

---

SHORT STORIES  
FROM SCATTERED  
PARTS OF THE PLANET

---

**MORE**

**TWISTED**

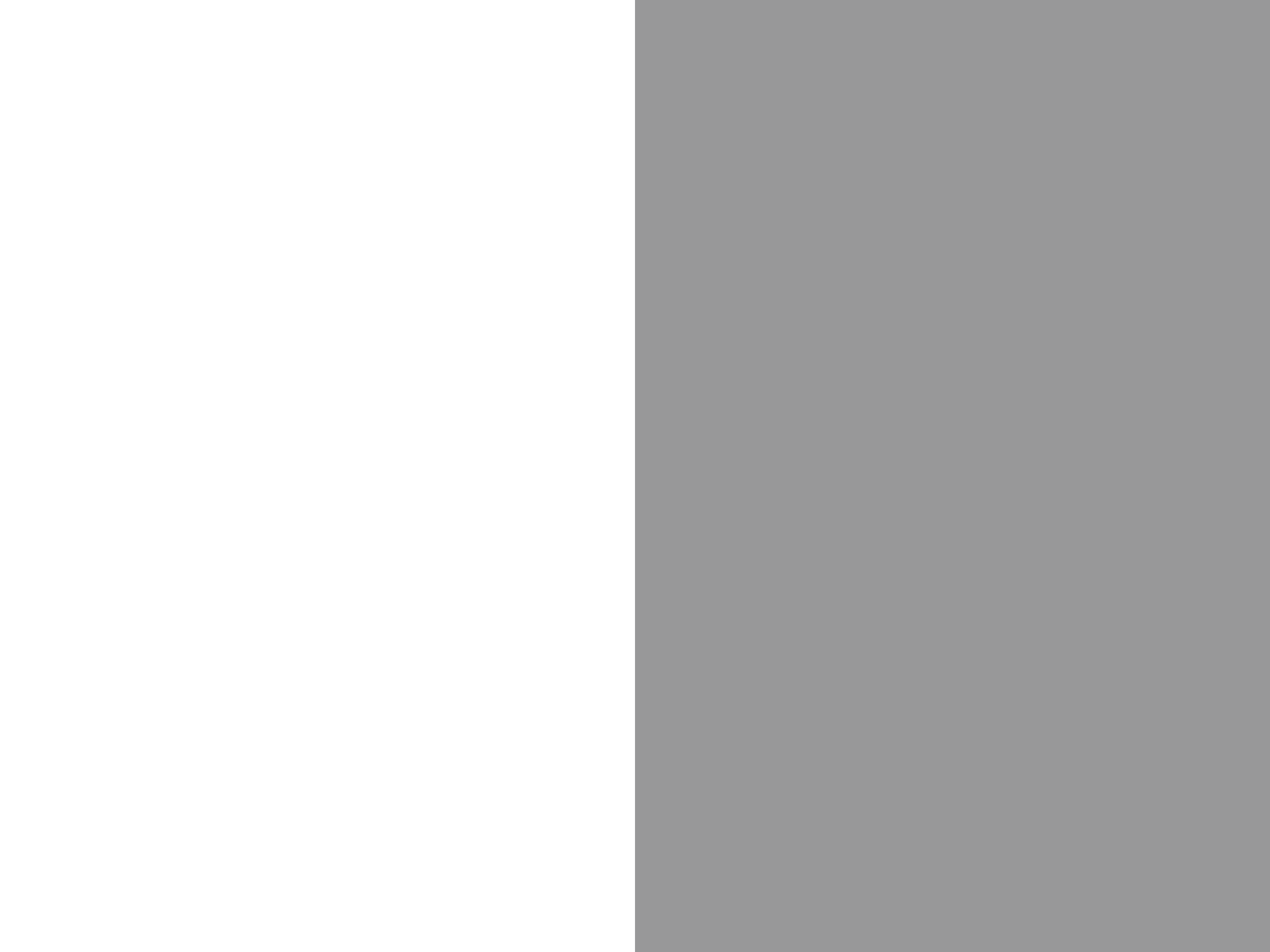
**TALES**

“Really fun stories. I highly recommend this book.”

--- Danny Skinner - The Witness

---

short stories by  
**BRIAN HANCOCK**





short stories by BRIAN HANCOCK

Scan the QR code below with your  
phone to see all of Brian's books  
or visit [www.greatcirclepress.com](http://www.greatcirclepress.com)





Copyright © 2025 Great Circle Press

A division of Great Circle Enterprises

33 Waterside Road

Marblehead, MA 01945

Tel: 339-338 0740

[www.greatcirclepress.com](http://www.greatcirclepress.com)

For Emmet - my Grandson

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without written permission from the publisher, except for the inclusion of brief quotations in a review.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

**ISBN: 9798339469353**

Hancock, Brian

More Twisted Tales - Short Stories from Scattered Parts of the Planet

Printed in the United States of America.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

# STORIES

FRANCOISE'S FOLLY	1
RUBY	7
PASS THE ANTACIDS	25
PRIESTS AND GOOD WOMEN	61
MILK RIVER	71
MILES WITH LYLE	83
THE SEAT BY THE WINDOW	101
VICTORIA FALLS	111
YELLOW DRESS	121
RUNNING WITH THE BULLS	137
NANTUCKET SLEIGHRIDE	143
LOW COUNTRY MURDER	195
JO AND THE NUTTERS	203
THE LETTER	219
A CHILD OF AFRICA	229
THE TOWN BIKE	253
SKELLUM	261
THE SOUTH OF FRANCE	295
MID OCEAN ADVENTURES	301
SMOKY BAR	309

“A splendid read by a master storyteller.”

Hazel Brewer - Author - Live Life Large

“This is just a great book full of twists and turns, most I didn't see coming.”

John Livermore - Adventurer and Explorer

“This is a beach or airplane read. If you want good storytelling in bite sized chunks this is the book for you.”

Rachel Gunning - News at 6

**Note:** If you would like a customized BOOKPLATE for your copy of More Twisted Tales please contact [brian@greatcirclepress.com](mailto:brian@greatcirclepress.com)

## FRANÇOISE'S FOLLY

I WAS WALKING A PINK SANDY BEACH in the Seychelles Islands. It was just me, lost in deep thoughts. You know the kind, right? What's the meaning of life? *Did America really put a man on the moon, or was that just done in a Hollywood studio? Was it really a good idea to drink bleach if you had Covid?* That kind of stuff. Deep thoughts.

That's when I saw her. I thought I was the only one out before sunrise, but apparently not. She had a dog and a very tiny bikini. I was going to be a typical man and steal a glance, but she stopped to say hello, and I thought it might be a little rude to stare. That, plus her dog was so friendly she could have licked the warts off my legs.

She asked if I spoke English, and I tried to make a joke of it, saying, "barely." Truthfully, English was the only language I spoke.

She looked at me and said, "I like a man who is an early riser." I had no idea what to do with that, so I petted her dog, who I soon learned was named Mindy. Now, let's put this into perspective: I'm a balding 65-year-old man with, let's say, a few extra pounds in the tummy area, but it seemed as if she was coming on to me.

She said, "My name is Francoise. I am visiting from France. Mindy belongs to my ex-husband. I came to visit her—not my ex. They live back there." She pointed toward a hill behind us. "He was always a lazy bum—too lazy even to walk the dog. He got Mindy in the divorce settlement. Do you want to get a coffee?"

At that point, I had very little to say. I was rising early, if you know what I mean.

There was a small bamboo shack on the beach. I ordered two coffees, and completely out of character, I ordered two mimosas. Now, to be precise, a mimosa in South Africa is called a Cotton Blossom, which, if you ask me, is a much better name—especially if you're going to drink one before seven in the morning.

Françoise looked me in the eye and said, "You are quite a mysterious man, aren't you?" I just shrugged. Mindy looked hopeful. I slipped her some of my leftover French toast, knowing Françoise wouldn't approve. Françoise ordered the fruit bowl, with extra blueberries.

A storm had passed through the day before, churning up the ocean. The waves washed the sand clean, almost drowning out our conversation. Françoise leaned in closer. She said, "I'm a spy for the DTS. I probably shouldn't have told you that, but now you know." I drank my Cotton Blossom and looked out at the ocean. Of course, I was buying time. Beyond the waves, I could see a few dolphins surfing the chop in the turquoise water.

Françoise gave me a knowing look. "You don't know what the DTS is, do you?" I shrugged and said, "Sure I do."

Françoise wasn't only beautiful; she was also smart. "You are a bit full of shit," she said, "and you're a bad liar. It's the Directorate of Terrestrial Security. To put it in plain language, the French FBI."

I downed my Cotton Blossom and was getting ready to leave when Françoise ordered a second round. She placed her hand on mine.

"I'm paying for these."

Françoise said to me, "My ex leaves the house at around nine.

He goes to the gym for two hours. Poor prick. He thinks buffing up his body on the outside will fix who he is on the inside." I thought to myself, *Didn't she say he was a lazy bum?*

We went to the house, and, well, we did it—with Mindy watching. It was beyond my wildest expectations. As we lay in a pool of sweat, Françoise said, "I need you to come to Paris with me."

I must admit I was a little taken aback by her forwardness, but she was a beautiful, mysterious woman, and I was an aging surfer. She slid an address and phone number to me and said, "I'll be waiting for you."

I did follow her back to Paris, and that's where things got... a little weird. Let me back up. Her ex came home early and was none too pleased. I should have picked up the vibe when Mindy started gnawing on the bedpost. Needless to say, it didn't go well—for me, at least. Remember, her ex went to the gym for two hours a day, and I was an overweight 65-year-old man with a bad back.

But I digress.

I met Françoise in Paris. She had a small apartment overlooking the Seine. It was cozy and, best of all, ex-boyfriend-free.

Françoise made us a plate of mussels in white wine sauce with tarragon. As we finished dinner, she took my hand and led me to the sofa, which, by the way, was covered in cats. I thought she was a dog person, but it turns out she was also a cat person. Personally, I'm not fond of cats, but I was fond of Françoise. She had more than a dozen cats. In fact, she had twenty.

"They're my pussies," she said with a slight smile. "I probably shouldn't be telling you this, but my assignment is the Pope's visit next week. I could use your help."

I swallowed hard. For some reason—don't ask me why—I noticed that my toenails needed clipping.

“The baguette comes from a place around the corner. Use it to dip into the sauce. That’s the best part—all that garlic, wine, and juice, and... well...” She seemed to lose her train of thought. Then she said, less delicately than I would have liked, “Eat the fucking sauce.”

It was all over the news that the Pope was coming to Paris. Françoise had asked me to help. To be honest, I wasn’t sure how I could help, but, well, us men know where our bread is buttered. I said those fateful words: “Of course, mon amour.”

She gave me a walkie-talkie and said, “You need to be near the Eiffel Tower. I’ll keep you posted.” She also gave me an official-looking name tag that allowed me to get close.

Françoise was dressed in black with her hair pulled back tightly. She looked stunning. I noticed she hadn’t eaten her lunch—just moved it around the plate.

When I arrived, I parked my rented eBike. The Pope’s motorcade wasn’t hard to spot—blue lights were everywhere.

Françoise’s voice came through the walkie-talkie. “Get ready for a big show. I’m going up higher for a better view.”

I turned to see her climbing the Eiffel Tower. She looked amazing. The walkie-talkie sputtered: “This is going to be fun. Watch carefully.”

And then she jumped.

I attended her funeral. Her sister pulled me aside and said, “You knew she was as nutty as a fruitcake, didn’t you? They had just let her out of the asylum when she took off for the Seychelles. I’m sure she told you about her husband. She’s never been married.”

I shifted uneasily and asked, “And Mindy, the dog?” But her sister had already walked away.

I looked down at my feet, realizing I was wearing flip-flops to a funeral, and my toenails still needed clipping.

There’s an old saying: *If it seems too good to be true, it probably is.*

I can vouch for that.



## RUBY



**W**E LEFT STOCKHOLM after a good breakfast of pickled herring and boiled eggs with some capers on the side. Scandinavian coffee is strong, very strong, but I was only in my early twenties and needed caffeine to get me to do anything in the morning. The coffee kicked in and I raised anchor. We motored slowly through the Swedish archipelago, a light breeze following us. The scenery was stunning and around midday a warm wind picked up from the north. We set the mainsail and a headsail and coasted down the coast to Soderkoping, a small town at the entrance of the Gota Canal.

The Gota Canal was built in the early nineteenth century and stretches across Sweden from Soderkoping on the east coast to Gothenburg on the west. It's a stunningly beautiful waterway that passes through two magical lakes; Lake Vattern and Lake Vanern. We were headed for Copenhagen and the canal was the quickest and most beautiful way to get there. I was with my friend George, the owner of the boat, his wife Pamela, and their baby daughter Ruby. It had been a dream of theirs to buy a boat in Finland and sail it to the Med.

We anchored at the entrance to the canal planning on an early start. We were tucked in close to land as the sun tried to set (it tried but didn't succeed. It was midsummer in Sweden after all and the sun never really sets). As the sun tried to set I could hear the lovely lilting sound of the cuckoos and doves as they settled in for the night. I did my usual nightly routine and covered the

windows with towels to darken below. To be honest I was really excited about the canal; for two reasons. It's a pretty iconic waterway that many sailors from other countries don't get to see, and also, kind of more importantly to me at least, I had noticed that once away from the metropolitan areas most ladies were topless. This I really liked. I was just 22 at the time and naked boobs were on my mind 24/7.

The following morning George was up early. "Pamela is going to sleep in," he said. "Let's get going." I had already made coffee and readied the boat and the anchor came up slowly. I could hear baby Ruby stirring below but she went back to sleep. There was just us entering the canal along with a small tugboat. It was quite pretty, the coachroof painted red. The windows were tinted so I couldn't see who the captain was but I waved anyway. Waving to each other is what all sailors do.

We motored slowly enjoying the early morning stillness and a second cup of strong coffee. Pamela came up with a very sleepy Ruby and we sat in the cockpit in silence just enjoying the sweet early morning air. George had the chart out. "We will get to our first lock in about an hour," he said. "It will be the first of 72 locks before we reach the west coast." I had my eye out for boobs but it was still early so I didn't really expect to see any. Pamela brought up some pastries and Ruby clucked contentedly in her car seat.

The tug boat was following a fair distance astern.

The first lock was easy. They were all manually operated meaning that I would climb ashore after we had pulled into the lock. There was a metal ladder that I could climb. On the dock was a turnstile that would raise the gate behind us and a lever that I could pull to start the water flowing. It was on a float switch so that the water would shut off automatically once the water rose to the right level. The first lock was only about

six feet and we were the only boat in. I could see the tugboat lurking but whoever the captain was didn't enter so it was just us. The water rose slowly and after ten minutes or so it rose enough so that the water level was the same as the water level in the canal ahead. I lowered the gate ahead of us and George motored forward.

That was pretty much the routine for the day. George and I switched out helming duties while Pamela tended to baby Ruby. I did happen to see my first naked boobs just before lunch but they were far away and the pretty blond was not that well endowed but it gave my heart a little lift. I noticed that the small tugboat had caught up with us but for some reason the captain would never enter the lock with us. He, or it might have been a she, I couldn't tell, would always take the lock after we had left.

I was becoming really attached to Ruby. She was sweet and never made a fuss. Pamela, however, always made a fuss. She was one of the newly rich who didn't really know how to be rich. Her idea of being rich was drinking champagne and eating caviar. Oh, and dressing like a Barbie doll. High heels are quite impractical on a yacht but she insisted. She was from New Zealand but somewhere along the way had picked up the accent of the really rich who spend their summers in the south of France.

George on the other hand was the salt of the earth. He had made a fairly decent amount of money from a small boutique hotel in Toronto. The Windsor Arms was 'the' place to go for afternoon tea and the waiting list to get in was as long as your arm. He used some of the profits to open a few upscale restaurants and a couple of dive bars.

"The dive bars make me the most money," he told me. "There is profit in cheap beer and my customers could never stop at just one beer." I liked George. He didn't wear his wealth on his sleeve. He was more of a meat and potatoes kind of guy.

After three days in the canal we came to Lake Vatern. The chart has us take a sharp left and suddenly there right in front of us was a stunning medieval castle. It was surrounded by water and the moat was the marina. I simply couldn't believe it. There were ramparts and even a portcullis. We motored slowly and found a spot for the evening. I sat looking up at the stone walls and wondered how a kid from Africa could get so lucky.

That evening we had smoked salmon for dinner. We sat in the cockpit. Of course Pamela had champagne, in fact she had a lot of it. She had an ice bucket under the table so that the bottle was close at hand and she made herself available. George and I had beer and Ruby had a bottle of formula. The sun tried to set again but there was no way. It was midsummer. George told me later that Pamela didn't breastfeed because she didn't want her boobs to sag. The couple in the boat alongside us were in an animated argument and I think that the wife was winning. I couldn't be sure because they were speaking Swedish. Instead I was counting in my head how many naked boobs I had seen since we left the dock earlier in the day. I reckoned that there were at least twelve pairs making it around 24 boobs in total. What a day.

Pamela was getting drunk but it was OK. She was more fun when she was drunk. "Jimmy," she ordered me. "You need to put towels over the windows. I need to put Ruby down." I jumped up and grabbed a stack of old towels that were there for just that purpose. I was covering the windows near the bow when I noticed the tug boat anchored just outside the castle. I could see a man on the deck checking his anchor and generally inspecting things before turning in for the night. He was slightly built and had a scruffy beard. That was about all I could see. I noticed that he had launched his dinghy which he had named Goodnight Moon and it was floating on a tether behind the tug. The sky behind was turning a pale pink and I went to get my camera.

Pamela was getting agitated. "Can you hurry up? Ruby is tired." I covered the rest of the windows and Pamela went below with Ruby. "Don't let her get under your skin," George said quietly. "This is all new for her. Since Ruby was born she has been a little on edge." I smiled and said, "I am living the dream. I could not be happier."

George and I sat in the cockpit drinking the final beer of the night. The walls of the castle loomed over us. "Nice spot don't you think?" George said. I didn't need to answer such an obvious question and just nodded. Finally George said, "Okay I'm turning in." He took the empty beer bottles below with him. I sat in the cockpit a while longer and then headed below to my bunk in the forepeak. I was tired and just falling asleep when I heard some moaning coming from the aft cabin. George and Pamela were going at it. Ruby was in a small cot in the main saloon. The moaning got louder and there was a bit of headboard thumping. I grabbed my Walkman and plugged in my headphones to drown out the noise and after a while I fell asleep, the numerous beers doing their thing.

The headphones also drowned out the sound of two soft padded feet hitting the deck around midnight. The headphones drowned out the sound of Ruby clucking as she was picked up from her cot. George and Pamela were fast asleep when Ruby was taken. I didn't hear whoever it was step gently onto the dock with Ruby snuggled up tight and I didn't hear the sound of the 10HP engine start.

Ruby had been abducted.

The first I knew of it was a loud, blood curdling shriek from Pamela.

The Swedish police are nothing if not efficient. The dockmaster called right away and within moments the boat was teeming with

cops. There was no sign of Ruby. She had vanished into the murky night air. For the first time since we left Stockholm there was a chance of rain. Pamela was inconsolable. George was doing his best but his best wasn't good enough. How do you even console a mother whose baby has been taken in the middle of the night? I certainly had no clue. I just hung like a spare part and kept my fingers crossed. Sometimes I wished that I wasn't an atheist and could pray but that ship had long since sailed so all I did was to try and stay out of the way. I wandered to the bow and looked out toward the lake. The tugboat was gone but I didn't think much of it. A short cop with piercing blue eyes came up to me and said, "We are going to need to question you, you know that right?" I nodded. It was fine with me. I had nothing to hide and only hoped that I could help. "Can you come down to the station later this afternoon? I know that you don't have transportation so I will send a police officer to pick you up." It occurred to me that the cop who looked no older than 25 was in charge.

George was still trying to console Pamela but it was no use. Can you imagine? A mom who went to sleep with her baby close by had woken up to the child gone; vanished in the night. She didn't know that I knew that she and George had sex and she was probably a bit shagged out, as they like to say in South Africa, and was sleeping like a baby when whoever it was came aboard and took Ruby.

The rain started just before noon and came down in buckets. The damp didn't help the mood on board but it brought some relief from the heat of the day. I washed the decks not knowing what else to do.

At around three in the afternoon a police cruiser pulled into the marina. I knew that it was there for me and had already told George and Pamela that I was to go to the station to be questioned. They were supportive. The cop let me ride up front.

He didn't have much to say which was fair enough. I understood. To be honest it was a bit intimidating when they led me into a small room that looked like an interrogation chamber. Blue Eyes was there. He looked a lot less friendly than he seemed to be on the boat.

"Okay Jimmy," he said. "You are not a suspect but we need to talk to you. Just answer our questions as truthfully as you can. Don't make up any bullshit. We will see right through it. I nodded. I had nothing to make up. I was still completely gutted that Ruby was gone.

They started off easy with basic questions. Name, date of birth, that sort of thing. They asked about my relationship with George and Pamela, what I did for a living and if my parents were still alive and did I have any young nieces or nephews. It wasn't really a good cop bad cop kind of thing but I could tell that Blue Eyes's sidekick had his suspicions. They asked where I was last evening and how I could not possibly have heard someone come onboard. I told them about the sex and my Walkman and Blue Eyes seemed to smile a little, but I couldn't be sure if it was a smile or something else. Perhaps he just had gas.

After about an hour the questions were slowing down. I think that they believed me and changed course a little. "Is there anything that you can think of that might have seemed out of the ordinary?" Blue Eyes asked. I thought for a while. I couldn't think of anything. The problem was, and I know that they weren't interrogating me, the problem was the environment. I was totally intimidated and could barely think straight. I concentrated on the white tile wall and noticed that whoever did the tiling had not quite placed one tile perfectly. It was a little off. I know, it's a blessing and a curse. Blue Eyes shuffled a little. Then I said, "there was this tugboat following us since we left Stockholm. I dunno. I have a feeling. I am not sure where it comes from but

I felt in my gut that there was something odd about it.”

“Did you talk to the people on board?”

“No. The windows were tinted and I couldn’t see who was driving the boat. I did see a man on board last night. The boat was anchored off the castle. I waved to him but he didn’t wave back. He was slight and had a scruffy beard. That’s about all I can remember. The boat has been following us for almost a week. Everyone in Sweden is so friendly but whoever this person was didn’t want to get in the same lock as us and never waved back. I dunno. It’s probably nothing.” I noticed that Blue Eyes was scribbling furiously in a yellow pad.

“That’s interesting,” he said. “Very interesting. Can you tell us more about the tugboat?”

