For sixty-five days, the Mayflower had blundered her way through storms and headwinds, her bottom a shaggy pelt of seaweed and barnacles, her leaky decks spewing salt water onto her passengers’ devoted heads. There were 102 of them—104 if you counted the two dogs: a spaniel and a giant, slobbery mastiff. Most of their provisions and equipment were beneath them in the hold, the primary storage area of the vessel. The passengers were in the between, or ‘tween, decks—a dank, airless space about seventy-five feet long and not even five feet high that separated the hold from the upper deck. The ‘tween decks was more of a crawlspace than a place to live, made even more claustrophobic by the passengers’ attempts to provide themselves with some privacy. A series of thin-walled cabins had been built, creating a crowded warren of rooms that overflowed with people and their possessions: chests of clothing, casks of food, chairs, pillows, rugs, and omni-present chamber pots. There was even a boat—cut into pieces for later assembly—doing temporary duty as a bed.

They were nearly ten weeks into a voyage that was supposed to have been completed during the balmy days of summer. But they had started late, and it was now November, and winter was coming on. They had long since run out of firewood, and they were reaching the slimy bottoms of their water casks. Of even greater concern, they were down to their last casks of beer. Due to the notoriously bad quality of the drinking water in seventeenth-century England, beer was considered essential to a healthy diet. And sure enough, with the rationing of their beer came the unmistakable signs of scurvy: bleeding gums, loosening teeth, and foul-smelling breath. So far only two had died—a sailor and a young servant—but if they didn’t reach land soon many more would follow.

They had set sail with three pregnant mothers: Elizabeth Hopkins, Susanna White, and Mary Allerton. Elizabeth had given birth to a son, appropriately named Oceanus, and Susanna and Mary were both well along in their pregnancies.

It had been a miserable passage. In midocean, a fierce wave had exploded against the old ship’s topsides, straining a structural timber until it had cracked like a chicken bone. The Mayflower’s master, Christopher Jones, had considered turning back to England. But Jones had to give his passengers their due. They knew next to nothing about the sea or the savage coast for which they were bound, but their resolve was unshakable. Despite all they had so
far suffered—agonizing delays, seasickness, cold, and the scorn and ridicule of the sailors—they had done everything in their power to help the carpenter repair the fractured beam. They had brought a screw jack—a mechanical device used to lift heavy objects—to assist them in constructing houses in the New World. With the help of the screw jack, they lifted the beam into place, and once the carpenter had hammered in a post for support, the Mayflower was sound enough to continue on...

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