
INTO DEEP WATER • EXPLORING AN OIL RIG

Stacey has trouble falling asleep. She's so excited. Tomorrow is a very special day for all the kids at school. They are going to work with their parents.

Her friend, Susie, is helping her mom at the bakery. Her friend, Tanya, is going to the office with her dad. Stacey is going to work with her dad, too. But not to an office!

Stacey's going out into the Gulf of Mexico on a boat. Her dad works on an oil rig. He looks for oil buried deep in the rocks under the water.

Before daylight, her dad wakes her. They drive to the dock in the early morning darkness. A crew boat is waiting. Stacey and her dad jump onto the boat. Other people climb aboard carrying suitcases.

"Dad," asks Stacey, "are all these people going to stay on the rig for three weeks like you do?"

"Most of them will. But not us. We'll ride back this evening with the workers going home."

The crew boat takes off and Stacey watches the sun rise over the water. It's a beautiful sight. The workers tell her stories about life on the rig, watching movies and playing cards. Last year, Stacey had Thanksgiving a week late because her dad was working.

"How deep is the water?" she asks. "All I see is water everywhere I look."

"Under the rig, the water's about 300 feet deep. It's a shallow rig. Some rigs are in water almost a mile deep. Those are called floating rigs and they're tied to the bottom by big cables."

Suddenly, dad points to a tower on the horizon. "There she is, Stacey. There's my office."

At first, the rig looks tiny. It grows and grows as they get closer.

“Dad, how did you build the rig way out here?” Stacey wants to know.

Her dad laughs. “We didn’t build it out here, Stacey. We built it on shore, then towed it out here on a big barge. It took almost a year to build.”

The crew boat pulls up to the rig. A big basket drops down from the deck above them.

“Jump into the basket, Stacey,” says her dad, giving her a hand, “and hold on tight. The air tugger lifts us up fast.”

“Is this the only way to get up there, Dad?”

“Yep, this is the only way when you come by boat. The helicopters can land right on the deck. I hope the tugger operator is in a good mood today. Sometimes he dips new people into the water before he lifts them up.”

“Dad, he won’t do that, will he? I didn’t bring extra clothes!”

“Don’t worry, Stacey, we’ve got a laundry room on the rig.”

Stacey holds on as the basket sways in the wind. The ride up takes only a minute. They climb out of the basket onto the deck. Ladders and machines are everywhere. The drilling unit towers above her.

“Let’s go see the kitchen first, Stacey,” says her dad. “I’m hungry.”

“Me, too!” answers Stacey. “I didn’t get any breakfast.” They climb down a ladder to a lower deck.

Stacey can’t wait to eat on the rig. Her dad has told her about the food—four meals a day. She’d eat macaroni and cheese at every meal.

After they eat, her dad shows her the bunk room where he sleeps. There are bunks for four people in the room.

He shows her the recreation room where the workers play pool and watch movies. He shows her the laundry room and the bathroom and the showers.

“Dad, where does the waste go? You don’t dump it in the water, do you?”

“Oh, no, we’d never do that. It all goes into a big tank and a boat takes it to shore. Some of the really big rigs have their own waste treatment plants.”

Her dad grabs her hand and pulls her up a ladder. “We’ve got a neat machine up here. It takes the salt out of the sea water. It makes clean water for us to use, so we don’t have to ship it from shore.”

“This is just like a city out here,” says Stacey. “You’ve got everything.”

“Well, not everything. I hate not being able to call you every day when I’m gone so long.”

“I know,” answers Stacey, “but, when you do come home, you’re home for three weeks. Now show me how you drill for oil. That’s what I really want to see!”

Stacey and her dad climb back up to the rig deck. He shows her a map of the sea floor under the rig. There are twenty X’s on the map. They plan to drill a well on each X to look for oil.

Stacey’s dad shows her the pipes where the drills go down into the water. He shows her the machines that run the drills. He shows her the X where they are drilling today.

“What happens when you find oil, Dad?” asks Stacey.

“We pump it out of the rock into a pipe. Then an oil tanker takes it to a refinery on shore.”

“Doesn’t any of the oil leak into the water?”

“We’re very careful, Stacey. We know that oil can pollute the water and hurt the fish and plants. We do everything we can to keep any oil from leaking into the water. Let me show you what I do.”

Her dad leads Stacey into a room filled with lots of control panels.

"Wow, Dad! This is where you work? It's so cool!"

"This is it. I use these control panels to run the wells. I make sure the oil and gas don't come out too fast. I'm called a blow-out specialist."

"A blow-out specialist. I like that. What's next?"

"Let's swing by the kitchen and grab a snack. Then I want to take you back up on deck. I've got one more thing to show you."

"Sounds good to me, Dad. I'm getting hungry."

Stacey and Dad have a snack and climb up to the deck. They walk to the railing. Way down below, Stacey sees two people fishing.

"I've caught some great fish down there, Stacey," says her dad.

Stacey smiles. "I'm glad you take care of the water, Dad. You know how important that is to me."

Suddenly her smile turns into a frown. "What do you do when a storm comes? Couldn't that make the oil spill?"

"Storms can be dangerous, Stacey. The first thing we do is shut the wells and stop drilling. Then, if the storm looks bad, we send most of the workers to shore. Only a few people stay on the rig."

"You always stay, don't you, Dad?"

"It's part of my job."

"Do you ever get scared?"

"Excited maybe, but not really scared. I would leave if I thought there was a real danger. Don't worry."

All of a sudden, a siren begins to blow. Stacey jumps. "What's that, Dad? Is something wrong?"

"Not a thing, Stacey. That's the siren to let us know the crew boat is about to leave for shore. Anybody who misses the boat will have to stay on the rig for two days, until the next crew boat comes."

"Let's miss it, Dad. I love it out here. I want to work on a rig, too. Maybe I'll be a blow-out specialist, just like you."

"You can be anything you want to be, Stacey, when you grow up. But, right now, we're getting back into the basket."

Stacey and her dad climb in and wave good-bye to the crew. As they near the boat, the operator dips the basket into the water.

Stacey shakes her fist at him and laughs. As the crew boat heads into the sunset, Stacey's hand slips into her father's. It has been a perfect day, even if her feet are wet.