“Not really. I was about 30 feet long, maybe a bit smaller, actually closer to 25 feet. The cabin top was painted red. The rest of the boat was black. It was really quite cute. It had a chimney and when whomever was driving gunned the engine, smoke came out of the stack. I thought it a little strange that the boat would never enter the same lock as we did at the same time, but what do I know? I am new to Sweden.”

Blue Eyes nodded his head. “So other than last night you didn’t see the person, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Do you think that there might have been someone else on board?”

“I don’t think so. We would take Ruby for a walk in the evenings but the tugboat was always closed up tight. That’s one of the reasons I have a funny feeling about that particular boat. Who closes things down on a warm summer evening?” Blue Eyes gave me a look and scribbled in his notepad.

“Do you by any chance have a photo of the tugboat?”

“No. I have a crappy camera and have been too busy to take photos.”

“OK,” Blue Eyes said. “I will have Sergeant Bigelow run you back to the boat. We will do whatever we can to find Ruby.” I left the police station feeling a bit nervous about going back to the boat. I knew that Pamela would be a mess. She was. She was well into her bottle of champagne and sitting in the cockpit sobbing. George told me that police had been by but they had very little to work on and while they didn’t come out and say it, the impression that George got was that they would be looking for a needle in a haystack. A very big haystack and a very small needle.

Pamela works as Tech Consultant for Spotify which was founded in Sweden and she would regularly commute back and forth to Stockholm. That was one of the reasons why they wanted to do the trip through the Gota Canal. She would have some bragging rights. She knew that most of her colleagues had never transited Sweden by boat. Pamela had been there 17 months earlier to be a part of their Christmas celebrations. When she returned home George noticed something a little different about her but didn’t say anything. He figured that he was just imagining things. Life went back to normal, well sort of normal. Pamela announced that she had seen her doctor and that she was pregnant.

George had ordered the boat from one of the most celebrated boat builders in the world; Nautor Swan, and he was preoccupied with all the details that go into a custom yacht. He noticed that Pamela was still drinking champagne despite being pregnant but didn’t say anything. Well he did say, “now we will have two babies; the new boat and the new baby.”

Around midnight I placed the towels over the windows and went to my bunk in the forepeak. It was a very different experience

from just 24-hours earlier. I glanced at Ruby's cot as I was heading forward and felt a sting in my eyes. Ruby was gone. I was just settling down to sleep when I heard the noise of a halyard clanging against the mast so I dragged myself up and went back on deck. It was still light out and I glanced to where I had seen the tugboat the previous evening but the lake was empty. The sky was beautiful and then I remembered. I had taken a photo of the sky the night before and I had included the tugboat in a perspective. I did have a photo of the tugboat.

I was at the dockmasters office as soon as they opened. "Can you please call the police for me. I need to talk to them." The dockmaster nodded and within a few minutes a car arrived. The station was only a few minutes from the marina and I was led in. It was still early in the morning but Blue Eyes was there. His uniform freshly pressed he had a cup of coffee in hand.

"OK." he said. "You have something to tell us?" I nodded and said. "I have a photo of the tugboat. I remembered once I got back to the boat that I had taken a photo of the sunset, well of the sun trying to set. I had the tugboat in the picture to add some perspective. The only problem was that we need to get the film developed." Blue Eyes nodded. "We can do that," he said. Then it suddenly occurred to me. Most of the pictures on the film reel were my pathetic photos of girls without their tops on. It was too late. I had brought my camera with me and Blue Eyes had already taken the film reel as evidence.

"Thank you," Blue Eyes said, "I'll be in touch." Just as I was leaving I remembered something else. I was totally stressed when they questioned me the previous day even though I had done nothing wrong. "I remember now," I said. "The name of the dinghy is Goodnight Moon." Blue Eyes put his coffee down. "And you are just remembering that now?" he said.

"I was stressed when you questioned me yesterday and forgot

about the dinghy." Blue Eyes softened. "You have given us something to work with," he said. "Thank you."

When I got back to the boat things were no different. Pamela was crying and George was trying, but it was no use. There was no way to console Pamela. "I have something to tell you George," she said. "Do you remember when...?" Her voice trailed off and George glanced at me. Pamela put her head in her hands and sobbed. That was how it went for the rest of the day. I felt for George. He had also lost a child, but the worst was yet to come.

We stayed in the marina for a week. The cops came and went but they didn't offer much hope. Baby Ruby was gone, vanished into thin air. Word had spread around the marina and people brought us food and glum looks. I was crushed. Ruby was my little buddy. She loved me. Whenever I told her that I just wanted to bite her toes off one and a time she gurgled and smiled. Then one afternoon we were sitting in the cockpit trying to eat some Swedish meatballs that George had picked up. None of us were hungry but we all looked up when we saw Blue Eyes walking down the dock. He came right to the point.

"We have a suspect," he said.

Pamela started to sob. It really broke my heart. I didn't like her that much but grief is grief and I felt her grief. Blue Eyes continued. "His name is Hendrik Tendstrom. He owns the tugboat. We developed the film that Jimmy gave us." He gave me a glance and I knew what he meant. Boobs. "The photo that he took of the sunset the night before Ruth was abducted had a photo of the tugboat in it. You guys know about the tugboat right?" Pamela and George had no clue. "Well anyway on the bow is a registration mark. We could just make it out and we were able to trace it to Mr. Tenstrom. We ran his file and it turns out that he is a registered pedophile." I heard Pamela sob only this time it came from somewhere deep in her gut, somewhere way, way deep.

“We are not sure if this is the man but he sure looks suspicious. The man has a very respectable job. He works at Spotify as a programmer.” I heard Pamela choke. She grunted and then left the table. “I need to pee,” she said. I could hear her throwing up in the starboard head. Blue Eyes left. “I will have Sergeant Bigelow come over later and fill you in on the details.”

Sergeant Bigelow came by in the early afternoon. He was also short, very stocky and acted like a bull waiting for his balls to be clipped. He came right to the point. “We have a suspect,” he said. He owns the tugboat. “He’s a registered pedophile and really not a very savory character. I heard Pamela grunt again and then sob. The problem is,” Sergeant Bigelow said, “we can’t find him. We have been by his residence in Stockholm but the neighbors told us that he had left for his summer vacation weeks earlier. They said that he was a little shady but in general a nice guy.”

To be honest, and I mean to be honest because this is my story, I did hear some footsteps on the deck around midnight. I thought that it was just George going outside for a pee. I also needed a pee and once things quieted down I went on deck to check if there was any moon and also to relieve myself. I did notice the tugboat motoring north. At least I think that it was the tugboat. All I could see were two running lights and a white tail light reflecting on the still water.

I told Sergeant Bigelow. “I saw the tugboat going north around three in the morning. I’m absolutely sure that it was the boat.” Bigelow shrugged. “It could have been anyone,” he said. I may have been a little defensive but I was right about the tugboat. I told Bigelow to investigate the small towns on the north of the island and he just nodded. I knew that he was blowing me off.

They took Tenstrom into custody the following day on an old arrest warrant. He denied everything. I mean everything. Even his previous charges but his emphatic denials had Blue Eyes

worried. There was no sign of Ruby but his body language was more than a little suspicious. Blue Eyes came by the boat. “We have him in custody,” he said, “but there is still no sign of your baby.” Pamela sobbed. “Why can’t you fuckers find my baby?” she wailed. “I mean how big is Sweden even? You say that you can’t find my baby girl? What kind of place is this?” Blue Eyes just shrugged. “We will find her. You can mark me on that one.”

They did find her. She was in the basement of an old farmhouse in the town of Vadstena. It was where they had arrested Tenstrom. Blue Eyes went to a judge and got a warrant to search the house. It didn’t take long. In the basement there was a young girl, around 15 or so, a little unwashed, but still pretty. She was trying to breastfeed Ruby when the police found her.

Blue Eyes came by the boat. “We have your baby,” he said matter of factly. “But you can’t have her back just yet.” Pamela looked both thrilled and distressed. “Why?” she asked.

“Well you see,” Blue Eyes said, “Mr Tenstrom claims that he is the father of the child and we need to run some DNA tests.” George just sat staring at a seagull that had settled on the dock. Pamela had told him something earlier that day that had him little more than unsettled.

“I want to see my baby,” Pamela wailed. “Now.”

Blue Eyes put his hand on her arm and said. “I will bring her by later today. You just have to be patient. Mr Tenstrom has a very convincing story.” He looked down at his hands. “You work for Spotify don’t you?”

Pamela was indignant, “yes but what does that have anything to do with anything?” I was at a loss. I had no clue what was going on. “You know Mr. Tenstrom right?” Pamela stared blankly at him and then in a low voice she said, “yes I know him. Just a little.” Blue Eyes was no fool. He said, “until recently you have been in

daily touch with him. Is that right?” Pamela shifted uncomfortably. George was staring at a patch on the dock where someone had taken some glue and fixed a wobbly board. I was trying to follow along but really had no idea what was going on. The fact that Pamela knew Mr. Tenstrom was in itself news enough.

“I’m not trying to be unkind,” Blue Eyes said, “but Mr Tenstrom showed us some WhatsApp messages that you had exchanged with him. You told him about your trip in the Gota canal just two weeks ago. ”Pamela tried to look indignant but George took her by the hand and said, “It’s OK Pamela.” There was an awkward silence. I was most definitely not the one to break the silence. Pamela didn’t look well. Blue Eyes spoke. “I don’t mean to be indelicate here,” he said. “But is there any chance that Ruby may be his daughter?” Pamela looked pale. She nodded slightly and tried to say yes but the word didn’t come out.

Pamela had confessed to George earlier in the day. I guess that she had tried to bring it up a few days earlier but these kinds of matters needed time and time had just run out for Pamela.

“It started at the Christmas party,” she said. “I may have had a little too much champagne. I didn’t mean to do anything but Henrik was persistent. I have never been unfaithful to my husband.” Blue Eyes look skeptical. George looked straight ahead. I sat in silence. A lone seagull was making itself available on some scraps that I had chucked onto the dock earlier. Blue Eyes said, “it doesn’t matter. All that matters is that your baby was abducted in the night. What happened before that is none of our business. If Ruby is his baby the courts can deal with it. For now we need to run some DNA tests and you will have Ruby back tomorrow.”

Pamela sobbed quietly.

Blue Eyes left. There was a very awkward silence. The seagull was having a good time with the leftover pork chop. I watched

as Blue Eyes climbed back into his cruiser and then went down below. Now George is a very mild mannered man, but he lost his temper and it wasn’t pretty. “You fucking whore,” he yelled. “This is our daughter. You know that and I know that but you put us in danger. Ruby means the world to me. How could you have fucked a pedophile? I mean. How could you have cheated on me with a known pedophile no less.” Pamela was silent. I was on George’s side. Pamela, so prim and prissy sipping her champagne and eating caviar, was getting a little leg over on her business trips. George was beyond pissed. Pamela had nothing to say. She had screwed some random guy and if that wasn’t bad enough she had stayed in touch to the point where he knew that we would be in the Gota Canal in mid-July. In her defense she said, “I didn’t know that he was a pedophile.”

I heard George crack a beer. I really felt for him. I really wanted a beer for myself but didn’t dare go into the galley. I was huddled in a fetus position on my bunk. I missed Ruby. My best summer ever was turning into the summer from hell.

The next morning Blue Eyes sent a cruiser to pick us up. He was all business. Cup of coffee in hand, barking orders. We were led into a small room. Tenstrom was there. He was staring intently at his cup of coffee and didn’t look up when we entered. We all sat in a very awkward silence until Sergeant Bigelow came into the room. “We need to wait for the Captain,” he said. “He’s waiting for the report from the doctor’s office. We sat for a bit. Now I have never been in a place like this but I thought that the security was a bit lax. Tenstrom had, after all, stolen our baby. I say our baby because I was so attached to Ruby. Blue Eyes came in just after nine. He looked serious. He left some papers on the desk and closed the door behind him as he left. Pamela was sobbing. Tenstrom was nursing his cold coffee. I had nothing to say so I said nothing. I could see that George was pissed and I felt his



anger. We were stuck in a room with a man that his wife had sex with and who had stolen their daughter.

George said, “how many times did you do it?” It was an awkward question that hung limply in the air. I felt like the pilot who was about to drop the atom bomb on Hiroshima. I could see Tenstrom’s hand tighten on his coffee cup. Pamela said nothing. Bigelow had left the room to check on Blue Eyes. There was nothing to say until Tenstrom said, “every morning and every afternoon for a week. By my calculation that’s around 14 times.” I thought that George was going to explode and if he did I had his back. Tenstrom was going down. He was just about to go for the jugular when Bigelow and Blue Eyes came into the room. When I first met Blue Eyes he looked so young. Now he looked a lot older.

“OK,” he said. “Thank you for coming. I know that this is difficult but there is a child involved and that’s our main concern. Pamela looked at him and in a tone that I had never heard asked, “When can I see my baby?”

“Our baby,” Tenstrom said. I could see George’s knuckles go white. Bigelow took a deep breath and Blue Eyes continued. “I have been with the doctors this morning,” he said. “We have very good doctors here in Sweden. Actually they are among the best in the world. We took some blood from your daughter. It’s OK, she never felt a thing. We also have Mr. Tenstrom’s blood and we ran both samples through a DNA screen. Mr. Tenstrom is not the father of the baby. In fact we have no trace of him in our system. Other than being a pedophile he seems to be impotent. We are going to take him into custody for stealing your child.” Pamela was pale. George was silent. I was not even sure why I was there and sat gripping my stool.

The door opened slightly and Bigelow was there with Ruby. Pamela was frozen in place but started to rise when all of a

sudden Tenstrom burst out of his chair. It was so sudden and unexpected that no one had any time to react. In a second he had grabbed Ruby from Bigelow and was hauling it down the passage. What he didn’t know was that the custodians had been in earlier and the floor was wet. Tenstrom hit the tile floor, Ruby went flying and skidded for about 20 feet but she was well bundled and okay. Tenstrom hit the edge of a wall where it turned toward the entrance of the police station. The edge happened to catch him on the soft spot right above and in front of his ear. The paramedics that came treated him on the scene while waiting for an ambulance. He died the following morning while in intensive care. Seems he burst an artery that bled into his brain at the same time that his brain was deprived of oxygen from the hit. The combination was lethal.

The police had already taken the 15 year old girl into child services and as part of their investigation they discovered a hidden door behind a bookshelf that led to a basement. There were eight children of various ages living in filth. They had been looking for some of the children for months without luck. Ruby’s abduction had saved their lives. I hope that George and Pamela find some solace in that and in time find a way to tell her.

We left Lake Vanern and sailed to Lake Vatern, some fifteen locks and a whole lot of naked boobs away. George had been relegated to sleeping in the main saloon which I thought was a bit unkind. He was not the ass who had been unfaithful. Ruby was upgraded to the aft cabin. I kept my mouth shut. None of this was my business; I was just happy to have Ruby back.

We finally made it to Gothenburg without any further incident. From there it was a pleasant sail to Copenhagen. We took Ruby to Tivoli Gardens and she ate ice cream until it was coming out of her ears but she was happy and I think, but you never know, I think that she had forgotten the basement incident where a 15 year old

girl had been trying to breastfeed her. When we left Copenhagen to sail south to a small boatyard where the boat would stay for the winter, George was invited to sleep in the aft cabin again so I guess all was okay in that department. In my opinion I know who should have been sleeping alone in the saloon, but there you go.

Time has passed. I have children of my own now and so does Ruby. She named her firstborn Jimmy.

## PASS THE ANTACIDS

I WAS FINALLY HOME after a two year stint with the army. It felt strange to be back in my childhood bed for more than just a single night. The poster of Marie Osmond was still on the wall (my sister had one of Donny on her wall) and the scratches on the door where Butch, our mini mastiff used to claw in order to make himself known in the morning, were still there. Dad had just painted over them. Perhaps he wanted to keep them as a reminder because he too missed Butch. They never found the driver that hit him and he didn't bother stopping even though he had to have known that he connected with a solid object. Butch may not have been that bright but he sure was solid. I rolled out of bed and joined Mum and Dad at the breakfast table. "How's our soldier then?" Mum asked. "What can I get you?"

"Just some toast please." Mum rang a bell and Violet, our maid, appeared at the door. "Some toast for the Master," Mum said. That was how things were back in the late 70s in South Africa. All you needed was a bell and a maid, not necessarily in that order.

"What do you think that you are going to do now?" Dad asked. "I knew it was coming. Dad was always happy to see me but I knew that he didn't want me to get too comfortable and move in with them. "I dunno," I said. "I heard that the ships are always looking for deckhands. I thought I might go down to the docks next week to see what I can find." Dad grunted. "Still interested in ships then huh?" Violet came back with two slices of white toast and a small pot of honey. "Would you like a boiled egg Master?" I

smiled at her. She had been with our family since I was barely able to walk and was like a mother to my sister Becky and me.”

“Sure,” I replied. “Just one will be fine.” I turned to my father and said, “it’s not so much the ships that interest me. It’s travel. I want to see the world. I want to see what’s out there.” Little did I know that I would get to see more than I ever wanted before my 21st birthday.

It was easy getting hired. Basically they were looking for anyone with a pulse and a passport. I had the pulse. I could get a passport and within a few days I had signed up as a cook’s helper aboard the South African freighter SS Dabulamanzi. The ship’s name is Zulu and means Sweet Water. I could have made more money on the ships that were foreign registered. Those ship owners did so for tax reasons but they also hired a mixed crew. I wanted to be with my people, people who spoke English especially those who had served in the military. Turned out that I was a little naive in that department.

Mum held a small going-away party for me. I had lost touch with most of my schoolmates. We were all drafted for two years. One day we were a band of brothers; the next we were on separate trains heading out to be scattered across South Africa for our Basic Training. Later, after we graduated and were allowed to grow back some of our hair, we were scattered to the war front in Angola where we would be used as human fodder. The whole military mess in South Africa was a joke yet every High School graduate was conscripted to go and serve the country and its racist masters. Back then the South African government was still pretending that Apartheid was a fair and just way to manage a society.

We were trained to fight the Angolan army over a small strip of land between the two countries known as the Caprivi Strip. The Angolan’s didn’t have an army so they recruited Cubans to

do the fighting for them, but the Cuban’s didn’t have any money so they took funding from the Soviet Union. Not long after I was discharged after my two years, the Soviet Union ran short of money and cut off funding. The Angolans, without a paycheck quit fighting, and South Africa ran out of money. After almost a decade spent planting landmines and lobbing grenades at each other, we all just put our guns down and went home. The war was over. I heard that some of my old schoolmates did not come home and wondered if they had received a proper burial.

My old girlfriend Liz was invited to my going away party. We had been sweethearts since I was 14 and she was 12 and we had promised each other that we would always be together. I had not been in the army for more than a couple of months before Liz took up with the kid up the street and the “love means never having to say you’re sorry” relationship ended up with Liz saying sorry when I came home for a rare weekend pass and found that the two of them had become lovers. We were still friends and she wrote me a letter at least once a week during my entire military training. Liz had long since dumped the guy and sat next to me at the dinner table. Becky had some friends over and we enjoyed a leg of lamb with all the fixings. “I don’t imagine that the food on the ship is going to be this good,” Mum said. I heard Becky snort. “Especially if Bart is going to be the assistant cook.” I tried to kick her under the table and connected just once about the same time I felt Liz take my hand. She gave me a look that I knew and I smiled. Her look, which meant exactly what you think it meant, seemed baked into my DNA. Liz leaned in and said, “my Mum and Dad are away for the night.”

The next morning I reported for duty aboard the SS Dabulamanzi. At the top of the stairway the Captain had posted bunk assignments. No cabins on the good ship Dabulamanzi; just a place to rest your weary mind that was out of the wind and weather. I had packed

my army duffel bag and made a quick go of stowing my gear. Then I went to the mess area to meet the cook. He was a wizened black guy, probably about 60 years old but with some black people it's hard to tell age. He could have been a lot older. The cook was affectionately named Biltong Bertie, biltong being the salty dried meat that is very close to every South African's heart. Biltong (he preferred to be called that) gave me a once over and then pointed to a large pot of potatoes. "They have already been blanched," he said. "It makes peeling them easier." I got to it right away. I kind of liked Biltong's direct manner and had a hundred or so Maris Piper potatoes peeled in no time. "That's a lot of potatoes," I said. "I thought that there were only 15 or so crew on board." Biltong gave me a look. "Just wait and see. These bastards can eat and what they don't eat they will get for breakfast tomorrow. I make a mean Bubble and Squeak." I noticed that he had been slicing cabbage and carrots. They would go into the potato mix along with some salt and pepper and a few eggs to bind them to make a hearty breakfast. So far so good. Biltong reached into the back of one of the cabinets into what he called his pantry, but was more like a few boxes stacked on top of each other. "Here," he said. "This is where I keep my supply of biltong. You are welcome to it but don't let any of the crew know. If they find out they will demolish the lot in an hour." I smiled gratefully. "Thank you."

Biltong is dried meat of almost any kind. Beef is the most common but they also use ostrich, in fact they will use any kind of game that they can get their hands on. The meat, it has to be red meat, is dredged through a mix of salt, coriander, cumin and garlic powder and then left to marinate for a couple of days in red wine vinegar. Many homes in South Africa will have a biltong box which holds a pride of place. It is usually shown off to visitors much as a new born baby would be. It's essentially a box with an extractor fan. The meat is hung with the fan going which sucks any moisture out of the air in the box, and after a

few days you have a delicious snack. I took a piece from Biltong and with my pen knife sliced off a chunk. It was salty and good. "You like that?" Biltong asked. I nodded and took another slice. "It's baboon. My first try with baboon. I was starting to think that Mr. Biltong and I might have a good time feeding the crew."

I had noticed that the SS Dabulamanzi was bound for Madagascar initially, and then on to Vietnam, Singapore and Jakarta. I couldn't wait to see those places and taste their exotic food. Dinner was served at 6. That was where I got to meet the Captain and the rest of the crew for the first time. The Captain and First Mate were white; the rest were either black or Cape Colored, the latter being the mixed race people that called Cape Town and surrounding areas home. The Captain introduced himself but that was the end of the niceties. We sat and shoveled as much food down as we could. Clean-up and dish washing was done on a rotating basis. The Captain, an Afrikaans man by the name of de Wet, seemed like a humorless chap. There was something about him that I didn't trust. If two years in the military had taught me anything, other than how to load a tank and fire a machine gun, it had taught me how to judge character. If you are on a battlefield where the enemy is lobbing grenades your way, you need to know who was with you and if you could trust them. From the outset I didn't trust de Wet and I wasn't quite sure why.

