to sink into a warm tub with a glass of bubbly than listen to all that boring shop talk!

Everyone said they had the perfect life and family, but how could she explain it? That she had lost herself along the way? It sounded so silly, so ungrateful. Gina pulled out the black shift that Sam liked. Form-fitting but conservative, he said, perfect for an attorney's wife. Standing in her slip and bra, she held the dress up and glanced into the full-length mirror. *Where are you? Who have you become?*

At times like this—when her life no longer felt her own—her alter ego would appear. Gina called the reflection “Regina,” the prefix “re” representing a chance to go back and do it again, to see who she might have become on another path.

Whenever she surfaced, Regina displayed a different aspect of the road not taken. Last time, her reflection had pulled out a saxophone and played a few mellow, sensual notes. It reminded Gina of how she had wanted to play the sax in the school band but was intimidated by being the only girl. Reluctantly, she switched to the clarinet and piano, classical instruments that people thought were more fitting for a girl. Yes, it eventually got her into Juilliard, but hadn’t her soul always leaned more toward jazz? Another time, Regina showed up with a rucksack, bringing back Zach, the rugged rebel who tried to convince her to take a gap year and accompany him on a tour of Europe. But she had goals, goals she thought couldn’t wait.

Today Regina wore a trench coat, the collar pulled up around her chin, her gaze slightly averted. Oh, yes, that crazy spy interview. She had gone on a lark, out of curiosity. The pamphlets about adventure and travel had reeled her in, but she never believed they would have hired her. Even if they said she had an ear for foreign languages, a way with people...

It was murky, but the image teased the synapses of her memories. She could picture the recruiter now, an older man seated across from her. "I can see you are a good listener," he had said. "That's a plus in this business. People—men especially—will tell you things. Some will see you as the weaker sex, but being underestimated is sometimes an advantage in this line of work."

Gina understood the feeling of being underestimated, although she had not always considered it an advantage. What if she had signed up? Would she have had a career? Traveled to far-away continents, dined with diplomats, kings, and drug lords? Would she be fluent in Russian? Arabic? Chinese? Would she have married and had children? Or would she still be single, trading in a spouse for a string of lovers?

Gina sighed. "Tell me more, Regina," she whispered, touching the mirror. "Where else has my sister-ship sailed?" Although tempted to walk through the glass and escape temporarily to a parallel universe, Gina was stopped suddenly by the sound of Sam coming up the stairs. She glanced toward the bedroom door, then back at the mirror. Her alter ego was fading. "Wait, where are you going? Come back! I need to know more..."

But Regina had vanished, leaving behind the reflection of a slim, demure woman dressing for dinner. But she'd return. She always hovered in the background, a phantom at the crossroads, the haunting ghost of "what ifs."