Growing up, I felt that I had no choice but to pursue science. My dad wouldn’t accept anything but a science degree. He told me in no uncertain terms that if I really wanted to be an English major or a writer, as I said I did, I would need to figure out how to pay for college on my own. I chose a school 2000 miles from home and overloaded my schedule with literature classes that I claimed were required, but I wasn’t brave or independent enough to squeak out from under my dad’s thumb. I trudged halfheartedly through the weeder courses in chemistry and physics, but during a marine biology class, I felt a spark. I was captivated by the quirky, alternative style of marine scientists, who braved the waves and conducted their experiments at sea. It was an adventure I wanted to be a part of.

I joined an oceanography lab as an undergraduate researcher, which propelled me to graduate school. I was passionate about my research, but niggling in my brain like a splinter was the constant fear that I was forging ahead toward a career I didn’t really want, still lacking the courage to make my own way. The splinter became harder to ignore as I progressed through my Ph.D. and struggled with questions about a future in academia.

Then, 2 years into my graduate studies, I flew across the planet to embark on a research cruise in the South Pacific with a team of French oceanographers. I was the farthest I’d ever been from home. I had left my partner behind and my barely affordable apartment empty. After waving goodbye to dry land and Wi-Fi for the next 2 months, I found that my high school French was rustier than I thought. I was feeling isolated, and my doubts about the path I had taken intensified. If I didn’t see a future as a scientist, what on Earth was I doing in the middle of the South Pacific?

The days at sea were grueling. Our course sent us into the path of a tropical cyclone, so I spent each day being pelted by rain and bracing myself against the pitch and roll to avoid being pulled overboard while I dragged a fine mesh net through the surface water to sample for phytoplankton. It was mentally draining, too. As I crossed off the days on my calendar until my return home, I grew more and more panicked and guilty, uncertain about what I would be returning to if I didn’t actually want to be a scientist.

Eventually, we sailed through the last tendrils of the storm. That first rainless evening, I found a place on deck to contemplate the sunset. Around the hull of the ship, a school of squid glided into view, bobbing gently along the glassy surface to feed in the waning light. It struck me as a hopeful omen. But as they drifted closer, I saw that they were not squid at all. They were baguettes. Too stale for eating, the steward had jettisoned them overboard with the rest of the day’s kitchen scraps. I laughed out loud and remembered what had initially attracted me to oceanography: the promise of adventure. I realized that oceanography had given me a passion to write about. That night in my berth, I resolved to stop lamenting the past and second-guessing the future and to enjoy my journey as a scientist. Most importantly, I vowed that I would apply my experiences to a future career writing about science.

“Sailing through uncertainty”

Kyle Frischkorn is a doctoral candidate at Columbia University in New York City. He thanks his adviser Sonya Dyhrman for her unwavering support. Send your career story to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.

By Kyle Frischkorn

I hefted the metal storm cover blocking my porthole and squinted into the morning light: nothing but ocean. It was day one of a research expedition in the middle of the South Pacific and my stomach was somersaulting. But it wasn’t because of the pitch and roll of the ship—I had better sea legs than that. The dawning realization that was making me nauseated was that, although I loved science, I didn’t want to be a scientist.

“I realized that oceanography had given me a passion to write about.”