Biltong and I, as was tradition or so I was told, got to do the first round of dishes. Biltong scraped plates keeping the ingredients for Bubble and Squeak separate. "It's always good to get a head start on breakfast prep," he said.

We had left the dock earlier in the afternoon. There was no fanfare. Mum and Dad had driven me to the ship, said their goodbyes and left. Alongside our itinerary was a rudimentary fax that showed the weather. To my untrained eye it looked fairly benign. A High Pressure system stood between Durban and

Madagascar. Good beach weather for those surfing Vetchies Pier off Durban, good weather for shipping, but not great for sailing. High pressure meant no wind. I was tired and climbed into my bunk. My last thoughts just before I entered the 'land of nod' were of the night before. It seems that Liz had gained some experience in bed while I was away shooting Communists.

The SS Dabulamanzi was owned by one of South Africa's business tycoons. His name was Gordon Renny and he seemed to have his finger in just about every pie, shipping being one of them. I remember reading somewhere that he was able to get the rights to build Holiday Inn's in South Africa and they had been popping up all over the place. I learned later, after it all happened and the death toll was taken, that one of his biggest money makers, in addition to shipping, were Rennies antacids. His company sold them by the truckload. South Africa was on the move. The young would-be tycoons needed a clean and comfortable place to stay on an overnight trip, and if their business deals didn't pan out as hoped, they needed the antacid tablets.

The Bubble and Squeak was a hit for breakfast. Biltong and I cooked up three dozen eggs and toasted two loaves of bread. The coffee was instant, actually it wasn't really coffee, it was chicory which tastes like coffee, but I presumed was cheaper. The crew seemed happy. On my way back to my bunk I took a look at the weather fax. A new one had been posted. There was a small weather system to the southeast of where we were sailing. It looked ominous. The isobars were tightly packed whereas the isobars for the High Pressure were loose and seemingly drawn at random. I made a mental note to keep an eye on things, but truthfully, weather forecasting was a bit above my pay grade.

That night at dinner Captain de Wet spoke briefly of some bad weather in the forecast. I guess that I was right about the low pressure cluster that I had seen on the fax. The following morning

the system was closer to where we were and according to the note that accompanied the chart, it was on a path that would intersect with ours in about 36 hours. "My first storm at sea," I thought. I could hardly wait.

Now, they say that hindsight is 20:20. I have no clue where they got the 20:20 from. There must be an explanation somewhere. My glee at the prospect of a gale at sea was quickly diminished as the ship heaved in a building swell, and I heaved into the toilet bowl. "Come on," Biltong said. "We have work to do."

Things were not very pretty. Fortunately Biltong had also checked the weather chart and had narrowed down dinner choices to either soup or a 'make-it-yourself' sandwich. Most of the crew opted for a slice of plain bread and a tiny bit of soup. "Pussies," biltong said. I noticed that he was tucking into a large roast beef sandwich and a full bowl of soup. "I always maintain," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "I maintain that you should never face a storm on an empty stomach." He handed me a quarter sandwich from which I took a bite and then immediately threw up. "Go and get some rest," Biltong said. From my experience this thing is only going to intensify. I bet by tomorrow morning we will be riding out a full-on gale." The idea of a big storm no longer appealed to me and I gratefully found my sleeping bag.

I felt the ship heave and strain through the night and by the time a milky dawn made a valiant attempt to light the eastern sky I could see that we were in the thick of things. I dragged myself from my bunk and then dragged myself to the galley. The ship was lurching all over the place. I found Biltong hanging on. He seemed to be enjoying himself. "The boys are getting cereal and toast but don't make too much. We are going to chuck what's not eaten to the fish, or the crew are going to feed them the same but with some gastric acid added. I have sailed with some of these buggers before. They are good seamen but a bad storm can

dampen their spirits.” Only five people showed up for breakfast. Biltong was right. We chucked most of the leftovers overboard and saw three of the crew each make a rapid exit from the mess. The fish were going to get well fed. Only one small Cape Colored man whose name I didn’t remember polished off the breakfast and came back for seconds.

The Captain came on the intercom around 9. “This storm is going to intensify,” he said. My suggestion is that you all stay put in your bunks until further notice. First Mate Jacobus and myself will guide the ship for the next few hours. And Biltong. No need for meals. Crew can help themselves if you just leave a pot of soup on the stove but be sure to lash it down tight. The forecast is for things to get a lot worse.” I helped Biltong with the soup and then gratefully found my sleeping bag. I was really starting to miss Liz’s soft touch. I took a bucket with me and for the next couple of hours threw up until there was nothing left in my poor, tortured stomach.

I braced myself in my bunk holding on tight as the ship crashed and slammed its way through an overcast day with occasional sheets of rain. I was trying to doze off when I heard the engines shudder. Instead of heading into the waves we were suddenly beam-on and the SS Dabulamanzi rolled dramatically. I thought for a moment that we were going to capsize but it was only Captain de Wet changing course so that instead of going directly into the waves, he was putting the waves on our stern. We were going to lose some hard earned distance toward Madagascar, but I guess that their reasoning was that it would be better to arrive late and beaten, than to not arrive at all. As soon as the waves were on our stern the motion changed and I felt a little better. Maybe I was finding my sea legs. I wanted to take a look at the ocean. I wanted to see what a real mid-ocean gale looked like. Biltong had already confirmed that it felt as bad as anything he had ever experienced.

I grabbed my sea boots and foul weather gear and made my way along the narrow corridor that led to an even narrower set of wrought iron stairs. I was grateful that the corridor was not wide; there would have been too much room to bounce from side to side. I braced myself and made my way up the stairs. At the top was a heavy steel door that led to the deck. I didn’t want Captain de Wet or Jacobus seeing me, but I wanted to go out on the deck to get a first hand experience of how it felt.

The door was hard to open. The suction from the wind on the outside made it a challenge but I finally got it open. The sight that greeted me was beyond spectacular. The ocean, which just a few days earlier had been fairly benign, was whipped up into some sort of hell. The tops of the waves were peeling off and being flung over the ship. Despite the noise of the wind and waves it was eerily quiet. I stood for a while just taking it all in. We were definitely heading downwind and the ship was surfing the huge cresting rollers. I could tell when the ship was going faster than the engines were propelling it. The props cavitated, sending shudders through the steel hull and making the sound like a pack of hyenas being slaughtered. I was mesmerized.

I was about to go back inside when I saw an unusually large wave coming up from astern. It built until it appeared, to me at least, to be as high as the small block of flats that was on the road that led my parents home. It kept building. The SS Dabulamanzi rose as the massive swell lifted the stern and then it took off down the face of the wave. I hung on. I was thinking a little of Liz. While I was away in the army she had attended Law School. She was bright and going places. Her long legs and olive skin would only help. It was during my daydream that I heard a loud bang. Well let me put that a little differently. There was an excruciatingly loud bang followed by a few more. I could feel the ship shudder and then slow down; and then I noticed that

the bow was not rising like it had done after previous waves. It was almost as if the ship had stopped dead in the water. Then I realized that it had stopped dead in the water. The bow was down and the stern rising. Back aft the propellers were making a terrible sound as they were suddenly half in and half out of the water. Still the bow kept on going down. I didn't need a textbook to tell me that we were going to sink.

Just then the Captain came over the intercom. "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday" he shouted into the mic. Mayday, Mayday. This is the SS Dabulamanzi." He gave some coordinates and then repeated that his ship was sinking. Almost as an afterthought he transmitted a message to the crew. "We need to abandon ship," he yelled into the mic. Crew of the SS Dabulamanzi we need to abandon ship. All assemble at the stern. The SS Dabulamanzi is going down.

GORDON RENNY DID NOT become a business tycoon by being a nice guy. In his wake, so to speak, he left unpaid bills, and half done projects, those that looked at some point like they would not turn a profit. He would just walk away leaving partners and vendors holding the bag which sometimes was filled with rotten eggs. It was well known among his employees that they were to cut corners wherever possible and if there was a way, to cook the books. Captain de Wet had been an employee at Renny's Holdings for almost two decades. He knew his way around a balance sheet and he knew how to strike a bargain. He had done just so with the SS Dabulamanzi two years earlier when he took it to Durban Shipyard for repairs to the hull, mainly repairs to the forward section of the hull where many of the ring frames, which are part of the overall structure of the ship, were badly cracked. He had bargained the team at the Shipyard down and down until they gave up and told him to take his ship elsewhere. That was when Captain de Wet struck. Instead of a top notch job his offer

was for them to do a quick and dirty job on the repair for the same amount they were haggling over. One small but important piece of information that de Wet knew about was that Durban Shipyard had an underwriter from Lloyds Insurance tightly in their pockets. He knew that the underwriter would sign off on just about anything so long as he got his Christmas bonus. A deal was made and the ship repaired, only it wasn't repaired properly. A lot of red spray paint covered up a multitude of sins, but true to form the Lloyds underwriter signed off that the ship was 'as good as new' and de Wet and his crew went back to the business of moving cargo. Gordon Renny was happy. The repair had come in under budget and had taken less time to complete than what had been projected. The SS Dabulamanzi was soon back out on the high seas without incident; until now.

THE SHIP SURFED DOWN the face of the massive swell and at the bottom it collided with the wave ahead. The hull buckled and split like a watermelon that had been left out in the sun on a hot day. There were no watertight compartments built into the ship even though it had become standard practice. Captain de Wet and Gordon Renny had lobbied hard to grandfather the ship in so that it didn't need the watertight compartments. There was only a steel door between the flood of water and the rest of the ship. As the forward compartment filled, the bow went down and as the bow went down, the stern lifted. Those crew that had their bunks well forward would likely have drowned within a few minutes.

The crew started to scramble up from below. It must have been an alien world to them. At least I had some time to adjust to the raging gale and the fact that the ship was going down. Most of them were desperately trying to get their lifejackets on; all the while the SS Dabulamanzi was slipping lower into the water. There was a contingent led by Joseph who were determined to

get off the ship before it went down. He was already untying the lines that secure the lifeboat. "Who's coming with me?" he yelled. "I'm ready to go." There was no way that I was getting in the lifeboat but three of the first crew on deck jumped into the wooden boat. Joseph was in charge. He finished unlashng it and then, with the crew in place, he started to lower the boat. I knew something wasn't right but couldn't quite put my finger on it. Suddenly it dawned on me. The liferaft would have been tethered to the ship with just enough scope to lower it to the water with the ship horizontal. At this point the ship was far from horizontal; the stern was sticking skyward. I scrambled across the deck holding onto anything within reach. I was halfway across the deck when I heard the first screams. I scrambled the rest of the way and peered over the side. What I saw was a disaster. Joseph had run out of scope and couldn't lower the liferaft all the way to the water. It was starting to swing badly and then as quickly as it started, it was over. The lifeboat swung into the side of the ship. The men screamed again and I watched the lifeboat swing out over the ocean, and then swing back toward the hull with more intensity than before. It crashed into the steel hull and splintered. Two men, I couldn't see who they were, two men on the port side of the lifeboat got smashed as it hit the hull, but the damage was not quite done. The small boat swung back out over the ocean, this time further than before and when it swung back it was all over for the rest of the crew. The lifeboat hit the ship and disintegrated while the crew were splattered against the hull before falling into the ocean. If they weren't already dead from the impact, they would drown in a matter of minutes.

On the port side of the ship there were a few more men trying to do the same thing. I yelled at them but they were not listening. They were intent on getting the lifeboat launched. Their demise was even worse. The captain still had the ship in gear and the

prop was spinning. The lifeboat swung aft and connected with one of the blades. In seconds the men and the lifeboat were shredded. I kept hanging on but I could feel that the stern was still rising and it was getting more and more difficult for me to get a grip. There was no way to stop the inevitable. The ship was going down and those of us still left on board were all going down with it.

Then I saw something that, had it not been so absurd, might have been funny. Biltong had dragged himself out of the companionway onto the deck. In one hand he had a bag and once he found a place to brace himself, he sat and opened it. The bag was full of biltong. I lowered myself to where he was. "Biltong," I yelled. "The ship is sinking." He just looked at me and gave me a wry smile. "Yes I know this, but I don't want to waste the biltong so I am going to eat it. Do you want some?" Behind him I saw Captain de Wet. His uniform was still impeccable, the pips on his shoulders all in order, but his face was ashen. The ship is sinking," he said. "You two need to cut the ties on the liferafts and get them ready to deploy. We need to wait until just before the motherfucker goes under and then pull the lines to inflate the rafts. I am not going to die and I am not going down with the ship. Turns out he was wrong on both accounts."

Then it started to rain. It came down heavy and warm and any visibility that we had was down to almost zero. Behind the Captain, First Mate Jacobus was crying. "I have a wife," he wailed. "She needs a husband. We are all going to die." As he yelled there was a loud sucking sound. The SS Dabulamanzi was going under. "Pull the cord on those liferafts," the Captain yelled. Biltong and I had them released and they were ready to go, but it was futile. Within seconds I could feel the water around my feet and then I was getting sucked under. I thought of Liz for a brief moment. I thought of Becky and my Mum and Dad and Violet and then I felt



a sharp pain under my armpits. My lifejacket was trying to rise to the surface while the suction of the ship was pulling me in the opposite direction. It had only taken ten seconds and I was still holding my breath. Suddenly the suction of the ship released me and I bobbed to the surface. My head was above water and I took a deep breath and looked around. The wind was still howling but it looked like the rain was easing. Suddenly, right next to me, Biltong surfaced. He saw me and yelled, "I can't swim." I swam over to where he was bobbing and grabbed him. Again, if it wasn't a life or death situation I would have laughed. He was still holding onto the bag of Biltong. Suddenly, about 20 feet from where we were flailing, First Mate Jacobus shot to the surface. There was just the three of us and a pile of debris that had broken free from the ship. The three of us were alive, but things did not look good for any of us.

The rain stopped as abruptly as it had started and it felt as if the wind had abated a little. The sea state was still horrendous. Jacobus swam over to where Biltong and I were treading water, well to be more specific, I was treading water while Biltong hung on. I could feel his nails cutting into my skin. First Mate Jacobus said, "the last weather forecast that we received just before we started to sink showed that the front was very fast moving and would be past us in just a few hours. This was good news, but not really. We were three wet and exhausted men treading water in the middle of a vast ocean. I could feel that Biltong's grip was not cutting into me anymore and then I noticed the blood. He must have cut himself when the ship sucked him under. He looked at me and said, "I am leaving you now. Please take the rest of the biltong and enjoy it someplace and think of me." He shoved the bag of soggy meat into my hand and then let go. He drifted away from Jacobus and myself and drowned. There were just two of us left. I turned to Jacobus. "We are really fucked now aren't we?" He nodded. "Yes I guess so," was all he said.

We bobbed in the awful confused sea and I had time to really contemplate my death. I was surprised that Liz was the one that was foremost on my mind. I knew that my parents and Violet would cope with my death, but Becky and Liz were another matter.

First Mate Jacobus was getting weak, his voice faltering as he tried to speak. "My vrou," he said. "Ag I forgot that you don't speak Afrikaans. My wife, she was already having an affair so I doubt that she will miss me, but I have a dog, a ridgeback. Tough little fucker. He's going to miss me." I looked at Jacobus. He was crying. "His name is bloubos. In Engels, sorry, in English it means Blue Bush. I know that it's a stupid name but my vrou and I had drunk most of a bottle of Klippies rum and coke when he was just a pup, and we gave him a silly name. He seemed to like it especially when we were serving him his dinner."

"We are going to make it somehow," I said, not feeling very sure of what I was saying even as the words came out of my mouth. "I am not a believer in that sort of way, but I believe that we are going to be OK." Just then I felt something brush up against my leg. Sharks. I knew it. I had seen quite a bit of blood in the water and knew that they would be making themselves available. I didn't say anything but Jacobus offered. "This foking cut on my leg is bleeding bad. It's going to attract sharks." I saw then that most of the blood was coming from him. I thought that it was coming from Biltong. The wind was dying and the sea state was not as bad as it had been, but it was still rough. The sky to the west was black with squalls but I knew that they were moving away from us. To the east it was quite bright. I was not sure if we would survive the night.

Just then, as if a gift from someone who cared, a liferaft came crashing out of the water. It must have been dragged down with the ship and had finally freed itself. It shot out of the water and landed a couple of hundred feet from where we were. Jacobus

had his head down and he was trying to stay alive. He hadn't seen the liferaft. "Jacobus," I said, "can you swim?" He gave me a blank stare. "Yes of course I can swim," he said. "That's a foking stupid question. What you expect me to swim all the way back to Durban?" He looked so forlorn. "No," I said. "Just as far as that liferaft." He gave me a dazed look. "You are talking kak now," he said. "There is no foking liferaft."

I was worried that the wind would take the raft. "It's there," I said, but I was exhausted. "You can swim for it if you like or you can drown but I am going to take my chances." I started to swim when I realized that Jacobus couldn't swim. Even as he was in a life or death predicament he had been too proud to admit it. I was not sure where he was injured but it stopped him from swimming. He turned and saw the liferaft. "I won't make it," he said. "You jus go."

"Mate," I said. "I have been on the battlefield in Angola. We never leave soldiers behind. Roll onto your back." He did and I grabbed him by his lifejacket. Now I am not a good swimmer myself, but I was full of adrenaline and started to tow him in the direction of the liferaft. It was starting to get dark and I was starting to get desperate. Fortunately the raft was staying in place and we were making progress. The sun set spluttering and sizzling in the ocean just as I got my hand on the liferaft. I knew that I could get aboard but I had no idea how I was going to get Jacobus into the raft. I needn't have worried. He had his own adrenaline squirting through his blood and he pulled himself over the lip of the raft and flopped onto the soft floor. We clambered inside and closed the little zippered door behind us. It was a total mess, soaking wet and the raft was bobbing like a crazy lady at the fair bobbing for apples. I was exhausted. Then I saw the extent of Jacobus's wound. Something had almost severed his right thigh through to the bone. It was still bleeding profusely

and the water in the raft turned crimson. I dug around and found a First Aid kit. It was wrapped in a plastic bag and the contents were dry. I found a bandage and some scissors. I cut his pants off and bandaged the wound as best I could. "Jacobus," I said. "I'm fucked. I need some rest. Do you think that you will be OK for a while?" He just nodded, but didn't look too certain that all would be well. Despite the water in the liferaft I fell asleep and woke up sometime in the night. The wind had abated completely and the seas had calmed to a manageable state. For the first time since the sinking I thought that we might be OK. What I tried to put out of my mind was that we were alone in a rubber raft bobbing along in the middle of nowhere. I would check in the morning to see if there was a radio and flares in the Emergency Bag. Jacobus was sleeping, his face contorted. His pain must have been horrible. I fell asleep without knowing that my ordeal had just started.

The forecast had been right. It was a fast moving storm and it had moved on. There was still a lazy swell rolling through. I unzipped the small flap that served as an entrance and peered out. It was hard to believe that it was the same ocean. It was a brilliant turquoise blue and in some places there were patches of calm water. I had been careful to not wake Jacobus who was in a fetal position in a puddle of water. Every now and then he would gasp and moan.

I sat for a while trying to make sense of what had just happened. Yes it had been a violent storm, but ships don't just sink. I watched the waves and felt the building tropical heat until I felt Jacobus stir. He moaned and swore. He opened one eye and caught me looking at him. "How do I look?" he asked.

"You look about as good as I know you feel," I replied. "Like shit." Jacobus tried to smile but he was in too much pain. His wound had bled through the bandage and I could tell by the gray look on his face that he had lost a lot of blood. I scouted around and

found a second First Aid kit. Had I taken the package and thrown it overboard Jacobus might have lived, but I didn't. I rummaged around and found a separate zip-lock bag. On the outside was written; morphine. Use only in cases of dire emergency. I turned my back to Jacobus so that he could not see the bag. I wanted to try and assess what his chances were without the heavy pain drugs, especially in his weakened state. Jacobus said simply, "I know why the ship sank." I hadn't asked and was wary of the answer. "The Captain, the fucker. He along with Renny took the boat to Durban Shipyard for repairs to the bow. The ship had been damaged on a previous trip to Madagascar. I was there. They did a crap cheap repair on the bow and then painted over things. It's how Renny operates. He tries to squeeze every cent out of every deal and de Wet was always happy to do his bidding. I knew when we left Durban that the ship was compromised but went along with it." Jacobus was trying to tell a story but between sentences he was gasping for air, trying hard to endure the pain. "We would not have had a problem sailing to Madagascar and the other ports but that cold front fucked us up badly. De Wet even commented on it when the brunt of the storm hit. He turned the ship around so that we would go downwind to take some load off the bow. The fucker knew what might happen and now he's dead and the crew are dead. It's just you and me Engelsman."

I managed to bale out the water and with the tropical sun beating down things were a little better. I was getting hungry and thirsty. Then I remembered. I still had Berties bag of biltong. It was sodden but I took the pieces of meat out and laid them on the side of the liferaft where the direct sun could dry them. I also managed to find a little water still in the First Aid kit. It was very rudimentary but seemed to make a couple of cupfuls of water in the few hours of sunlight that we had before the air changed and I could feel night approaching. I gave Jacobus a cup of water and a piece of biltong and did the same for myself. I was really worried.

Jacobus seemed to be fading in and out of consciousness. He wasn't saying much. Just moaning and repeating his dog's name to himself. I figured that I would see how the night went and if he was any worse in the morning, I would shoot him with some morphine.

It was suddenly dark. I scanned the horizon looking for lights but there was nothing. Just a dark, empty ocean. I fell into a fitful sleep. Jacobus was out. The next morning he was no better. "I am in some serious pain Engelsman," he said. "Very serious. I am not sure how much longer I can hang on." It was time to give him a shot of morphine. I looked over at him to tell him what I was going to do but he seemed either unconscious or asleep. I pushed him gently until I could get a clear shot at his backside. Jacobus just moaned. "Call me Jaco," he said. "That's what my friends call me. If you have morphine, you are my friend."

There were no instructions with the drug, but there were some calibrated markings on the syringe. I forced the air out of it and filled it with morphine. Jacobus said, "have you ever done this before?" I shook my head. "They gave us some rudimentary training when I was in the army but I didn't really pay attention. It's going to be okay." Jaco rolled onto his stomach and I shoved the needle in his butt as gently as I could. I heard Jacobus exhale and that was it.

He was dead. I had killed him.

