Tacking into the wind

By Devansh Das

The sailing instructor said we'd capsize if we fought the gusts head-on.

"You have to tack," she explained, tracing zigzags in the air with her weathered hand. "You just can't sail straight into the wind. You have to approach it sideways, again and again, until you've gone where you meant to go all along," she stressed. "You have to grip the waves."

I didn't get what she meant—not then, standing on the dock with a life jacket cinched too tight and doubt heavier than the anchor. But three hours later, alone in that borrowed Sunfish with the sail luffing and the boom swinging wild, it clicked.

My acceptance letter to the marine biology program arrived the same week my father's cancer returned. The scholarship was full-ride. The treatment was experimental. He didn’t have much time left, he said. The choice felt impossible.

"Go," he said, his voice already thinner than it had been at Christmas.

"I can't leave you," I blurted out.

He pushed the letter back across the kitchen table.

"Then you don't understand sailing."

The first time I successfully tacked, I nearly lost my hat to Lake Michigan. I have been in battle with the harsh winds for twenty minutes. They pushed me backward, spinning the boat in useless circles, mocking my fumbling grip on the mainsheet. My arms ached. Salt stung my eyes, though we were hundreds of miles from any ocean.

Then something clicked. I stopped trying to just brute force it, muscle my way forward. I angled the bow forty-five degrees off the wind, let the sail fill, and felt the boat surge. When I'd gone as far as that angle would take me, I came about—ducked under the boom, switched sides, reset the sail on the opposite tack. Forty-five degrees the other way. Another surge.

Zigzag. Zigzag. Closer.

I wasn't fighting anymore.

I decided to defer enrollment for a year. However, I never gave up on the goal. It lived rent free in the back of my mind.

That year, I learned things no textbook covers: how to advocate with insurance companies, how to sit quietly in waiting rooms, how to find humor in the smallest victories. I learned that my father had wanted to be a marine biologist too, once, before his own father's illness

redirected his course. He'd become an accountant instead. “Steady. Reliable. Practical,” he had said.

"I don't regret it," he told me during one of the good weeks. "But I'm glad you're not giving up on the water."

"I'm not giving up," I said. "I'm tacking."

He smiled—the first real smile in weeks.

The sailing instructor was right about capsizing. I did it twice that summer: once in week two when I overcorrected in a squall, once in week five when I got cocky and forgot to watch the telltales. Both times, I hauled myself back into the boat, bailed out the water, and kept going.

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My father died three weeks before I finally started the program. At the funeral, I wore the shell necklace he'd brought me from his one trip to the coast, decades ago. A trip he told me he wanted to recreate, but life had other plans.

Now I'm in my second year of graduate research, studying coastal ecosystems and climate resilience. My thesis explores how organisms respond to their environment changing—how they don't resist the current, but ride it, redirect it, and work with what they’ve got.

Sometimes, on research trips, I stand at the bow of our vessel and watch the water. I think about zigzags. About the wind you can't control and the rudder you can. About destinations reached by unexpected routes.

I think about my father, who taught me to tack without ever setting foot on a sailboat.

The horizon is always there, waiting.