There was now just me, the only survivor. I moved Jacobus away from our little zipper door so that I could access it easier and for the hundredth time scanned the horizon for ships. I was sure, well as sure as I could be, that de Wet had relayed our position as part of the Mayday call and that there would be a search party looking for us, but in the meantime Jacobus was starting to smell. Rigor mortis had set in and he was starting to bloat. I had no idea what to do. I wanted to keep his body for his wife, but after

three days in the tropical sun life in the raft was getting to be unbearable. I had almost finished the biltong and almost caught a fish. There was a piece of fishing line and a lure with the rest of the First Aid package and I had noticed what looked like mahi mahi swimming under the raft. I hooked one but he/she shook off the lure and swam away. As I settled in for my fourth night at sea I thought that I might have seen some running lights from a ship off on the horizon, but I couldn't be sure. There were some flares in with the rest of the medical supplies. I grabbed one and tried to set it off but it was a non-starter. By the time I had finished buggering around with the flare the lights had disappeared.

Somehow I knew that I was going to survive. I felt that I had to. I needed to tell the story. 15 people were dead and I was the only survivor that could explain what had happened. My fifth day in the raft was just like the previous four except that some wind had picked up overnight and there were some squalls around. I had rigged a system that would allow me to collect water if it rained. I sat for a while thinking of Liz and my family and looking at the dead body of Jacobus. I had made the decision during the night that I was going to dump him over the side. His corpse made life in the raft more unbearable than it already was. I was trying to muster up the courage when I heard a faint throb. The sound was coming through the water. I looked around and there was nothing to be seen on the horizon. "I must be going mad," I thought.

I had no idea if Jacobus was a religious man or not, but being Afrikaans chances were that he was. I wasn't remotely a believer but this was not about me. I said the Lord's Prayer, the only bit of religious text that I knew, and then hauled Jacobus over to the opening. I had managed to get him up onto the side of the liferaft and half into the water when I heard a voice. "Ahoy, ahoy is there anyone onboard the liferaft?" I was sure that I was hearing things when all of a sudden a small boat appeared at the entrance to

the raft. "Ahoy there." There were three people in the small boat. It was the man on the bow that was calling out. I gave them a thumbs up and let Jacobus fall back into the raft. It all happened very rapidly after that.

They took me in their boat to a freighter that was standing by a couple of hundred yards away. The Captain had me on board in no time and I was hustled down to a small room near the bow of the freighter. "You will be okay now," the Captain said. "Let Marie, our medic, go over you. You look okay to me but she will find out if you are or not. After that they will bring you to the bridge and we can discuss what happened and what we should do next." I nodded gratefully. "We have your raft on board and we recovered the body. Let Marie take a look at you and then there is a big bottle of South African brandy on the bridge. You can explain what happened. I am presuming that you were part of the crew of the SS Dabulamanzi.

I joined the Captain on the bridge and between us we polished off the brandy. Well to be honest, the Captain had killed most of the bottle. I was just an excuse for him to drink. Add to that I was so dehydrated that after a couple of drinks I felt lightheaded and nauseous. I was still ecstatic that I had been rescued and probably said more than I should have. I had no idea. We were well hammered when I told the Captain that I had planned to get rid of the body. He just laughed and thought it was all just funny and I never gave it another thought. He told me that his ship was bound for Port Elizabeth. "We usually go to Durban," he said. "But for some reason we are going to PE this time. We can drop you off there. You may have some issues with Customs. I presume that you no longer have your passport."

I barely have the shirt on my back," I replied. The nurse had given me a spare shirt. The Captain continued. "We are on a tight schedule so we will have to keep going but never mind. By the

way I radioed Renny's Holdings and told them that I had you and that their ship had sunk." The Captain laughed. "When I told them they acted surprised as if Renny's ships would never sink. I am surprised that it took so long for them to lose a ship. Their fleet is a mess. I know Renny well. He's a cheapskate as well as a cheat, but we go back two decades. I used to work for him." He took another hit of brandy and asked, "Is there anyone that you would like to call?" I thought for a moment. "No one on land probably even knows that our ship has sunk. It will be better if I tell them myself."

Three days later we docked in Port Elizabeth. There were some issues with Customs but they figured it out quite quickly. They also called the newspapers and by the time I was released back into South Africa there was a press contingent waiting for me. I had managed to call Liz and my parents. They were completely astonished by what I told them. They were also very supportive and Dad sprung for a plane ticket. I felt safe at our kitchen table. Violet baked my favorite dessert, milk tart and I explained everything that had happened. Dad just sat there shaking his head and after a while ventured, "seems like you were safer in the army getting hand grenades lobbed at you than trying to cross an ocean." I couldn't disagree.

The story was front page news for a couple of days mostly because the ship belonged to Gordon Renny and any dirt on him was good fodder for the news. I was mentioned and gave a couple of interviews, but soon the story dropped below the fold on the front page and after less than a week was lost somewhere in the paper.

Liz and I became an item again. We were having lunch at the Point Yacht Club in Durban when it started to hit me. I hadn't realized how much I had suppressed the whole saga. I had survived the sinking of a ship; 16 of my crewmates had not. I remembered

the pledge that I had made to myself and them. Should I survive I would tell their story and seek compensation for their families. "I told Liz what was on my mind." She placed her hand on my arm and said, "I knew that your mind was in overdrive. You were just pushing your food around on the plate." Just then Sammy came over with a bowl of brussel sprouts. My favorite. "These are for you," he said. "The manager said that there would be no charge." I smiled. Sammy was our favorite waiter and seemed pleased that he had made me happy. "I said to Liz. "okay it's time." She knew what I meant. "I know quite a few lawyers that will take your case pro bono. Let's get started."

THERE WAS A THREE JUDGE PANEL that would hear the case. My lawyer was working pro bono. His name was Dereck Atkinson and had taken on many cases pro bono. "They are usually the most satisfying," he said. "Especially if you win and I feel sure that we can win this one."

Liz had received permission from her professor to take time off to help with the case. Dad paid for a private investigator who had been able to get some paperwork from Durban Shipyard. They were, of course, reluctant to discuss anything but once there was a court order in place they had no choice. The evidence that they provided was damning. What was worse was some information that we uncovered about Durban Liferaft Company. There was one person willing to talk, there always is. He was a young kid with pimples and a lop of blond hair that hung over his left eye. He looked like a surfer to me. He explained how the company cut corners. He remembered when the liferaft from the SS Dabulamanzi came in.

We were sitting in the PI's tiny office. Liz was there along with Dereck. Dad too. He wanted to see how his money was being spent. It didn't take too long before the kid from the Durban

Liferaft Company came right to the point. "OK," he said looking directly at Dereck. "I am willing to talk but I want some kind of immunity. I know a lot that goes on at that place and much of it is crooked." Dereck took a while to answer. He leaned back in his seat before he spoke. "I can most definitely get you immunity. That won't be a problem but it will take some time. I will have to go through the court and that always takes time. We are looking to get to the bottom of this case as quickly as possible. How about for now I give you my word that I will get you immunity? We can put it in writing if you like." The kid looked a little skeptical. "I dunno," he said. "As I said, a lot of crooked shit went down in that place and I don't trust them if I speak out." There was some shuffling off to the side then Liz said, "I give you my word as well. You will be completely protected." I looked at Liz. She was smiling on the inside but her face was blank. The kid was nearly there. I looked him directly in the eyes. "You are a surfer, right?" The kid nodded. "Yes I am. How did you know?" It was actually quite easy. He was wearing a band around his left wrist. On the band two words were written. Two words that surfers live by; Hang 10. "I used to surf Vetchies," I said. "I haven't been able to get there for a while. I have been in the army. Does it still break to the right when the southeaster blows?" The kid looked at me with new respect. "Okay," he said. "Here is what I know. I know a lot more but this is the most important piece of information regarding the SS Dabulamanzi." I leaned in closer and he continued. "I was given the task of servicing their liferaft. Servicing is 90% of what I do there. My boss looked at me and said, 'this one is a 4. I knew what he meant. A 10 meant a thorough inspection. A 4 meant that I just needed to do a quick scan of the liferaft to make sure that there were not any holes or any serious chafe, that kind of thing. That was it in terms of inspection. The rest, like servicing the First Aid kits, was a no-brainer. I didn't have to do anything other than issue a new certificate confirming that the meds and all the other

stuff in the First Aid kits had been changed and replaced with new meds." I was about to speak when Dereck put his hand on my arm. "Let the kid go on," he said.

"I never checked the First Aid kits. I just issued a new certificate stating that I had replaced everything. Of course when we do that we bill the client for new medication etc. I had worked on the liferaft from SS Dabulamanzi and we never once changed out the meds. Not once. Some of that shit had been in there for a decade at least." He was going to continue when Dereck stood up. "Okay," he said, "what you are saying is this. Some of the meds like morphine was at least 10 years old?" The kid thought for a moment and then said, "at least." Dereck slammed the desk. "That's our smoking gun. The morphine had more than likely gone off. If Bart injected Jacobus with morphine that was that old, he was signing his death warrant. That's the reason he died immediately." His words hung in the air. No one said a word. "Between the unseaworthy ship and the lethal morphine there is a lot to answer for. Those fuckers knew what they were doing all in an effort to make more money, human life be damned" There was nothing left to say. Liz took my hand. "You could never have known," she said to me. "It's more than likely from what Dereck has said that you killed Jacobus." Dereck took the kid by the hand and said, "you have my word. Thank you."

Liz and I went to the Smugglers Inn for a drink. The place is a real dive bar. After midnight was when the strippers came out and earned their keep. We were early and just in for a beer. "I'm buying," said Liz. "It looks like you need a beer or would you like something stronger?" I shrugged. "Can I have a triple rum, just on some ice." The drink arrived and I downed it. The reality that I had killed Jacobus was starting to settle in. Liz had already signaled the barman and he had another triple lined up. I took it a bit slower this time. Liz waited for me to talk.

The rum had hit the bottom of my gut when I said, “I heard that the Captain and some of the crew of the ship that rescued me have been asked to be part of the defense. Liz nodded. She already knew about it. “I don’t see what they can offer,” she said.

“You see,” I took Liz by the hand. “There is something you don’t know. I never thought that it would be relevant; until now.” Liz leaned in closer. I downed the dregs of my rum and took the next one that Liz had already ordered. “You see, here is the problem. I never heard the ship approaching. Well I may have heard it but by that time I was more than a little out of it. The first I knew that I was going to be rescued was when the crew showed up in their little boat.”

“How is this relevant?” Liz asked. I hesitated for a bit. “You not drinking?” Liz ordered herself a beer. I came right out and said it. “When the little boat came around the liferaft I was in the middle of dumping Jacobus overboard. Another 30 seconds or so and he would have been in the water. As soon as I saw the little boat I dragged Jacobus back into the liferaft. You can see the problem right?” Liz nodded. “We make our case that the morphine had expired. They counter and say that it was not the morphine that killed him. It was you and you were trying to get rid of his body.”

“Yes, “ I said in a quiet voice. “And there were three of them in the boat. If they all testify that I was dumping the body our case gets turned on its head.” The strippers were just coming on stage when we staggered out of the bar. Well I speak for myself. Liz was sober. I was beyond drunk. Liz called a taxi and I slept for 24 hours. The stress was getting to me.

Dereck was going after a settlement of R8,200 000 for the crew that died and a little additional for me for my pain and suffering. I asked if there was any way to exclude Captain de Wet from any settlement. I didn’t feel that he deserved a penny. He knew about the compromised ship but went along with things to make

an extra few bucks. Dereck was sympathetic but said, “Let’s not complicate matters.”

Our case was simple. The SS Dabulamanzi was unseaworthy when it shipped out from Durban. The principals knew that it was not fit for the voyage, including Gordon Renny, yet they let the ship go anyway. It was gross negligence on their part and the result was 17 people dead. We wanted compensation for the families of the crew that had perished and we wanted some punitive amount added because of the negligence shown by Renny and his cahoots. The punitive amount would be donated to a general fund to help seamen that suffered from stress and drug and alcohol addiction. We would need to interview a number of organizations and choose the one that got the most value for the Rand. That was it. Nothing too complicated.

In addition to Renny Holdings we were holding Durban Shipyard and Durban Liferaft Company responsible for the parts that they played in the whole sordid ordeal.

The shipyard, liferaft company and Renny banded together to fight our charges. To them it was not going to be a simple open and shut case; they planned to use every dirty tactic in the book. While they used the head of Renny Holdings legal department, a man by the name of Hofenberg as lead counsel, they also hired a bulldog who had managed to get a class action lawsuit thrown out. In that particular case the Plaintiffs were suing because they had all been sexually harassed by bosses further up the food chain. Bulldogs counter was, in a nutshell, that the women had all basically asked for it by dressing provocatively. The man had no scruples and in fact had counter sued looking for compensation for his clients for the “loss of reputation” suffered by the men named in the suit. We had no pollyanna illusions about the whole matter when we arrived in court on the first day of proceedings.

Dereck laid out his case. In addition to gross negligence, there was a conspiracy between Renny Holdings, Durban Shipyard and Durban Liferaft Company to cut corners and fix the books wherever possible. He managed to draw Lloyds the Insurance company in stating that they knew that their 'man on the spot' was signing off of ships that were unseaworthy.

After a full day of testimony and arguments we were let go. Dereck, Liz and I grabbed a beer at the yacht club. "How do you think we are doing?" I asked. Dereck just shrugged. "You never know with cases like this. Those judges were not giving away anything." I nodded. "It seems like bullshit to me," I said. Liz took my hand. "I have come to realize that a lot of this is bullshit. The trick is to make it your own bullshit. I think that we are doing OK."

"I'm going to take off," I said. "Liz are you coming?" She nodded. Dereck said that he wanted to stay for another beer. Liz and I left the yacht club. It was a short walk to the train. Along the way there were some unlit patches and that was where they jumped us. There were three men wearing balaclavas. I don't think that they were expecting Liz. In 20 minutes they left both of us bloodied and bleeding and quite badly battered. I was sure that they were after money until one of them put a knife to my throat and said, "you need to drop this case or else you are going to end up dead. Your little girlfriend too." They took off. I checked on Liz. She was badly bruised and blood was streaming from a cut above her eye. I am quite sure that I didn't look any better.

It wasn't far back to the club. Dereck was still there nursing a beer at one of the corner tables. He jumped when I saw us. I explained what had happened. He said, "I was worried that something like this might happen. I didn't want to scare you." He was ushering us to his car. I can get you to the Emergency Room at Addington Hospital. I can ask the judges for a delay in the case and I can tell them that you were threatened and beaten

up presumably by the other side." He pulled up in front of the hospital and summoned a wheelchair for each of us. "We will be okay," I said. "You get some sleep and we will see you in court tomorrow."

The following morning we showed up in court on time. We were a mess wrapped and bandaged with blood seeping through some of the bandages. The judges didn't say anything. I thought that they would at least ask and it looked like one of the judges was going to say something when the courtroom door opened and a large man entered. It was Gordon Renny. He nodded to the judges and took a seat behind where we were sitting. The judges didn't say anything.

Renny is an imposing figure. For a start he's a big man and to add to his height he had a thick mane of white hair and sharp blue eyes. I could see why people were scared of him. He was there to intimidate me and frankly I was intimidated. He was there to make a point and his point was being made in a not so subtle way. The lead judge said, "Hofenberg. you have some things that you would like to tell the court as it relates to this case."

"Yes, your honor. We would like you to consider dismissing this case."

"On what grounds?"

"The Plaintiff is very unreliable and what he has testified to should not be taken into account. The lead judge leaned forward and looked at Hofenberg directly. "This had better be good," was all he said.

Hofenberg continued. The plaintiff is unstable. We believe, but in fact we are quite sure that he killed Jacobsen."

"How so and for what reason?"

"When my men came upon his liferaft he was trying to dump



Jacobsen's body into the water. I have three of my crew here who can testify to this." I hadn't noticed but the three chaps from the small boat had come into the courtroom. They looked very uncomfortable. "I don't see how this is relevant to anything," one of the judges said. "But I will hear you out. Choose one of your men to explain what he saw." Hofenberg asked Jose, a small Mexican man, to tell the court what he had seen. He was clearly unhappy and made a point of not looking my way. He explained to the judge what they had witnessed. The judges nodded. "You know that this is not relevant to the case before us. What else you got?"

Hofenberg said that the captain of the ship had some information that might interest the court. Captain Swanepoel was sworn in and then recounted what had happened on the bridge the night that I was rescued. He explained that we had polished off most of a bottle of brandy and that I had told him that I was planning on dumping the body.

The lead judge asked, "why would he want to kill the man? I doesn't make any sense to me." I could tell that the judge was getting frustrated. He summoned Hofenberg and Dereck to the bench. He looked Hofenberg squarely in the eye. "I have a mind to find you in contempt of this court," he said. "None of this is relevant. I told you this before you introduced the Captain yet you continued to bring a bogus witness in front of this court. Add to that your reasoning about running out of food is ridiculous. Who is going to kill his friend for a morsel and maybe, if he was lucky, half a cup of tepid water? If there is a case to be made one of the families of the surviving crew members should make their case and bring it to the court. It's a different matter altogether and you know it and you and I both know that all you are doing is creating a distraction."

The judge banged his gavel. "Court will adjourn until tomorrow,"

he said. Gordon Renny had been quiet during the court session but as soon as the court was adjourned he stopped by our table. He smiled at me. "I'm sorry what happened to you but ships get old you know. Insurance had signed off on the repairs so we were well within our rights to send it back out to sea." I just sat there startled. Renny leaned in closer, first glancing over his shoulder to make sure that the judges had left the courtroom. "I wouldn't mess with this any more," he said. "It's only going to end in tears. Look, here is my number. Call me and I will make you an offer for the discomfort that you suffered. That would be a smart move on your part. If you continue what you are doing, last night will look like a picnic." Dereck stood. Renny said, "I'm leaving. Just think about what I have said."

As he left he said quietly, "if you don't listen to what I have said you are going to be sorry." I could tell that even Dereck was intimidated, but not Liz. She stormed after him. "You are threatening my client," she said. "I will report you to the court." Gordon barely gave her a glance. "Are you out of diapers yet?" he asked. Liz stepped forward. I am not sure what she planned to do but one of the police officers stepped in. "Please take a seat," he said to Liz. Gordon had a smirk on his face. "Just think about it."

There was just Liz, Dereck and myself left in the courtroom. "Fucker," I said with more vehemence than I thought I had in me. "The fucker doesn't realize that this is not about me. I could give a shit about my settlement. I want the families of the crew to get some compensation for their suffering and loss."

It was just before the lunch break when things wrapped up. The lead judge said, "we will adjourn until tomorrow morning. We will have our decision then. He slammed his gavel and the three of them rose and departed."

The verdict was unanimous. The lead judge was visibly pissed at the Defense and he let Hofenberg know it. "That whole distraction

was uncalled for and you know it and I warned you. This case was not about character assassination. It was to get justice for the men that died that day aboard the SS Dabulamanzi. Your client is being charged with knowingly allowing one of his ships to go to sea in an unseaworthy condition.” He shuffled the papers on his desk and conferred with the other two judges.

We grant the Plaintiff the full compensation he was seeking on behalf of himself and the crew. In addition we order Durban Shipyard and Durban Liferaft company to each pay R1,000 000. Their licenses will be revoked as of now. I presume that there will be an appeal, but let me assure you, there is nothing to appeal. I would expect that the judgment monies be placed in an escrow until after the appeal. If there is an appeal then the money must be transferred within eight business days. If there is an appeal and your case does not have merit, then you will pay the settlement within 48 hours and it will include interest which will be at 14%. With that he banged his gavel and the three judges left the courtroom.

Liz, Dereck and myself went back to the yacht club to have a celebratory drink. Well, to be perfectly honest we may have had more than one. I had just ordered another round when Sammy came over. Mister there is a phone call for you in the bar. I looked at Liz and then went into the bar. The receiver was on the counter. It was Dad. He was hysterical. “You need to get out of town as quickly as possible. Don’t come home. Some goons were just here looking for you. They threatened me and your mother. It’s about that court case. As they left they fired a few shots at the house. One of them grazed Violet on the arm. If you come back they will kill you. Your Mum and me and Violet are going to leave town. I am not sure where we will go but we have to warn Becky and get out of here before we all get killed. I will call Dereck in a week and tell him where we are and he

can fill us in where you and Liz are, but I’m telling you to get out of Durban as fast as you can.

Liz and I moved to San Diego. Dereck had friends there. He used to race sailboats out of Marina del Rey for a few years. His friends Bill and Sue let us use their guest cottage. We felt safe until one evening a few days after we arrived in town Bill stopped by the cottage. “They got Dereck,” was all he said for a while. He was holding back tears. Then he added, “they shot him in the chest and in the neck. According to the police there had not been any kind of struggle but there was a note. I guess that it read, “We will find the other two and kill them no matter how long it takes.”

Liz and I sat in silence. Dereck knew how to reach Mum and Dad. He had not even told them where we were so effectively communication was cut off. I wanted to return to Durban but both Bill and Sue convinced me and Liz to stay put for a while. After a couple of weeks we took a plane to Gaborone in Botswana and rented a car to drive into South Africa. The first thing we saw were the newspaper headlines. “Businessman Renny in suicide attempt.”

In the late 70s there was a money drain with rich people setting up offshore bank accounts and stashing their fortunes far away from the sticky fingers of the South African government. Gordon Renny was no exception. Where he ran into trouble was when the Government made it illegal to have an offshore account and slapped some serious jail time on anyone caught with one. Gordon was caught. He was an obvious target. He said later that he was not worried about jail time. It was his reputation that he was concerned about. A few weeks earlier Renny Holdings had placed the settlement money into an escrow account. Hofenberg and some of the other lawyers associated the case, including the bulldog, felt that there was ample reason to dispute the verdict.

Gordon locked himself in his hotel room with two bottles of brandy and an array of pills. According to the official record he drank a bottle of brandy, popped some pills, drank the second bottle of brandy, slit his wrists, climbed on the bed and waited to die. When the hotel staff noticed that he hadn't left his room in days and hadn't answered the door, they forced their way in and found Gordon in a pool of blood, but still alive.

He was hospitalized for a week and then released. One of his passions was yacht racing and he decided to enter his boat called, funnily enough, Dabulamanzi, in the Cape Town to Rio race. Dabulamanzi was one of the largest boats in South Africa. Gordon hired a top skipper who assembled the best crew that he could find. His theory was that he would feel better after a month at sea. There was precedent. In the '71/72 Cape to Rio race Dutchman Kees Bruynzeel entered despite warnings from his doctor that he would not make it or would die shortly after. Kees had some serious heart problems but he ignored his doctors orders, packed a burial-at-sea kit took along a cardiac nurse and went on to win the race and live another five years.

Liz and I were nervous about being back in Durban. We made contact with one of the judges and explained to him what had happened. We told him about Dereck's murder and the attack on my parents. The judge listened solemnly and then told us that our case was under appeal. He advised us to stay away from Gordon's lawyers only because they might alert the hit men who would come after us. He said that he knew about Dereck's murder and that the police were working on it.

We stopped by to see Dereck's family and also stopped by our home. It was deserted. No one had any clue where Mum and Dad were, but they did have a number for Becky. The best that we could do was to leave behind an encrypted phone number of our apartment in San Diego. It was Liz's idea. She knew that

Gordon's men might find the phone number and come after us. Liz's brilliant plan was to tell Mum and Dad to take her phone number and add a certain amount to each digit. That way they would have a new number. She then wrote that they needed to subtract her age from the new number and they would have our number in California. I thought that it was a brilliant idea and told her so.

While we were at my parents home I saw a strange car pass in front of the house a few times. I didn't want to scare Liz, but I said, "We should be going." When we got back to the little hotel where we were staying I mentioned the car to Liz. "I think that for now we should go back to California. We're safe there." I agreed. Before we left I called Becky and gave her the same riddle to get our number. I was worried that Mum and Dad's phone might be bugged. I called the Travel Agent in Gaborone and reconfirmed our return flights. We were just about to cross the border into Botswana when I read the newspaper headlines. There, in bold letters; "business tycoon Renny lost at sea and presumed dead." Liz ran into the store and bought the paper. It seems that Gordon had fallen overboard during the Rio Race. The crew tried to find him but to no avail. He was officially lost at sea.

Mum and Dad made contact shortly after we arrived back in San Diego. They had rented a small flat in Hillbrow, an area of Johannesburg, but were thinking of moving back to Durban now that Gordon Renny was gone. They knew where Violet lived and would find her. I agreed that it probably was safe.

I never did receive a cent from Renny Holdings. The matter was tied up in court and once Gordon was no longer around things just went into slow mode. It didn't matter. I wrote a book entitled "Pass the Antacids" which was part biography about Gordon and part a deeper dive into my ordeal. It sold out in South Africa as well as the UK, Australia and New Zealand and netted me a small

fortune. I felt bad that the families of the crew did not receive any compensation but as Liz said, “You did your best.”

We were sitting in a restaurant called the Rusty Pelican. It overlooked Marina del Rey and had excellent mahi mahi fish and chips as well as a very decent New England clam chowder. Liz and I were sipping on a sailors drink of Mount Gay rum and tonic when I noticed a man about my age walk in. He was wearing a Dabulamanzi shirt. I invited him to join us. His name was Lucas and he had been part of the crew on Dabulamanzi for the Rio Race. Turns out that Gordon Renny had screwed him badly and he was forced to close the doors on his business that made awnings. I hadn't told Lucas who I was and didn't plan to.

We all had a few more rum drinks and then out of the blue Lucas placed his hand on my arm. “I am going to tell you something that should never be repeated. First of all I know who you are. I read your book. It was fascinating.” He hesitated for a moment and then said, “I was the one that killed Gordon.” He gave it a while to let the words sink in and then continued, “I was on watch alone when he came on deck to take a piss over the side. He didn't know who I was other than I was just a deckhand on his boat. He didn't hear me come up from behind. To be honest it didn't take much. I pushed him and in a moment he was swimming. I never told the rest of the crew what I had done but I suspect that they knew. They had heard every detail about how Gordon had stolen my business. It was pure luck that I was able to get a place on Dabulamanzi for the race. I think that the world is a much better place now that he's gone.” Now it was my turn to be quiet. I ordered another round and we toasted. The irony was not lost on me. Gordon's company might not have paid the families of the crew a cent, but his life ended the same as theirs; in a merciless pool of black.

## PRIESTS AND GOOD WOMEN

I WAS IN BOTSWANA with my girlfriend Leslie. We were camping on the banks of the Chobe River, a beautiful slice of water that separates Botswana from Zambia. Earlier in the day we had seen massive herds of buffalo and elephant. I had chosen our spot to camp quite carefully, or so I thought. It was in a thicket surrounded by scrub and acacia trees on one side, and the banks of the river on the other. I guess that there is nowhere completely safe to camp in Chobe; it is after-all the home of a myriad lion prides, as we would find out.

Leslie and I were taking some chances. We had secured a permit to canoe on the river, but the permit came with restrictions. “They always do,” I thought. “Too many regulations,” I said to Leslie, “this bloody place is becoming a nanny state. I wonder what the early explorers would make of all of this.” Leslie, sweet as ever, just said, “you know that many of them were eaten by lions or gored by buffalo?” I knew how I was going to answer long before I said the words. “That's the price that you pay for being free.” As it turned out we paid a hefty price for our freedom. One of the restrictions of our permit was that we return to the same spot at the end of each day, but our plan instead was to follow the river all the way to Victoria Falls and that turned out to be one chance too many.

Northern Botswana is one of the most beautiful places that Leslie and I have ever traveled. It's dry and hot and the sun scorches the land, sometimes ferociously. There is a rainy season and when

it starts it changes the barren landscape into a Garden of Eden. Wildflowers appear out of nowhere seemingly as if by magic and the animals have food to fatten up because it's a time for babies. Leslie and I were there on the cusp of the rainy season and the air hung heavy with water that had been sucked up from Lake Kariba just waiting for the right time when the land was desperate to be rejuvenated.

We paddled all day and really enjoyed seeing the wildlife from the water. One good thing about being on the water is that many animals come to the water to drink and we had a front seat view. Sometimes we would come across a crocodile sunning itself, but when it saw us it would make a dash for the water. At first it was frightening; we thought that it was coming for us, but I learned later that water is where they go to seek protection. They never bothered us. The hippos, on the other hand, were a bit of a menace. Well let me be more specific. Most of the hippos were happy to just wallow and snort, but the teenage males were having none of a couple of people in canoes paddling through their waters and they came after us. I don't think that they were going to do anything except have some fun and make us shit our pants.

It was early evening when I spotted the place for us to camp for that night and Leslie and I pulled over and hauled our canoes onto the dry land. "I think that this place looks good for the night," I said. Leslie shrugged. "Either you are a genius at finding places to camp or we have just been very lucky."

"Probably a bit of both. Here's to our luck holding out."

It didn't take long for us to pitch the tent and ready our small burner to heat up dinner. We had been eating freeze dried rations and I, for one, was getting a bit tired of them. I was longing for a fat, juicy steak and a bottle of wine, but that would have to wait for a couple more days. While Leslie

prepared the meal I scrounged around for some firewood and made a decent fire. A good fire would keep the animals at bay. It didn't take long for the dry wood to catch and soon we were sitting contentedly enjoying the warmth from the fire and our 'one-a-day-each' beer. The beer was warm but it didn't matter. Beer is beer and there was a fair amount of dust that needed to be washed away.

In Africa it goes from day to night in almost the blink of an eye. Our short twilight was made even shorter by storm clouds that were gathering to the west. They looked bruised and angry but just hung suspended. "I hope that we don't get rained on tonight," Leslie said.

"We should be OK."

We turned in early and after a long day on the water it took all of a minute or two for both of us to be well into the Land of Nod. Around midnight I heard lions roaring. Some people say that there are certain things in life that make your hair stand on end, and I agree. If you don't believe it, go to Africa. The first time that you hear a wild lion roar the hairs on the back of your neck will stand up and your skin will start to squirt adrenalin.

The thing that you need to know is that lions don't roar when they are hungry. They don't want to scare potential prey. They tiptoe, very quietly, until they attack and then it's everyone for themselves as they come in hard and fast. Once they have eaten themselves full they might start to roar. I like to think that it's their way of giving thanks for the food. That's what being a lion is all about. That and finding a lioness that they can have a little dalliance with before the sun sets.

The lions roared for a while and then suddenly stopped. I thought that I might have heard some hunting dogs way out to the west but I couldn't be sure. We were camping on the border of Chobe National Park. Our tent was slim, as in, there was barely

a tent there. The tent could have been blown away by a hippo farting on a Sunday morning.

We had a peaceful night and woke just as the sun caught the tops of the acacia trees. "Did you hear those hyenas," Leslie asked. I shrugged and replied, "no, I didn't hear anything."

"They seemed fairly close. It must have been after midnight but they soon buggered off and I went back to sleep. Why is it that everything sounds so much louder at night?"

"Sound carries easily on the still night air. Those lions that we heard roaring were probably a mile or so away yet they seemed much closer. If you can clean the plates and cutlery I will break camp. We should probably get going. It looks like it's going to be another hot one today."

As I was dismantling the tent I noticed some lion tracks about ten feet from where we had been sleeping. I didn't say anything to Leslie. I didn't want her to worry. We launched our canoes in silence and paddled slowly out into the middle of the river where the current ran more swiftly. By my estimation we were just over a day's paddling away from Victoria Falls.

It was an uneventful day on the river, unless of course you get a kick out of watching a fish eagle swoop down just meters from you and snatch a fish before returning to its perch to feast. That and a cheetah with her cubs drinking the clear river water. I knew that she would not venture into the water so Leslie and I paddled to within two meters. She seemed unfazed. In the early afternoon we came upon a herd of buffalo. There must have been a few hundred of them all groaning and moaning like they had just stepped on a thorn while jostling for a place to drink. It was a sight as old as time. In the early evening there was a very distinct change in how the air smelled. "Those clouds are going to break soon," Leslie said, "and when they do we are going to

get drenched." I could tell from the mood on the river that all the animals sensed a change and were waiting to welcome the rain.

We pulled our canoes before it got dark and set up camp in a fairly exposed area but our choices were limited. I had been scouting the river bank since mid-afternoon looking for a place to sleep for the night. I pitched the tent while Leslie prepped dinner. "If you are sure that this is going to be our last night on the river," Leslie said, "let's break out that bottle of red wine. Tomorrow is my birthday but I expect that we will find some small restaurant in Vic Falls where we can celebrate and they will have plenty of red wine."

"Good idea. So this is the last day that you will be in your 20's. You are getting to be all grown up." The wine was good. It was South African from a small vineyard just south of Cape Town and with a bit of a buzz on and heavy air hanging low I dared to suggest that we make love.

"Hmmm," Leslie said. "We might as well. The next time we do it I will be an old lady in my 30's." The night was quiet for a change and we held each other before falling asleep to the beautiful call of the African Nightjar.

Around midnight Leslie woke me. "Quick," she said. "Look." There in the moonlight were a half dozen elephants drinking from the lake. They could not have been more than 15 feet from us.

Leslie said, "I have to pee."

"Hold it for just a bit." The elephants wandered off and Leslie found a dry spot to wet. We were both snuggled in our sleeping bag when the hyenas started to giggle. They made the most hideous sound that carried on the wind and truthfully, I loved it. The night noises reminded me that I was back in Africa and not in our comfortable suburban home on the outskirts of Philadelphia.

I dozed for a bit and when I heard Leslie snoring lightly I fell asleep. She had an occasional fart which I took to be a good sign. Only priests and good women fart in their sleep.

I woke before dawn. The air had turned cooler overnight and a light wind had picked up. I snuggled closer to Leslie hoping to sleep for a little longer. That was when I suddenly realized that Leslie was on my left side and I was cuddling something through the thin fabric of our tent on my right side. It was some animal sleeping tight up against the tent. I lay perfectly still. After a couple of minutes I noticed a big tongue licking the morning dew off the thin fabric. I could almost feel its breath and judging by the size of its tongue, I knew that it was something big. I nudged Leslie who grumbled and asked, "what time is it?"

"Leslie," I whispered, "don't move and don't panic. Don't make a sound. There is an animal outside our tent and I think that it's a lion." Leslie started to sit bolt upright when I grabbed her shoulder. "Don't move, I'm serious." Just then the tongue reappeared and licked the tent once more. I could sense Leslie's sharp intake of breath. She arched her back a little and farted.

Now, I have slept with a few ugly girls in my time, but I have never slept with a lion. I froze. I had no idea what to do. I was less than two millimeters from a lion and had no idea if he, or she, was hungry, so I just held still and suppressed my urge to pee. Actually, if truth be told, I could have pee'd my pants right then and there if I was wearing any.

"What the hell are we going to do?" Leslie whispered with all the innocence of a naked woman. I could see the marks of gravel on her face and realized that her head must have slipped off the pillow and that she had been sleeping face down in the dirt. This was one reason why I loved her. I replied as best I could. "We are going to stay still and hope that at some point they get hungry for some impala or warthog and piss off." My sleeping buddy took

one last lick, then he/she too farted and with a lot of effort got up and grunted.

It reminded me of my grandfather.

Leslie and me just stayed as still as we could until we were sure that they were gone. The pride had definitely moved off and I knew that there was going to be some killing done that day, but at least it wasn't going to be us for breakfast. I unzipped the tent flap and cautiously looked out. The grass had been flattened. "There was a lot more than one lion," I said. "There must have been a whole pride." I turned around and saw that look in Leslie's eyes. "That was a complete turn-on," she said, "now get back on me and let's get this day started right."

"Oh I nearly forgot. Happy Birthday."

We decided to skip breakfast. I was quite sure that today would be the day that the clouds burst and it turns out I was right. No sooner had we packed up and pushed off there was a loud crack of thunder. "Should we pull over and find some shelter?" Leslie asked.

"No, this rain is going to last for a few days. We need to get down to Vic Falls ASAP." It was to be a fateful decision. The rain started slow but then it began to cascade down by the bucket. The Chobe River was churning. We kept paddling. The rain increased in intensity. I noticed that the animals on the river banks were standing with their backs to the deluge. We kept paddling.

Here is where things went wrong. The visibility started to worsen. It was okay at first but after a while it was hard to see. Now I confess that I had a very rudimentary map of the river and I had estimated that the jump-out point was around four hours paddling from where we had launched. What I had not anticipated in my calculations was that all the rain was going to make the river flow more swiftly. Leslie was quite far ahead

of me. I was worried but not sure what to do so I did nothing except to keep paddling. Then suddenly there was a small wave that came up from behind. The runoff from the banks were filling the river at a rapid rate that was when things started to get a little out of control.

I tried to catch Leslie and yelled to her to wait for me, but my words were drowned out by the deluge. The sky was black and bruised and threatening and very ominous and the thunder and lightning had my nerves on edge. Suddenly my canoe took off, swept by the flood of water. I am a seasoned paddler and anticipated this happening, but this was Leslie's first time doing something quite so ambitious and she was oblivious. At times I lost sight of her. I was starting to get desperate. We needed to pull over and shelter on land even if it was going to take a few days before the rain subsided. Leslie just kept paddling. That was when I saw a sign on the side of the river. Welcome to Victoria Falls. Beware - Dangerous Rapids Ahead.

The last time I had seen Leslie she was paddling along the opposite bank and would not have seen the sign unless there was one on that side as well. My canoe was moving swiftly, too swiftly. I was getting really desperate. We were in dangerous waters and I was about to have to make a gut wrenching decision. I saw a small jetty up ahead where I could stop and haul my boat, or I could continue to chase Leslie and hope that both of us got to safety. In hindsight I think I made the right decision. I grabbed onto the jetty and swung the canoe into calmer waters. I was safe.

Leslie and I had been together for just under three years and if I know her like I think that I do she was probably humming to herself, enjoying her birthday and enjoying being on a grand adventure with her lover. She might have capsized in the rapids; I will never know. Either way a 350-foot sheer drop over the falls lay ahead.

The rain claimed other victims that day. Below the waterfall are a number of villages. It's low lying land and the huts and animals and people were washed away. Most of the dead bodies washed ashore where the river does a sharp hairpin turn and discharges bodies, animals and debris onto the bank.

The police found Leslie. I had reported the incident in advance and let the police know where they would be able to find me and a few days later there was a soft knock on the door and two uniformed police officers were there. They had Leslie in the bed of their truck and needed me to identify her body and sign some paperwork. The short stocky cop pulled back a canvas tarp. The hardest thing that I have ever done was to look at her, but I was able to see a small amount of solitude and a slight smile on her face. I like to think that she died happy, but I guess that the smile was for me to help me move on. Leslie Bates was buried in a shallow grave in the churchyard outside a small chapel where she had worshiped as a child. I try and visit, but it's hard. I have not set foot in a canoe since.



## MILK RIVER

**W**HEN I WAS A KID we used to swim in a place called Milk River. We were kids and we had no idea why it was called Milk River, but we found out later, and the news wasn't good.

It was in the south and, well, let's just say that government regulations were a little lax. Let me take that back. Government regulations were almost non-existent. Let me take that back and take out the word 'almost'.

Me and my best mate Richie loved to swim in the river. We rigged up a zip line so that we could come down hard and fast and then let go, into the Milk River. Our first attempts were not successful. We had stolen some 3-gauge wire from behind the local hardware store. Richie found a metal pipe, heck knows where he found it, but we managed to string the wire from one side of the river to the other. My Dad had a 'come-along' which we used to get the wire quite tight. Dad never knew about this escapade so please don't tell him.

Here was the problem. It was a metal on wire situation and if you know anything about physics, when one rubs against the other it gets hot. Like on a first date, only hotter. Richie went first. He just made it to the edge of the river before letting go and almost hit the bank but came up and yelled, "that was awesome."

He never thought to tell me that his hands were about to catch on fire before he let go, or perhaps he did and I forgot. That's what friends are for.



“Hey Billy, you have to try this. It’s so much fun.” I was halfway between tree and river when I realized that Richie was an asshole. I let go about six feet from the water’s edge and hit the dirt, face first. I could hear Richie laughing. “That was spectacular,” he said. “Maybe we need a different pipe. I think that I know where to find one. Meanwhile, let’s have some lunch.”

Richie had a small backpack with some rolls and a couple of pork sausages. The butcher next to the Piggly Wiggly had the best sausages in town. I put them on my mother’s account. We had all we needed for a feast. Richie had thought to pack some Fatwood fire starter sticks and in minutes we had a small blaze going. “If the cops come we need to kick all this into the water and make a run for it.” The cops never came and we sat under an old willow and enjoyed our lunch.

Richie was kicking at the ground. “Remember that exchange kid that came from South Africa a few years ago.” I nodded. He was a tall kid who always insisted on wearing a bush hat wherever he went, even during school hours. “I remember that he always wore that silly hat even though Principal Evans kept telling him that it was against school regulation.” Richie laughed. “He was actually quite a nice kid once you got to know him. He told me that they would make elaborate zip lines in South Africa. I think that he was lying a little when he insisted that some of the rivers where they had the zip line had the occasional crocodile. He said that the crocs looked like logs so you had to be careful.”

“Sheeze,” I said. “Do you think that he was telling the truth?” Richie nodded. “He was from Africa. There are crocodiles in every river in Africa. And some hippo’s too. I don’t think that he was lying.” I thought about it for a while and then said, “I would really like to go on a zip line that went over a river where there were crocodiles swimming.”

Richie looked at me and also thought for a moment before saying, “me too. I think that his name was Fanie or something like that. I remember that he told me that in South Africa they called a zip line a foefie slide. I think one day I would like to go to South Africa. I once saw some lions on a TV program and they looked quite dangerous.” We both laughed. “Of course they were dangerous. Some of them actually eat people.” I shook my head. “We had better be going,” I said. “I think that my Mom is on the rag.” Richie looked at me. “On the rag, you know. Once a month when she’s grumpy and my Dad tries to stay away from home. You never heard that word before?” Richie shook his head. “My Mom does get grumpy once a month but I didn’t know that there was a rag involved.” I knew that I was in over my head. “Let’s go,” I said. We kicked the ashes into the river and went home.

We got the zip line working but soon got bored and rigged up a swing. It was pretty cool. We could swing out over the river. One day I asked Richie, “why do you think that the water in this river is white?”

“I dunno. There was some kind of protest that my Dad went to but I didn’t understand any of it. They were talking about the water being white. When he came back from the protest I heard my father swear for the first time. ‘They are a bunch of shits the lot of them’ was all he said.”

Richie and I spent many hours on the swing. We would use our legs to swing out over the water and when we got as high as we could we would jump, float downstream a little, and then run back and do it again.

One day when we were walking home Richie said to me, “now I know what you meant when you said that Moms are sometimes on the rag. My Mom was mad at everyone this morning. My Dad left for work early and took his breakfast with him. You know

Billy, I think that you are my best friend.” I grunted, not sure what to say. Richie continued. “I think that we will be friends forever.”

“Me too.”

Richie and I had an almost perfect childhood in the Appalachian mountains. If we weren't swimming or making fires to cook sausages, we would go off on some adventure. About a mile upstream from where we liked to hang out there was a chemical plant that churned out fertilizer, among other chemicals, and they, well you guessed it, they emptied the waste into the river, hence the name Milk River. There was no milk involved, it was just the slag from the fertilizer. One time we scrambled through a gap in the fence and got close to the building. It didn't smell good, but for us it was exciting until a guard saw us and chased us but we ran for it. Of course we made a rookie mistake and ran in the direction of our house and later that day two men in uniform arrived on our doorstep. They warned my Dad that if we were ever seen on the property they would have us arrested. Dad didn't say anything but after they left he said, “you boys should probably stay away from that place. Old Mr. Baker likes to make trouble. He owns that place. He's friends with Councilman Atkins and I'm sure that the councilman could make life difficult for us.”

“That's not fair,” I said. Dad just shrugged. “That's the way that things are done in this part of the world.”

RICHIE WENT OFF TO BECOME a school teacher near Boston. He actually rose quickly through the ranks and after a few years made it to become the Principal. It was a small school in a town named Revere about 10 miles north of Boston, and he taught there for at least ten years before he started to feel ill. He had

applied for the Superintendent's job and was waiting to hear if he got the position. He called me. “I've had the shits so bad I can barely walk,” was all he said.

I had no idea what to say so I just mumbled. “Have you seen a doctor?”

“No I don't believe in them. They just try to find more and more things wrong with you.”

“True, but maybe you should give it a try, at least once. They are not all snake oil salesmen.”

“Okay” he replied, “I will think about it.”

I was working as a tugboat captain in Boston. It was menial work but it paid and I needed a paycheck. My ex-wife Hillary had managed to suck up most of my disposable income. Richie called a month or so later. “I've still got the shits,” he said.

We agreed to meet at our favorite restaurant in Revere. Tipico Americano. The place was not fancy, in fact it was far from it. It was badly lit, usually had the TV on too loud and worse yet, sometimes a customer would chuck some quarters into the jukebox and both the TV and the Jukebox tried to compete with each other. The food, however, was awesome. The fried fish was especially good.

Richie met me there. He didn't look good. He was pale and had lost a lot of weight. “You look like crap,” was how I greeted him.

“You don't look so good yourself,” he said. “Are you still making yourself available at the Dunkin' Donuts all you can eat bar?” I knew that it was a joke but the lunch was not about me, it was about him, and after we ordered I asked him, “so what's going on?”

He stared far into the distance and said, “I am not doing very well. I took your advice and went to see a doctor. The school

district paid for it and by the way I didn't get the Superintendent job, which is okay, but the doc had some, well how do I put this, some not so good news. I have cancer."

That was right about where I lost my appetite, good fried fish or not. Richie looked down at his drink and said, "do you remember all those years ago when we swam in the Milk River? I saw something on TV a few weeks ago. The reporter said that there was a class action lawsuit against the fertilizer company. You know it wasn't milk in that river; it was chemical runoff, and it caused cancer in many people."

I am not usually one to run out of things to say. As a tugboat captain I need to be talking almost all day, every day, except Sundays when I went to church and sat quietly to recharge my batteries.

We finished our lunch and it was good but tinged with a little sadness. Richie paid the bill. I gave him a hug and said something so stupid that to this day I regret. I said, "you shouldn't have drunk all that water." Richie just smiled and then laughed and said, "right back at you."

He lasted nine months. I was at his bedside when he died and while I was there for him, I wasn't feeling that good myself. I didn't tell Richie this, but I had also been diagnosed with cancer. At that point it wasn't going to be able to help Richie, but I was determined to help myself.

I had signed onto the lawsuit. The bloody bastards had been poisoning the water for at least 30 years; and to make things worse they knew it and didn't care. Luckily my boss gave me some leave and I took it to show up in court. I was trying to be indignant but truthfully, I really didn't have the energy. The chemical company, National Fertilizer Limited, had hired the best law firm in Greenboro which was where the trial was taking place.

Their top lawyer had slicked back hair, but he wasn't fooling me. I knew that he used Just for Men to cover the gray.

He came out swinging. "There is absolutely no proof that the water discharge from my clients business caused any kind of damage to anyone." As he was speaking I was thinking of all those dead birds that we used to see washed up on the river bank. Fish too. Richie and I used to laugh at them, but now I was furious.

When it was my turn to speak I said, "the chemical runoff from that bloody fertilizer plant killed my best friend." The judge leaned back in his seat and said, "please do not swear in my courtroom." It took almost two weeks for the trial and in the end we lost. My lawyer, Lily was part of a team of lawyers there to look out for the best interests of the 15 plaintiffs who had filed the lawsuit. She said, "we will appeal," and they did.

The new lawyer for National Fertilizer Limited who was tasked with handling the appeal was a large man. His parents had named him Bert. His last name was Lancaster. His parents could never have known that he shared the same name as one of the rising movie stars, but he did and he couldn't help acting like a movie star. The smirk on his face after the judge handed down the second verdict left me feeling sick. We lost the appeal.

A reporter from the local newspaper The Daily Reflector had been attending the trial and had done some digging around. Things didn't seem right to him. He was just a young kid but clearly ambitious. He uncovered that both the judge in the first trial and the judge that heard the appeal had received a sizable amount of money from National Fertilizer Limited, in other words they were in the pocket of the defendant. The kid broke the story the day the appeal was rejected and the mayor of Greenville took an interest. Our trial was not the first time that he had heard about judges taking kickbacks from defendants. The story in The

Daily Reflector was well researched and compelling. The mayor called the governor who, after his team had investigated, was really mad. He had run on a law and order platform and was up for reelection so he was on top of the story. His investigation discovered that many of the judges in North Carolina had received unsolicited money from Defendants. The story grew, the kid got promoted and the governor ordered that the court in Greenville chuck out the original trial and the appeal and start all over again.

“What are our chances this time?” I asked Lily. She just smiled and said, “less than 50:50 but you never know. How are you feeling?”

“On a day to day basis my health is deteriorating and I feel like crap, however this news makes me feel a whole lot better so today is a good day.”

The new trial started in the Fall of '95. This time it took only a week. I didn't attend. Somehow I felt that my presence in the courtroom was bringing bad luck. I know that it was not logical but that's how I felt. Instead I sat in a bar a few minutes walk from the courtroom nursing a few beers until Lily came in to brief me on what had happened in court. Things seemed to be going quite well. “Don't get your hopes up,” she said. “This judge knows that this case has already been adjudicated twice in favor of the fertilizer company. I am sure that he is trying to keep an open mind about things, but judges, like the rest of us, are human.” Lily ordered a martini, extra dry with a twist and we talked for an hour or so. Just as she was leaving she said, “I expect a verdict in the next couple of days.”

I was sitting at my usual table nursing a beer when my phone rang. It was Lily. “Are you in the bar,” she asked. “Yup,” I replied. “I will be there in five minutes. There has been a verdict.” She looked somber when she walked in and when she took me by the hand I felt my heart sink. Lily smiled. “We won,” was all she said

and signaled the waitress. “A double martini, dry with a twist. I'm in a celebrating mood.”

I stared at Lily. “We won? What does that mean?”

“It means that you are going to be very rich soon. The final amount that National Fertilizer has to pay is not yet clear. The judge wants money from National Fertilizer for clean-up costs. That money will go to the city who will manage the clean-up but as of now it looks like all the plaintiffs, including the estate of your friend Richie, will receive around \$5 million each.”

I really don't recall how many drinks we had that night but I know that it was a lot. I never made it back to my hotel. Lily invited me to stay at her place and, well... you know. I don't want to spell it out but let's just say that it was a very memorable night in many ways.

In the morning I booked my ticket back to Boston. The lady at America Airlines asked if I would like a morning flight or an afternoon flight. I said “afternoon.” I had some business to attend to. Lily had already left for work. She looked a bit disheveled but put on a brave face. She kissed me goodbye and I drove north up rt52 until it intersected with rt58. I turned left and drove west passing through the small town of Galax. A couple of miles beyond the town I passed by our old family home and pulled up alongside Milk River. It was still flowing white with a residue of scum along the edges. I sat for a while tossing stones into the water and was about to leave when I looked up. There, on the limb that stretched out over the river, was a short length of rope. “We had some fun here Richie,” I said out loud, “but in the end it's National Fertilizer Limited that is going to swing.

Four months later I got a call from Lily. She said, “I have some great news and some interesting news.”

“Give me the great news first.”

“Your settlement in the case has been fully authorized, like they had any choice in the matter. They will wire the money to your bank account early next week. You had better alert your bank. Sometimes they freak out when there is a huge sum that suddenly drops into your account. You obviously can’t just leave the money there. I have some very good contacts in the financial industry that can help you invest it.”

“Thank you Lily, I really appreciate it. You have me intrigued. What’s the interesting news?”

“You might need to sit down for this one. I’m pregnant and the baby is yours.” Now I may be a bit of a hick and I was born in the morning but it wasn’t yesterday morning so my radar was up. Lily’s news sent me reeling. On the one hand \$5 million was about to hit my account. Her pregnancy seemed awfully well timed. “That’s good news,” I said, “congratulations, but, and forgive me for this, but how can you be sure that I am the father?”

Lily said, “I know that this has come as a surprise to you. I am not looking for money if that’s what you are worrying about. I just need you to know that you are the father and that I had not had sex for at least a year before we did it that night, and I have not had sex since. There is no doubt in my mind unless it was an immaculate conception that it’s your baby Billy. I can raise the child alone if you are not interested, but I really hope that you are.”

The baby was born by C-section. I had flown to Greenville to help out and when I saw the little head trying desperately to get out into the world I knew that it didn’t matter who the father was. As far as I was concerned it was me. My only stipulation was that we name the baby Richie if it was a boy. The little bugger fought like hell and then suddenly came out in a slosh of water and some other muck. I took one look and saw a penis. I looked again. It was hard, not hard to see. The other kind of hard. “He’s definitely my son,” I said.” Lily cried. “We have a child.”

I had been worried that I would always wonder if he really was mine, but on his first birthday the resemblance was unmistakable. I had moved to Greenville and followed my passion which was restoring old cars. Lily urged me to follow my other passion which was to write, so there you have it. Richie and me are together again and to add to it, I have a beautiful wife.

## MILES WITH LYLE



I WAS HOME FROM WORK EARLY. The guy in charge, I guess that he was technically my boss but I don't like to think of him as superior to me, had told me to leave early. As I was walking out the door I heard him say, "you had better get used to getting home early." I could tell by the tone in his voice that he was going to fire me in the next few days. Truthfully I didn't care. It was a crap job changing tires. We would put the car on the lift and make the switch to a new set, drop the lift and away with another happy customer. Mundane work at best but I needed a paycheck just like the rest of us. Luckily in the next few months things would change, and for the better.

Anyway, I was home early. I let myself into Tracy's small house, threw the keys into a glass bowl by the door and called for her. There was a noise coming from the bedroom so I opened the door. There she was, en flagrant as they say, with the plumber Bill who lives in a huge house up the street. Tracy said. "You are home early." That was all. I looked around the bedroom. There were clothes strewn all over the place and I saw that the sheets were damp. Tracy and I had been together for almost a year and I liked her. She was about as smart as a well worn tractor but had legs that seemed to never end and a rear end that could make a pool table blush. Her legs were long and slim and always, no matter the time of year, were a light bronze. Bill just gave me a look. "Can't you see that we are busy here?" was all he said. Tracy gave me a look that I hadn't seen before, and if I had, I had probably missed the signs. "You can't really be surprised,"

her eyes said. "This is not the first time. Bill and I have been doing this since just after Christmas." I was disgusted. There was something dank about our bedroom and smelled faintly of plumbers putty and Tracy's Dior Roses & Roses. I didn't know what to say so I said nothing. Then things got worse. Bill got on top and started at it again. That was enough for me. I found the keys where I had left them, grabbed my gym bag which was in the closet in the front hall, slammed the door and walked back out into the bright sunshine. My faded Ford F-series still had some life left in it. As I pulled away I emptied the stuff off the front seat onto her lawn. Sure it was a pathetic protest made up mostly of old Dunkin' Donuts coffee cups and a few Burger King wrappers, but somehow it felt good to leave that part of my life on her freshly mowed grass. I didn't look back. I had read an article in some magazine, I don't remember which one, that basically said, 'never look back. Always keep looking forward.'

I drove out of Lubbock for the last time vowing to never return. I was heading north on Rt27 toward Amarillo. Just past the junction of Rt27 and Rt87 is the small town of Happy Texas. To be honest I actually felt quite happy. Fuck Tracy and that smelly plumber. I knew where there was a Burger King just off the highway and their billboards advertised a Whopper Special. I could get a triple Whopper with all the fixings, a large lemonade and a large fries all for \$4.99. "Extra ketchup," I spoke into the speaker at the drive-through and in just two minutes I was on the road again.

By sunset I was through Amarillo and hit Rt40 heading west. As I drove out of town I noticed a package store and pulled over. The fridge at the back of the store was packed with Lone Star and I bought a 6-pack, some beer nuts and a few slices of jerky. I was on the road eating road food. The first beer went down, as my late father liked to say, 'singing hymns'. It tasted good but it was only when I was most of the way through the 6-pack that

the familiar taste of flat beer replaced the sour taste of Tracy's perfume and the sight of Bill humping Tracy right in front of me. I should have been pissed but I wasn't and only wished that I had bought more beer. The setting sun was shining directly in my eyes and it colored the dry landscape a soft hue. Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew where I was going but hadn't really formulated any plan. The change in my circumstances was sudden but it didn't matter. I was 'looking forward' and feeling good. Tracy and Bill could do it all they wanted because I didn't care. I would call T-Tires in the morning and have them hold my check until I had a forwarding address.

By midnight I was starting to feel the day. Our shift at T-Tires started at 6 most mornings and I was shagged out. I passed through some small towns and thought of grabbing a NoTell Motel for the night but instead decided to save my limited cash. Just past Tucumcari the road opened up and the traffic thinned out. I found a spot on the side of the road to pull over and was asleep in a couple of minutes.

The seat was hard and I woke around 3 in the morning which worked out just fine. I needed a pee anyway. I tried to go back to sleep but it wasn't happening so I fired up the Ford and kept on driving west. I flicked on the radio. All that I could find was Christian radio and listened for a while to some preacher who had worked himself into a frenzy. I guess that Tracy and Bill were going to some place called damnation which was too bad because that was probably where I was also heading and I didn't want to bump into them there.

I had lived in Texas for a half dozen years and even though I was an atheist I enjoyed listening to the preachers. They sure worked hard at selling their case and when they started to flag the engineer would put on the Casting Crowns. I knew their music. They were a Christian rock band originally out of Florida and like



many wannabe's had moved to Texas to find fame and any kind of fortune they could. Their beat was unobtrusive and I listened to them and the preacher who seemed to fall asleep every now and then until I saw the sun starting to light things in the east. It had been a little chilly overnight but the weatherman, who had a hard time getting a word in edgeways, had promised a real 'Texas Scorcher'. It was a good thing that I had serviced my AC just a week earlier.

I had a slice of jerky and half a bag of nuts left so I enjoyed a snack and realized just how hot the day was when I took my first pee break. The air had changed overnight and was clinging and damp.

I drove through Santa Rosa and at the junction of rt40 and rt84 there was a truck stop. I had noticed the 40-foot cactus long before I saw the truck stop. It advertised the cheapest gas this side of Albuquerque and their 'Big Breakfast Special' served all day. It was my kind of place and I pulled into the parking lot. The place was full with many of the customers looking like they had just climbed off their horses and not out of their trucks. There was one last seat at the counter and I took it. The waitress came over with a pot of coffee in one hand and a menu in the other. "Coffee?" she asked. I nodded and she filled my heavy porcelain mug. "You are not from around here are you?" she asked while dropping a few sachets of white sugar and a handful of pods of Half and Half in front of me.

"No," I said. "I had a fight with my girlfriend back in Lubbock so instead of making things worse I decided to hit the road. The waitress smiled. "Good man. It's very rare that a man wins an argument with a woman and if he does it always costs him in jewelry and flowers. What will you have?"

"I think that I will try your Big Breakfast. I didn't have dinner last night." The waitress left and then returned. "I forgot to ask, how would you like those eggs?"

"I will take them sunny side up and white toast please." In ten minutes she was back. They had not falsified their advertising. The damp plate was piled with the eggs, sausage, bacon, fried bread as well as regular white toast, some beans and a large bowl of grits. "That should keep you out of trouble for a while," the waitress smiled. "Definitely eat the grits. They are not out of a box. The chef makes them from scratch. More coffee?" She wasn't kidding about the grits. They were delicious and foolishly I ordered a second bowl. By the time I was halfway through the piled plate I was stuffed but determined to finish it all. I used the white toast to wipe up the egg yolk, pointed at my almost empty cup and the waitress came over with the coffee pot. By the time I had paid my bill and headed out of the restaurant I was almost high from eating too much.

As soon as I opened the door the heat hit me like a damp sheepdog. It was hot and wet and smelled of old coffee and grits. I made it to the Ford, fired it up, dug through my stuff and lit a fairly lengthy tube steak. Sadly there was no beer to wash it down. I had bought a bottle of Crazy Water and used a little to brush my teeth. The small print on the label read, 'rich with Mother Nature-infused minerals, which are more readily absorbed by your body.' I thought about it for a bit and made a mental note to send the company, which was out of Ardrey Springs, a message to add to their label. 'Perfect for brushing your teeth.' Somehow I didn't think that it would catch on, but you never know.

Moriarty was a small town set back from the highway. I took the exit and quickly found a package store. The first beer barely touched sides when I noticed up ahead what looked like a person on the side of the road hitchhiking. I could not imagine how it must be just standing there without shade so I pulled over. I learned later that the man's name was Lyle. "Hop in my friend," I said. "Where are you going?" He smiled. "Aaah the AC feels

good.” He didn’t say anything else so I offered him a beer. The can was empty in a Texas red second so I handed him another. “That’s better,” he said. “My name is Lyle and I don’t know where I’m going. I have been traveling this highway for the better part of a year ever since I cashed out of my company.” Lyle seemed ok until he mentioned cashing out of his company. It would have made more sense if he said, “I have been on the road since I peed my pants while visiting with the President at the White House.” I let it all slide and offered him another beer. The heat can make you say and do crazy things.

Lyle sat in silence and I drove steadily enjoying the open road. There were cacti everywhere and an occasional tumbleweed that rolled on by as if on some important mission. After an hour or so we were at the junction of rt40 and rt285, the one leading up to Santa Fe. Lyle spoke. “You ever been to Santa Fe?” he asked. I shook my head. “No but I heard that it was nice.” Lyle got a faraway look in his eyes and said simply, “it sure is. I used to travel there a lot for business back in the day.” He left his words dangling in the warm breeze. “You should visit one day.”

We blew through Albuquerque and found more open road to the west of the city. The heat was really intensifying. There was a sign at a gas station that read 109F. It felt all of that and then some. I noticed that Lyle had dozed off and was snoring faintly. His gray beard was a little matted and it was clear that his clothes had not been laundered in a week of Sundays. Still there was something in the lines on his face that had me believing that he was happy, content with life. The only thing he was carrying was a tiny duffel which I learned later that day when we stopped had what looked like a spare pair of underpants and a toothbrush. He had managed to reduce his life to the very bare essentials.

Lyle woke when I stopped for more beer. “You know we could stop in Las Vegas,” he said, it’s not that far out of our way. Back

when I was younger and the business was just starting to make some real money we held our annual convention in Las Vegas.” I just nodded. It was the third time that he had mentioned a ‘business’. I wasn’t sure how to respond so I cracked a cold one and handed it to him.

“Thanks.”

I opened one for myself and we drove in a contented silence. I hadn’t come right out and admitted it to myself but I was heading for LA. Somewhere among the few possessions that I had grabbed when I left Tracy’s house was an address written in pencil. I had met Susie a year earlier when she came by the shop. She needed a flat repaired. We were busy but I told her that we could take care of it but she might have to wait an hour or so. Susie smiled and shrugged. “I have time. Do you by any chance get a lunch break?”

“I do,” I replied, “I fact it’s right now.” Susie had a twinkle in her eye. “Can I buy you lunch?” she asked. I was hungry and against my better judgment I said “sure, there is a greasy spoon just up the road. We can walk there. I have an hour.” There was something in her chemistry that I have never been able to get out of my mind and I knew that one day I would surprise her and pay her a visit in LA.

Lyle said, “next time you see a place to pull over can you please stop. I need to go number two.” There was a safe place just up ahead and I pulled over. Lyle went one way. I wrote my name in the dust while I let the residue of a half dozen beers splash onto the hot Arizona dirt. Lyle was pensive when he got back in the car. “You said that you didn’t have any particular place to be. I was thinking back there. By the way I always do my best thinking while I am squatting in the hot sun. How about you and I pay a visit to Mexico. I have never been there and I heard from one of the blokes that worked for me that the women were beautiful and easy, if you know what I mean.” It was the fourth time that

he had mentioned some kind of business. Mexico sounded like a decent option for a detour. I had been seeing signs for Tucson and a place with a Spanish name, Nogales. I kind of wished that I had a map but then I was glad that I didn't. Without a map who knows where we would end up. "Let's do it," I said. By late afternoon we were through Tucson and facing some open road when I saw up ahead a small run down place that advertised BBQ. "You hungry Lyle?" I asked.

"I could eat the south end out of a northbound cow right about now. It's been a few days since I last had a decent meal."

I pulled over. The place was called Mama's Brisket, BBQ and Bullshit. I liked it already. The building was really just a front for a large fire pit out back. The locals had all parked behind the restaurant so I fired up the Ford again and we found a parking spot. "Lyle," I said, "I think that we are underdressed for this place." Lyle hadn't noticed that everyone was wearing some kind of cowboy outfit. "Yup probably," he said, "but I'm guessing that they will still serve us."

It was still hot as buggery outside and not much better inside. A half-dozen fans struggled against the heat. We found a place at the bar and ordered a pitcher of Lone Star. A middle-aged woman came over. "I'm Mama," she said, "would you like to see a menu or do you just want me to order for you?"

"We'll take what you got and we are hungry so if there is a little extra charge for a little more that won't be a problem." Mama looked hard at me and said, "No one pays extra and no one has ever left this restaurant hungry." I smiled. Lyle smiled. Mama said, "I will bring you some sausage as a sampler then get ready for the good stuff."

On the counter was a leaflet advertising that the circus was coming to Tucson. Lyle examined it for a while and then said, "I

used to be a barker for a circus. This was after I had cashed out and I was looking for something to do. That was time number five. "What does a barker do?" I asked, trying to test to see what he knew about circuses. Lyle topped off his beer and said, "it was my job to get people into the tent. We had an old Big Top that had more than a few patches but it did the job OK for the while that I worked there. The barker is the person who wrangles the crowd to get them to watch the show. It was a fun job. Most people want to go and see a circus act. When I saw a family with kids I knew that they would be good for it even if the parents were not interested. Kids have a way of being persistent until the parents relent and 99% of them relented. The boss, Mr. Boswell liked the work that I did and didn't mind that sometimes I gave away tickets. I could usually spot a family that was down on their luck and knew that an evening watching clowns and acrobats would cheer them up." Mama brought over a plate of hot sausages that had just come off the grill. "Enjoy these," she said. "There is more to come."

We ate until I had no room left and Lyle did the same. He seemed to pack it in like a pro. The BBQ was beyond excellent. I wiped my plate clean with the fresh bread and put an early Hank Williams song on the jukebox. Life was good. Tracy, Bill and that wanker at T-Tires were all a thing of my past. I had Susie (I hoped) and a future in California to look forward to.

I paid the tab and Lyle and I jumped into the Ford and headed down rt19 for Nogales. I was a little worried about Lyle's passport situation but he didn't seem too concerned as we pulled up to the border crossing. I handed over both passports and in minutes we were in Mexico.

Mexico looked just the same as southern Arizona except the signs were in Spanish. It was dry and dusty and hot with a lot of giant Cacti. We peeled off on rt43 after stopping to buy some

tequila and ice. It did seem a little corny to be buying tequila in Mexico but it was really good. The sun was getting low in the sky when Lyle said, "I have it you know." Truthfully I didn't know. I didn't know what he was talking about. He sipped on his tequila for a while and then said, "I have the Big C. I have liver cancer. My Doc told me that I had to quit drinking and I did try but it wasn't easy. I have been drinking my whole life and quitting was hard. There were a few times I made it for a week or two but then I went back to the bottle. My problem was I liked the strong stuff. Vodka, rum and he held his glass so that the setting sun could reflect through the amber fluid, and most of all I like tequila so one day I just said, 'fuck it'. I had sold out and didn't have any responsibilities. I had already paid off two ex-wives so that was no big deal. It left only my son in line and I knew that he was counting on a decent inheritance. The kid is a real right prick. Do you sometimes wonder how you fathered someone who was so completely different from you that it was hard to like them?"

I hadn't said anything. It was a lot to take in. I chose the easy option. "I don't have any kids so I wouldn't know." My words hung hollow and to compensate for the awkwardness I drained my drink. I was in a little bit of a bind. I noticed that Lyle had finished his as well and I was not sure if it was OK to top it off. I shouldn't have worried. Lyle repeated. "I told you that I said fuck it so pour me another. When I go I'm going pickled but at least I will be happy." He looked happy to me. "Okay," I said, "hand over your glass. Let's drink to saying 'fuck it.'" Lyle downed his glass and held it out for another. "You know," he said, "you are one of the few people that haven't judged me. I respect that."

The sun was gone and the night turned very dark. There was a little tequila left and we shared it. "Let's pull over here and sleep for a while. What do you think?" Lyle was drunk. He nodded and slid down in his seat. I was just dozing off when I asked him,

"how long do you have?" Lyle pretended that he had not heard me but then said, "they gave me a year max and that was if I stayed sober."

"How long has it been?"

"Coming up on a year next week. I feel fine but I think that one day I am going to wake up feeling like crap or I am not going to wake up at all." My tequila level was high otherwise I might never have said what I said but I said it anyway. "Well don't croak in my truck. It has enough problems without a dead body riding shotgun." Lyle thought that it was really funny and laughed out loud and then he was asleep. I leaned in closer. He was still breathing. I shut my eyes and was asleep in a couple of minutes.

The sun was quite high and the heat in the truck cab starting to intensify. My mouth felt like a whole mariachi band had relieved themselves in it. Lyle didn't look much better. "I need a crap," he said and walked off to see if he could find a cactus for privacy. There were plenty to choose from. While he was away I was digesting what he had told me. Things didn't look or sound good but he seemed to be OK. I fired up the truck and we drove west. There was a road that took us down to the Gulf of California and we found a place to grab a bite. The menu was extensive but I, embarrassingly, settled on the tacos. What could be more of a stereotype than a taco except the Huevos Rancheros that Lyle ordered. We both agreed that the meal was excellent and the coffee was strong and black. I joked with Lyle. "Strong and black like my first wife," I said. He laughed at my pathetic attempt at humor.

We followed the coast to Mexicali where, you guessed it, cold beer was on the menu. The bartender told us that Tijuana was a 100 miles away so we set off after killing a pitcher. I said to Lyle, "how about we get a room for the night? This bloody seat is killing my back."

“Suits me, but you know that I don’t really have enough to pay my share.” I smiled. “It’s OK. You have earned a proper night’s rest for putting up with me.” We could see the city from quite far out and more to the point, we could smell it. Civilization didn’t smell good, especially after so long on the open road. I found a small motel with twin beds and then we found the bar. Neither of us was hungry. I think that we were both a little sad that the trip was coming to an end. I wasn’t sure what to order. I had enough beer from the night before. I asked the bartender for a recommendation. He said without hesitation. “Try a Michelada and then added, it’s a beer with lime and hot sauce added.” Not technically a beer I told myself. It came in a chilled glass and was surprisingly refreshing so I ordered a couple more. “What do you think?” Lyle smiled. “I am not dead yet but this shit may well kill me. I will take a tequila straight up.” We sat in silence for a bit before Lyle asked. “What will you do if this Susie girl no longer lives at that address or doesn’t remember you?” I shrugged. “I will take my chances, but I have a favor to ask. Will you please come with me when we get to her apartment? I dunno why but I think that having you there will bring me good luck.”

“Sure,” Lyle said. “You have been very kind to me so that would be the least that I can do.”

We woke up refreshed and arrived at passport control at around 10. There was no problem getting back into the US and pretty soon we had blown past San Diego and driving into Los Angeles. I knew that finding Susie’s apartment might be a challenge without a map, but it turned out to be quite easy. I just kept asking directions and by mid-afternoon we pulled up in front of a bland building that sported the same address that Susie had given me. “Let’s just do this,” I said. “What’s the worst that can happen?”

I made my way up two flights of steps with Lyle in tow. I have to admit that I was nervous when I knocked on the door. There

was a bit of noise coming from inside and the door opened. It was Susie. She took one look at me, looked over my shoulder and saw Lyle and then said, “I knew that you would come and find me but I didn’t think that you would bring your Dad.” She tossed her long hair and said, “please come on in.” I explained that Lyle was a friend without going into any detail. Susie made a pot of strong black coffee. Lyle said, “I should be going.”

I had not thought to ask where he would go next and felt like a fool. “Lyle,” I said. “You have been a great companion and friend. I don’t know where you are headed but I can take you to the open road but only if Susie will come with me. I will never find her place again.” Susie nodded. “I can go. We can drop Lyle at the Central Bus Station.” Lyle smiled, “I was thinking of going to San Francisco and I want to take the Pacific Coast Highway.” Susie said, “what about a bus?” Lyle smiled. “Busses smell. I would rather not. I have made it from Boston this far just using my thumb. I will probably hang my hat up in Alaska somewhere. I caught a little wistfulness in his voice. I knew what he meant by hanging up his hat and it made me sad.”

Susie barely missed a beat. “We can drop you on rt101 which runs up the coast. It’s a beautiful drive. I knew in that moment that I liked her. She didn’t question Lyle or his motives. Lyle grabbed his small duffel and then said something a little odd. “Susie,” he said. “Can I get your address? I like to send Christmas cards.” Susie scratched it on a piece of paper. I was bemused. Lyle didn’t seem like the sentimental type and given his life expectancy I wasn’t sure that he would make it to Christmas.”

We dropped Lyle on the side of the road. He was short on sentiment, but he did say, “you have been a friend. You will hear from me at some point.” I felt some tears start to well but just blinked and said, “I wish that I had not lost my sunglasses.” I fooled Susie; I wasn’t fooling Lyle. We climbed back into Susie’s

car. She took me by the hand. “Nice chap. Have you known him long?” I squeezed her hand and replied, “it’s a long story.”

Susie wanted me to move in with her and it seemed like a great idea since I didn’t have anywhere else to go. Most nights I silently thanked Tracy and that bastard Bill the plumber. They had done me a huge favor. I got a job at a Starbucks slinging coffee and was quickly promoted to manager. I think that they were desperate for a warm body to fill the position. That was when a letter arrived at Susie’s apartment. It was addressed to me which I thought was strange. The only person who knew of my new address was that wanker at T-Tires. He had forwarded my check as soon as I gave him the address.

I waited for Susie to come home from work. She worked a day shift at the local hospital. There was something about the letter that made me nervous. I had no reason to be nervous but in the top left hand corner was the return address of a law firm in Chicago. Susie poured us both a drink and I opened the letter. It read simply, ‘please call our offices as soon as possible. We do not have a phone number for you’. There at the end of the short note was a name; John Jacob, Esquire and a phone number. I looked at Susie. She said, “the sooner you call the better.” She handed me her phone and I dialed the number. The receptionist put me right through. Mr. Jacob came directly to the point. “We need you to come by our offices in Chicago. It’s a matter of utmost importance. That was all he said. I looked at Susie. She mouthed, “you should go.” Mr. Jacob said, “I have an opening next Tuesday. I will clear a few hours on my calendar. You have my address and phone number. I will see you then.” His voice was clipped and he didn’t give me any time to answer before he hung up.

I looked at Susie. She said, “I will go with you if it makes you feel better. My sister has an apartment overlooking the lake. I am

sure that she will put us up for as long as we want.” I was grateful for the support and booked two tickets. To be perfectly honest I was nervous, but not sure why. We found the law offices on West Wacker Drive. The receptionist buzzed us in and said, “Mr. Jacob is expecting you. Would you like coffee, green tea or perhaps something stronger?” I glanced at Susie and she shook her head.

Mr. Jacob had a very pleasant manner quite unlike his phone persona. “Okay,” he said. “I will come directly to the point.” He reached into a file and found a letter sliding it across the table toward me. It was folded in half. I started to read it. There was some legal junk at the top which I skimmed. It was a number near the bottom that caught my eye. There, plain to see, was the number \$57,280 000.00 Mr. Jacob noticed that I was looking at the number. “Do you know of a man by the name of Lyle Jefferson?” I nodded. He has been in contact with our office. We have represented him, well the firm has represented him for almost three decades. Mr. Jefferson passed away three weeks ago. The amount you see there is the amount outlined in his will. This money will go to you, in fact all of his estate will go to you. The \$57 million plus is hard cash but he also has quite a few properties which we, with your permission, will liquidate.”

I looked at Susie, still trying to take it in. Mr Jacob continued. “Mr. Jefferson was found dead in a motel room in Anchorage, Alaska. He died of liver failure. A month or so before he passed he contacted our office to set up the inheritance and outline the terms. Now I need to let you know that his son, his only living next-of-kin that we know about, may challenge his soundness of mind, but there is very little chance he will prevail. If you read on you will see that Mr. Jefferson made it explicit that his son was not to receive a penny.” The whole thing was notarized with two signatures. “That’s how they like

to do it in Alaska. Congratulations sir, you are now a multi-millionaire.”

We left the office in a daze. Susie said, “what do you plan to spend the money on?” I was still definitely in disbelief. “I dunno,” I said, “I’ll probably get a new car and if there is any money left over I would like to set up a foundation to study the effects of alcohol on the liver.” Susie smiled. “That would have to be one heck of a car if it cost \$57 million. How about we get something to eat?” We started with an old-fashioned chop joint a block or so from the law firm. After that things moved relatively quickly.

Lyle’s son did challenge the will but lost. Susie and I bought a small hotel in Santa Cruz. I own the place but we are planning on getting married so it will officially belong to both of us once we tie the knot. It took some time for the legal work to fall into place but most of Lyle’s bequeathment is now set aside for the Lyle Jefferson Alcohol and Kidney Research Foundation.

I learned later that Lyle was one of the founding partners of a start-up that made computer parts for Apple. Had he not cashed out when he did his fortune would be well over \$100 million. I was able to get his founding partner to chuck in \$7 million a year to help the Foundation. It was the least that he could do and to be honest he didn’t need much convincing. “Lyle was a smart cookie,” he said. “Very smart and a brilliant businessman. It’s a pity that he had such a fondness for martinis.”

I never did buy a new car. The old Ford got a full service and I splashed out to have it detailed. I use it for errands. Every now and then I think of Lyle. Susie and I named our first child Lyle and our second Jefferson. In case you are wondering, and I wouldn’t blame you if you were, I set up an annual donation to Boswell’s Circus and High Flying Act and in a moment of extravagance we bought Mama’s Brisket, BBQ and Bullshit. Mama

is retired now but once a month we get a box in the mail with ribs, brisket, a few jars of their proprietary BBQ Sauce, and while I haven’t actually seen it, I am sure that there is a large container of bullshit hidden in every shipment.

## THE SEAT BY THE WINDOW



I WAS HOME SMOKING smoking a joint, something I do on rare occasions, but my job was getting on my nerves, and I needed an escape. My home is directly across from an old graveyard. It's a beautiful place, well maintained, the holes all dug perfectly. I mean, impeccably perfect. The sides are within half an inch of being just right. I know this because when the gravediggers go home at the end of the day, I go and explore. I admit to being more than a little fascinated by the whole thing. There are always some plywood boards that need to be removed before I can peer into the pit, and then I would think to myself, "Someone is going to rest in this hole for the rest of time."

It's a busy graveyard, with a lot of people coming in for their final sleep. In the winter, when the ground is frozen, I can hear the gravediggers banging away down near the water. What they usually do is lay down a heating sheet to melt the dirt a little, then start chipping away. The frozen part is at most around six inches deep, and once they get through it, the rest is easy.

My bedroom window looks out over the graveyard, and sometimes at night, when I can't sleep, I sit by my window and watch the shadows. I love it when there is a storm, but most nights are usually quiet. I like those nights too, especially when there is a moon. One night, I was sitting and looking, and no, I hadn't been toking. There was a fresh grave about 50 yards or so away from where I was sitting. Earlier that day, they had buried a body. It was a big funeral, and cars came from the church



downtown and paraded into the graveyard following the hearse. The graveyard workers had rigged up a tent and set up chairs. There was a lone bagpiper standing off to the side. Everyone assembled for a short ceremony, and after about 45 minutes or so, the mourners left, with the bagpiper playing *Amazing Grace*. After they were gone, the gravediggers lowered a sturdy concrete box into the hole, and then lowered the coffin into the box, sealing it with a concrete lid. It all seemed a little more than necessary. You can rot inside your concrete box and stew for eternity in your own juices, or you could skip the box and let the dirt and worms do their thing. Personally, I'm not up for either; I will be going into the fire when my time comes.

I heard my wife's voice. "Are you obsessing about the graves again? Why don't you come back to bed?"

"I'm just going to stay up for a little while longer. Go back to sleep." I thought that I had seen something. Earlier in the day, after the gravediggers went home, I visited the gravesite. There was a temporary plaque that read, "Mr. Harry Arnould - 1935 - 2002." If I remember correctly, Mr. Arnould was President of our local bank, the National Grand. I stood by the grave for a while and felt a strange aura, unlike anything I had felt before.

I sat by the window a while longer and was thinking of joining my wife in our warm bed when I noticed the moon rising in the east. It was a Harvest moon and shone brilliantly. That was when I saw the shadow. There was a light wind blowing, and the leaves on the big maple were rustling and throwing their own shadows, but the one that I had seen was different. It looked like a person sitting right by the gravesite. I didn't think that any of the family would be back visiting the grave in the middle of the night, but you never know. I once saw a group of teenage girls sitting on the grave of their friend, who had been in a car accident. They were there all night, drinking and smoking and crying.

The shadow didn't move, and for a moment, I assumed that I must have been seeing things. I walked downstairs and cautiously opened the front door. Ziggy, our rescue cat, was there waiting to go out, and she followed me to the edge of the yard before rushing back into the house. Something had spooked her. I didn't want whoever or whatever the shadow was to see me, so I hid behind a tree and peered cautiously. The shadow moved slightly and was looking my way. I thought that I may have seen a brief flash of light. Then suddenly, the shadow vanished. I went closer to the grave, but there was no one there. There were no car headlights—just an empty silence except for the rustling leaves.

I went back to bed. My wife grunted and then farted. "You coming back to bed?" she mumbled.

"Yes, love, I am, but I have a strange feeling. I saw a man sitting by that new grave across the street."

"Just go to sleep. We have an early start tomorrow."

I tried to doze off, but when you have a feeling that something strange has happened, it's hard to fall asleep. I woke before the 5 o'clock alarm, feeling disturbed, but dragged myself out of bed and into the shower. When I went back to our bedroom, the sun was just coming up, and I glanced at the grave. All looked okay. I planned to investigate on my lunch break.

I work as a short-order cook in a small place downtown. My boss had recently hired a new kid who didn't know an egg from an omelet. I usually come home for lunch, even though I could eat at my workplace, but when you cook greasy food all day, sometimes all you want is a salad and a sandwich. My wife would leave both in the fridge for me.

I scoffed it down and then went across the street to the grave. There was a single cigarette butt and a burned-out match that hadn't been there the evening before when I had gone exploring.

I thought of calling my wife, but then thought better of it. All that she would say was that I was seeing things, and I probably was.

That night, I waited until my wife was sound asleep and moved to the seat by the window. There was nothing, just a light wind floating by. I was sitting there thinking that the previous night might have been nothing more than a shadow, but then I remembered that the crows that morning had been going crazy. We usually get a couple of them looking for scraps, but that morning there must have been 20 or so, most of them circling above the gravesite. I decided to sit a little longer, at least until the moon came up.

It was close to midnight when the shape drifted in and sat by the gravesite. It was definitely a person, but I couldn't tell if it was a male or a female. The person glanced my way, and I pulled the curtain shut. Then I opened it slightly and saw the sharp red glow of a cigarette butt. The next day during my lunch break, I went across the street, and sure enough, there were two used butts on the ground by the grave. I said to my wife when she got home from work, "There is something strange going on across the street." She looked at me and asked, "Have you been seeing Jackie down by the lobster shacks again?" Jackie was the one who supplied the pot.

"No, I haven't, I promise. It's just that I have a strange feeling about all of this. The crows had been back in the morning again, making a racket. Now, I am not superstitious and I am not religious, but there was most definitely some strange stuff going on. I waited until my wife had fallen asleep and found the seat by the window. All was quiet. I noticed that the wind had picked up a little and there was a distinct feeling of fall in the air. There was a sweet, dusty taste to the cool breeze. Around midnight, I saw the glow of a cigarette. Actually, I saw the bright flash of a match, then the glow. Now, I did have a martini before my wife and I turned

in for the night, but I was pretty sure what I was seeing. It was a man, and he was looking my way. I needed a drink, so I tiptoed downstairs and poured myself another martini. When I got back to our bedroom, my wife murmured, "Give it up, Tom. You're imagining things." With that, she went through her usual bedtime routine of a good fart and a long sigh, and I knew that in minutes, she would be out like a clock with a dead battery.

I went back to my seat by the window. He was still there, at least I think it was a he. Then, and I am sure that I didn't imagine it, he waved. I downed my vodka and sought refuge next to my wife. I barely slept. Even before daybreak, the crows were circling, making a racket.

"What happened last night?" my wife asked. "I thought that you were coming to bed, and what's with that racket? How come we have so many crows in the morning these days?" I just grunted. I needed coffee and some sleep. These late nights were playing havoc with my work schedule. I decided right then that enough was enough, but I knew that I wouldn't give up until I figured out what was going on.

My wife went to bed early. She had a tough job as a lawyer, and they were working on a complicated case. I think (I know) that she was getting a little pissed at me for all the late nights, but I was determined to try and figure it out.

The man, it was definitely a man, was there around midnight. I could see him looking my way, smoking a cigarette. He waved. I slipped quietly out of our bedroom, found a warm coat, and some solid shoes. I have always believed that solid shoes are important. I went out the back door of our home because the front door kept jamming and made a noise when it was opened, and I didn't want to disturb the home. Ziggy was asleep by the heater, but he woke when I opened the door. He needed to go out, but he got to the door and stopped cold. He tried to meow, but nothing came out. Just a soft sound, like a car running out of gas.

I was not at all sure what I was going to do, but I, very tentatively I might add, crossed the road and walked toward the grave. Then I heard the coyotes. There is a pack that lives in the graveyard. Sometimes they come close to our house at night. I stopped and listened for a while, and their howling got louder. I knew that they were heading our way, and I use the word 'our' lightly. I still wasn't sure if the shadow was human or just a shadow. After a while, they quieted down, and I crossed the street.

"Hello Tom," the shadow said. I couldn't see anything, but as I got closer, there was a man sitting by the graveside. "I knew that you would come sooner or later. I can sense you."

Now I could see him quite clearly. "Who are you?" I asked.

"Funny you should ask," the man replied. "I'm Harry Arnould."

"You are supposed to be dead."

"Yes, well technically yes, I am dead, but not yet. Do you smoke? I didn't smoke real cigarettes but took one anyway." He leaned over and lit it for me.

The graveyard was quiet. The earlier wind had died, and there was only the slight rustle of some of the leaves that had fallen.

"So you think that I am dead, do you? I have seen you in the window."

"Yes, you are dead, as in really, really dead. I watched them lower your coffin into the ground and cover it with a heavy cement lid and then chuck dirt on top of it."

"Tom," he said quite paternally, "you only really die when you decide it's time. I wasn't ready to die, but I am getting close. In fact, I would probably be really dead by now if I hadn't seen you in the window." I wasn't sure what to say, so I said nothing.

"Another smoke?"

"No thanks." He said, "Probably a good thing. These things can

kill you." He laughed a hollow laugh. I got the joke.

We sat in silence for a few moments. Harry puffed on his cigarette. That was when I saw the glint of a dozen brown eyes: coyotes.

"Don't worry," Harry said. "They won't bother us. They are just curious. I talked to my friend Amus, who died a few weeks ago. He said that the coyotes always come for a final farewell. I must be getting close."

I was not too sure what to make of it all. I wanted to ask him so many questions, but to be honest, I was feeling a bit awkward talking to a dead man while surrounded by coyotes. We sat for a while until Harry said, "Well, Tom, it has been fun spending my last few moments on this earth with you, and don't worry, the coyotes will go away when I decide to leave."

And with that, he was gone, and so were the coyotes.

I left a few moments later, feeling a little shaken. Luckily there was still some vodka in the bottle, and I poured myself a stiff one. Around two in the morning, I went to find my wife. She mumbled, "Where did you go?" I held her tight and said, "I will tell you tomorrow."

The next morning, there was not a single crow. Just an eerie silence. I poured my morning coffee and crossed the street. There, by the gravesite, I found a few cigarette butts, a couple of burnt-out matches, and some coyote paw prints.

I sat at the window for the next few nights but never saw him again. Mr. Harry Arnould was gone, for good, well, almost. When I walk my dog Maisy in the graveyard, she always stops by his gravesite, and when she does, I can feel a light tremble coming up from below.

## VICTORIA FALLS



**B**OTSWANA IS A LAND OF ENCHANTMENT. It's a land of snorting impalas, trumpeting elephants and the occasional roadside murder; of a baby springbok so that a pride of lions could enjoy Sunday brunch. Like a baby zebra that imprints her mother's stripes in some part of her brain so that she can always find her in a herd of ten thousand zebras, Botswana does the same. I always like to say that the air that you were born into, that first breath you take, that's what will stay with you; forever. Botswana does that for me.

I was born in a mud hut on the south side of the Chobe River. My first memory is of elephants walking past our tent is the dusk of an early evening that tasted like drinking liquid mud. The air, my Dad told me later, was thick from the dust of ten thousand wildebeests that were on their annual migration from the Serengeti to the more lush plains of Botswana. That memory is me; who I came to be, except for that one really stupid occasion when I was trying to get a flight out of Victoria Falls, the same falls that I named my daughter after. She was with me to witness my stupidity, but thankfully she doesn't remember it. Until she reads this.

Victoria, or Tory as we call her, was just seven when we first visited Botswana. I wanted her to smell the dirt, to hear the night noises. I wanted her to breathe in some African air rather than the smog of Boston. I had moved to the US and had a small apartment on Boylston Street. It was not much, just a tenement on the

third floor. My marriage had gone sour even though I still loved her mom but her Mom needed stability and I needed to roam, so for one last time we roamed to Africa and ended up with my brother who lived on the edge of Lake Ngami. We were headed for Victoria Falls so I could show Tory where her real birthplace was. I knew that I had made the right decision when the first morning over a breakfast of eggs, boerewors and a small piece of warthog, Tory said, "I feel like I am finally home."

Our plan was to drive north, through Savuti. You know Savuti. If you have ever watched a wildlife show on TV, National Geographic, or something by Sir David Attenborough, it was probably filmed in Savuti. As an aside I love Mr. Attenborough. May he live forever, but I am guessing he won't.

On our first night we camped in Moremi and would you believe it, elephants walked past our tent in the early morning as the new day sun kissed the lake where the hippos were grunting and moaning and hopefully humping. The elephants tip-toed as they hustled closer to the Mopani trees where they knew that the leaves would be sweet; at first. Mopani trees talk to each other. As soon as one leaf starts to get eaten it sends a sour sap up their trunks and to their leaves and the elephants move on. The tree also sends a message to the other trees in the area to warn them that elephants are coming their way and that they need to start sapping up in self-defense.

Tory and I had a guide, someone who would help us navigate Savuti. His name was Duma and he was pretty sure that he knew what he was doing. His jeep was old, as in very old, but it seemed to work OK. There was just Duma, Tory and me and for a while a kid named, oddly enough, Sambuka. We dropped him off in a small village in the middle of nowhere.

Tory said, "how can these people be so happy when they have so little?"

I replied, "they have all they need and that's a lesson for life." Tory scratched her toe and didn't reply but I think that she understood.

The first kill we saw was while we were having a picnic under a baobab tree. Pete had thought of everything and there was still ice in the cooler and since I wasn't driving, not that it really mattered, there were no roads anyway, I had a glass of cold Sauvignon Blanc, a nice drop from a little vineyard just to the south of Cape Town. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a young reedbuck came hurtling through our little camp. Close on its heels was a pack of hunting dogs. They had spread out with the dominant female in charge. Tell you what, never mess with a dominant female. What we had not noticed was that three dogs had been dispatched ahead of time and seconds after the reedbuck sprinted past our picnic, the three dogs attacked and within a second they had the buck on the ground.

Now if you are enjoying your dinner or reading this before bed, it's probably best to find something more serene to read. I will say this as kindly as I can, but remember that Africa is a harsh place. The dogs knew that they had to eat fast. As soon as word got out that there was a kill the hyenas would move in, only if they could beat the lions. Within minutes the wild dogs had shredded the reedbuck; eaten it alive. I could see the front legs still twitching as the back legs were being devoured and since it was so close to us, I could see in her milky brown eyes a look of pleading. Duma, myself and Tory made a run for the jeep in case we were next on the menu.

We headed north on a compass bearing. As I said, the road part was a bit sketchy. Duma said, "it's OK. I know where I am. My Dad and I used to camp here when I was around six or seven. Actually earlier than that. I remember one night we camped near a small building where they would keep the dead deer that

they had culled. It was food for the natives who worked on the reserve. Once a month they would get some meat as part of their pay.”

Tory was asleep on a few hessian bags in the back of the truck. “Wait, what?”

You were camping in a place where there were dead animals?” Duma laughed. “Yes,” he said, “there was running water there and my Mom, Daisy, likes to be clean. But anyway, me and my sister Annah were camped out in a tent. Dad and Daisy were in the car, asleep. It must have been around midnight or maybe even later when the lions arrived. They could smell the meat, you know, and they were going crazy from the smell of blood. The meat was hung in the small building but there was wire mesh on the windows so that they couldn’t get in. I woke up Annah. She was pissed at me for waking her up but she soon got the drift, if you know what I mean. We could see through the flap of the tent about a half dozen lions clambering up the sides of the roof of the building going frantic, almost intoxicated with the smell of meat. I said to Annah. ‘We need to get the fuck out of here.’ I was only around seven or eight at the time and had never sworn except for under my breath, so when I said, ‘we need to get the fuck out of here,’ Annah just said, “we need to go back to sleep.”

“I looked over at Dad’s truck. It was an old Toyota High Lux. Dad used to boast that he had close to 500,000 kilometers on the dial. In the fast fading moonlight I could see him and Daisy asleep. They had tipped their seats back and were sharing a blanket. Annah was snoring; the lions were roaring. I nudged Annah, ‘we really do need to get the fuck out of here,’ I said. Annah grunted and said, “OK.”

I looked at Duma, sure that he was kidding. I could tell by the look on his face that he was dead serious.

Duma continued, “we ran for the car. Now we were just little and even though the car was only a hundred feet away it seemed to take forever. I remember that the lions paused roaring for just a bit. I am pretty sure that they had seen us. Faith and me got to the car at about the same time but the doors were locked. One particularly scrawny lioness jumped off the roof of the small building and started our way. Luckily Daisy is a light sleeper and heard us banging on the car and clicked the unlock button on the dash. I heard the click at the same time as I heard the lioness hit the dirt. I am guessing that she was quite hungry by now. I opened the door and shoved Annah in and then followed her about two seconds before there was a loud thud of the lioness hitting the rear tire. Dad woke up and said, ‘what the fuck?’ I had never heard my Dad swear, by the way, so this was all a bit of a shock to me. It didn’t take long before the lions were all there trying to get in the car. They were frantic, but the old Toyota was bullet proof and after a while the lions went back to the small building still trying to see if they could get in. They were really worked up.”

I said to Duma, “where are we camping tonight?” He looked at me with a wide grin and said, “same place.”

There were no lions there that night. The cull only happens at the beginning of each month so we slept with pleasant dreams and upped our tent just after a dawn that had painted the sky a pale pink. We kept moving on toward Victoria Falls. It was, according to Duma, around seven hundred miles away. He had no way to be sure because, well you know, there were no roads. Just a compass bearing.

Duma was on a deadline and had to drive back to Maun so he left me and Tory at a small hotel on the border of Botswana and Zimbabwe. There was a bus that we could take to Victoria Falls. OK, by saying bus, I may have slightly exaggerated things.

It did have wheels and was covered but there was no seating arrangement and even though the sign said Maximum Occupants 60, I'm guessing that there were probably well over 150 of us and that wasn't counting chickens and a few dogs that were roaming around looking for scraps.

We were hot and smelly when we arrived in Victoria Falls. We could see the thick mist as we got closer and noticed that the scrub had turned from a dusky brown to a rich green from the runoff and spray. I asked Tory, "do you know the name of this waterfall?" She was so proud and answered, "Yes it's Victoria Falls." I shook my head, "it's called Mosi-oa-Tunya." Tory gave me a look. She said, "You told me that this was going to be Victoria Falls." She had an impish grin. "You know, Tory Falls, like me."

I said, "that's what the local people here call it. It means 'The Smoke that Thunders.' Can you hear it?" Tory looked at me and said, "I have been hearing it for the last half hour. I think that you might be losing your hearing Dad."

Our hotel was quaint in a British colonialism kind of way, and run down enough to be cheap enough for me to afford. It did have an extra perk; a swimming pool with a bar in the middle. We had barely checked in when Tory fled the room and was swimming over to the bartender. She ordered a coke. It was ten cents. I ordered a Tusker beer. It was R5.00. So cheap that I thought that I might just have to have another.

Tory was full of Coke and I was full of Tusker beer when I said, "OK my girl, let's go and check out those falls. It was a short walk and as we got closer the noise really started to thunder. There was a little pamphlet at the hotel that had guidelines for visiting the falls. One tip they recommended was a raincoat. Me, being typically me, thought screw that so by the time Tory and I got to the edge of the falls we were soaked. I was surprised that there were no fences, actually nothing to stop us from falling over the

cliff into the cauldron below. I guess that I had been living in the US too long where there are warning signs everywhere. In Africa it's kind of like 'screw you. If you want to be stupid just go ahead and fall over the edge.'

The falls were absolutely stunning. Aside from the wet and the noise, there were all kinds of animals everywhere. A black backed jackal sauntered up to us and stood staring at the water plummeting. Tory wanted to touch it but I said no. Too much time in America I guess. There were a lot of warthogs making their way along the rudimentary path that ran along the edge of the falls. I took Tory by the hand and said, "Would you like another coke?" She squeezed my hand and didn't have to reply. We went back to the pool.

Now I have never been much of a planner and still had not purchased the plane tickets back to Johannesburg. In my defense I did have the tickets from Joburg to Boston but still I needed to buy the tickets that would get us back to South Africa. What I hadn't realized was that there were limited daily flights from Vic Falls to Joburg and we needed to fly out of Johannesburg the following evening which meant either an early morning flight or an evening flight today.

Away from the falls it was hot and humid and a kid came up to me. "Hey Mister," he said, "do you want to change some money?" I brushed him off. Tory said, "He was nice Dad, why didn't you change some money with him?" I shrugged. I didn't have a good feeling about it all but the kid was persistent. "Mister," he said. "My boss can give you a much better deal than the bank." I shrugged. I did need to change money to buy our tickets back to South Africa.

It was getting really hot so Tory and I stopped in a small cafe. She had a lychee soda and I might have had a few Tuskers. The kid was there when we left. "I can get you Zim \$13 for five US.

That's a good deal, you know that right?" I leaned in closer. Zim \$13 for five US?" The kid just said, "take it or leave it." Tory said, "that sounds like a good deal Dad." I had seen earlier one of those exchange placards in front of a bank. They were advertising Zim \$10 for five US. The kid was still following close. He looked like a reasonable chap. A little scrawny but with large brown eyes and some decent looking shoes.

"OK," I said. "I need to change \$500. \$500 US dollars, that is. Can you do it?" The kid nodded. "I will check with my Boss. That's a lot of money but I think that he will do it. Give me 20 minutes," he said.

Tory said, "can I get another drink?" It was really hot. In the distance we could hear the smoke thundering. Tory and I stopped into the Acacia Cafe. She had another litchi drink and I downed two more Tuskers. The kid was back. "OK," he said, "my boss is good for the money, in fact he's going to give you Zim \$15 for five US."

"OK," I said. "Let's go ahead. I will be here. You bring the money." The kid ran off. I ordered another Tusker. This time Tory went for a cream soda.

I had the money tucked into my front pocket. I had been warned of pickpockets so was being more careful than usual. A half hour later the kid came back. "OK I have the money," he said. "Five hundred US is ZIM \$7,500. We should probably go around the corner. This place is cool with me. The manager is a good friend but I always like to keep it a bit discreet."

"Sure," I said, "Tory come with me."

We went down a side street. The kid had a huge wad of money. "It's all there. You can count it later. You know where to find me if there is anything missing." He had a charming smile, and think I have previously mentioned, he had good shoes. "But there is

nothing missing I can assure you." I gave him my \$500 in crisp notes. He handed over the wad of money tied with a thin white string. "OK Mister," he said, "I will see you tomorrow. My friends like to hang out near the Acacia Cafe. As I said, I know the manager quite well and he usually spots us a few cokes. You take care," he said, and with that he was gone. I stuffed the money in my pocket and headed down to the travel agency to buy our plane tickets to Johannesburg.

It was nice and air conditioned in the agency and the lady that was there to help us was very pleasant. "So you are just going one way to Joburg?" she asked. I nodded. "You know that they might give you some grief at customs if you don't have a ticket out of the country." I nodded again. "I have the tickets for my daughter and me. They are Joburg-Boston with a stop in the Cape Verde islands."

"Well," she said after studying her computer. The cheapest that I can find is for a 4pm this afternoon. Actually if you want to leave a little later the price is even better." I said that I would take the later flight. We had friends in Joburg that we could stay with and they would pick us up at the airport no matter the time.

"OK, so it's going to be ZIM \$4,720. Your daughter gets a discount. How would you like to pay?"

"I have cash." She clicked on her keyboard and said, "cash is good, in fact we only take cash. Our card machine is down." I pulled the wad of money out of my pocket and pulled the string to release the notes. They were all blue. The outside note was for ZIM \$100. I stared at the rest. They were all for ZIM \$1. "The little bastard," I thought. "The little fucker." He had made \$480 in cold hard cash and I was screwed. Well and truly screwed. It was all the money that I had.

Now that's not the end of this story. I did have a debit card but



was not sure how much balance I had on it. I was sure that it was not much. I guess that we have all been there at times. Standing waiting with fingers crossed.

“Tory,” I said. “We have to run. Your friend there, that dude, he scammed us.” I told the sweet lady that I would be back and asked if she could keep the reservation. There were no ATM’s in Vic Falls but we found a bank that was just closing their doors as I ran in. “Sorry Sir, we are closing.” The lady was ever so sweet but I pushed her aside. “I need to get some money,” I said. Tory said, “don’t panic Dad. It’s going to be OK.” She didn’t have any clue. I hadn’t bought any kind of travel insurance for our Joburg-Boston flight and if we missed it the tickets would be worth nothing.

There was a young woman behind the window. She had very long nails that were painted bright pink. She was just closing her window when I think that she saw the desperation on my face.

“How may I help you sir?” I smiled and nodded and then Tory said, “can we get an advance on my Dad’s card?”

The lady said, “sure I am pleased to be of service. May I please see the card?” I had it ready and handed it over. “How much do you want me to run this for?”

“Zim \$4,720. She just smiled and I thought that Zimbabwe must have good dentists. Her smile was bright white. She swiped the card. I sat with bated breath, and so Tory couldn’t see, I had my fingers crossed in my pockets.

Tory was enjoying a free lollipop that were on the counter for the taking. There was a bit of groaning from the machine, you know that old sound when you were trying to connect to the internet from a landline. (You’ve got mail - you know that sound). I looked at the pretty lady. She looked at me. It seemed to take for ages but then suddenly her smile was wide and she said, “all

set. There is a bank charge of ZIM \$400 for the transaction. We only take that in cash.” I didn’t have any money. I thought that they could have taken it out of the debit card. I was pretty much screwed. I knew that the travel agency closed in 15 minutes. Tory said, “I have the money Dad. Don’t worry. I didn’t spend it all on Cokes.” She had a little wallet and handed over the money. The lady took it and handed me my money. I think that there was something screwed up with their system. There could not possibly have been that much in my account.

I took the money. I so wanted to hug the teller but figured that it might not be appropriate. “Tory,” I said, “we have to run and by the way thank you.” Tory gave me another of her disarming smiles and said, “I have money for the taxi as well.”

They were just closing up the Travel Agency when we got there. “Oh good, you’re back. I still have your reservation. But we had better hurry. My Boss shut down the computers but I have your reservation saved,” she said and I still love her for this when she said, “it’s all here. Do you have cash because while we are still connected to the airlines, our payment system is down.” I handed over Zim \$4,720. She looked at her computer and said, “they have lowered their prices for the later flight. The cost for both of you is just Zim \$2,101.” Tory gave me a glance.

“When does it take off? Can’t we just take a flight tomorrow?”

“There are no flights on Thursdays and this flight might still be a bit of an issue,” she said. It leaves Vic Falls airport in a half hour, well maybe an hour. They are always late. You still have time.” I handed her the money. She took her time writing out the tickets and then said, “I have a brother who has a car. I already called him. He will be here in around, I dunno, seven minutes. That’s enough time to get you there.”

“But we have to stop and get our bags.”

The lady smiled and said, “this is Zimbabwe. You worry too much.”

There were goats in the road and everything started to move in slow motion. “Don’t worry,” the brother said, “I know the pilot. He’s an old school mate. He does the Vic Falls-Joburg trip five days a week.”

We pulled into the airport which was deserted. I grabbed Tory by the hand.

“We need to run.”

Tory said, “I need my bags and so do you. Right?” Oh jeez I had forgotten about the bags in the back of the car.

The small terminal was deserted. The brother parked his car and caught up to us. He went right to the back of the terminal and through a door marked, Authorized Personnel Only. I heard him say something like, “we need to stop the plane.” Tory was fidgeting. Then I saw the plane starting to taxi down the runway. It was dark out and it was the only plane there. I knew that it was our plane and I pretty much knew that we were going to miss it; and our flight back to Boston.

The brother came out looking relaxed. “It’s all set,” he said. “They are coming back to pick you up.” I was watching the plane and was certain that it was going to take off but it stopped and turned around and came back to the gate to pick us up. As we took off I could see far below The Smoke that Thunders. Tory smiled and asked, “did you really name me after that waterfall?”

## YELLOW DRESS

**T**HE WELCOME SIGN WAS FADED. It had once said, “Welcome to Bangkok where we have the Best Beaches and most Beautiful Women,” but no more. To be honest it didn’t have to say anything. The forlorn sound of the air conditioner with its occasional bang and hiss made it clear that we were not in Honolulu anymore. Far from it, but we were exactly where we wanted to be.

Jim and I shuffled forward with the throng of tired passengers, some arriving for the first time, some returning home. Before long we spilled out onto the pavement in front of the International Terminal and that was when the heat really hit. It was not like a hot day in Boston where I had spent four years chasing Freshmen from Boston College. Some days it could get a tad toasty in Massachusetts, but not like Bangkok. I could physically feel the dank air trying to suck out what moisture was left in my skinny body. “Jeeze it’s fucking hot here,” Jim said. Have you noticed? I flicked a withering look his way and tightened the belt around my waist where I kept a small wad of damp notes. “Save your voice,” I said, “It’s only going to get worse. I glanced at the sky. The cheap travel guide had promised that the real heat of the day would kick in about the same time as the sun went down.

By some miracle Jim had found us a taxi. “Good job Scorpo,” I said. Scorpo was the name his team mates on the lacrosse team at Emerson College where he was their star attack man used especially when he deserved it which was often. I opened the door and Jim shoved me in from behind. For a very brief moment

there was a respite from the heat but as soon as the driver took off we were back to where we started. Sweating like a black pig in the midday sun in Provence. We had just been in France and thought that it was hot there. How I longed for that afternoon breeze that usually kicked in and allowed the tourists to come out and sit on the sidewalk to enjoy a pastis or cold beer.

Who knows where our driver learned how to drive; clearly he had no license, just a pic of himself hanging from the rearview mirror held by a faded pink piece of lace. He seemed to know where he was going and we sped away from the airport. Jim, ever the gadget guy, had purchased one of the original iPhones and noticed that they were heading south. At least we are heading in the right direction," he said. The driver handed us his card. "We are going south. That's where the beaches are and where your hotel is." He had a wry smile. "You speak good English," I said. "Yes I do," the driver replied. "Anytime you boys need a ride, in fact anytime you need anything (he glanced in the rearview and held my gaze for a few seconds). Anytime you need anything you just call me. It doesn't matter what time of day or night."

"Thank you but I hope that we won't need your services." He nodded then swerved to miss a family of four on a scooter. "I used to live in London. You boys been to London?" We both nodded. "Great city but too expensive. It was hard to save any money to send home although I have to admit I spent quite a bit on cheap lager and once a month, as a treat, on a cheap woman."

"So what are the beaches like here?" I asked. "Jim here and me, we heard that they were nice." The driver didn't answer right away. He took his time and then he answered. "It depends what you want from a beach."

Suddenly he swerved and pulled in front of a fairly rough looking hotel. "Okay chaps," he said grinning, "this is as far as this horse is going. That's your place on the right." We paid him

and piled out of the taxi. The driver said one more time, "if you need anything. Anything. Just call. I will pick up." Neither of us knew that in the next 24 hours we would be taking him up on his offer.

The hotel had a new air conditioner which seemed to be doing okay against the swampy air. Jim said, "I am going to get some shut eye. Even the plane was hot. Wake me later when it cools off." I left him to nap and found a bar that was cool enough and ordered a cold beer. I sunk a few Singha's and it was just getting dark when Jim showed up. "I thought that I would find you here." The waiter had already cracked the top on a cold one and slid it Jim's way. We both sat in silence for a bit. Finally I said, "Did you get some sleep?" Jim nodded.

It was now dark outside and instead of things quietening down, the noise level had picked up. Families were going out all piled high on tuk tuk's. The light behind the bar was tilted just right and I could see a myriad scars on Jim's face, each a memory of a lacrosse game hard fought. "You want to get a bite?" I asked. Jim nodded. "I could eat the back leg off the front half of a hooker just ridden hard and put away wet." I had no response so didn't respond but paid our tab and we took off into the damp night air. It had cooled slightly and the bars along the beachfront had come alive. The place smelled amazing.

We found a spot that was full, a good sign for any restaurant. Jim ordered another beer and I ordered a kombucha with turmeric. We shared a plate of baked chili garlic shrimp and some crispy spring rolls and sat people watching for a while. There was plenty to see. It was still early for Thailand.

"Well this place is definitely not Provence," Jim said. "Far from it but I quite like it. I like the energy." There were a lot of small children chasing each other around while their parents smoked and got a little high. Pot, other than for medical reasons, was

illegal in Thailand but that didn't stop anyone from puffing away contentedly.

"Let's go for a walk," I said. "I'm getting hungry again and it doesn't hurt to work up an appetite." We were quite literally a hundred yards from some salt water pools that lined the shorefront. In addition to the children, teenage girls in tight fitting skirts and an obvious excess of make-up swaggered their stuff and flirted. They weren't there to eat or exercise. There was one girl wearing a tight yellow dress. Her hair was jet black, her skin olive and her eyes were a pale green. She was quite possibly the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. I noticed that Jim was staring at her and I knew that he was thinking just one thing.

A couple hundred yards down the beach were some stunningly beautiful older women, also flirting. I got the eye as we walked past and made a mental note. I could see Jim doing the same. "Did you see that lot?" Jim asked once we were out of earshot. "I think I am going to go back and see what kind of progress I can make. I didn't come here only for the swimming and food."

"You do what you need to do Skorpo," I said. "I'm going to stop up ahead and get some dinner. You will find me."

I was starting to like Bangkok and had already forgotten the heat and damp smell that was part of the midday sun. "Don't forget that we have chartered that fishing boat for tomorrow afternoon. Let's not waste our money." I had switched back to beer by the time Jim found me and I was well into a heaping plate of Pad Thai. "This shit is good. Do you want to try some?" Jim grabbed a spare fork and made himself available. "I think that I am already in love," he mumbled through a mouthful of noodles. "Did you see the one in the yellow dress? I think that she wants me badly."

"Order some more food," I said, "and stop letting your cock do all the thinking. And be careful, this is not Wellesley College." I slowed down to enjoy the atmosphere while Jim continued to

shovel food down as fast as he could. "I am going to need my strength tonight." The girl sauntered past our table. Yellow Dress was definitely making a play for Jim. One with too much red lipstick held my gaze a little longer than necessary, but I looked away and added some sugar to my coffee. It was hot and sweet and reminded me of Susan, my sweetheart from Boston.

By midnight the kids had gone home and the street had quietened. "I am going to get some sleep," I announced, but Jim wasn't listening. His mind was on other things and he had long since mentally removed the clothes from Yellow Dress. "You know where we are staying. Room number is 22. I don't expect to see you for breakfast but don't miss the boat ride." I paid my share of the bill and walked slowly back in the direction of the hotel. "I guess that I am going to be on the boat ride by myself," I mumbled. I found the hotel, stopped at the bar for a last cold one and went to bed.

The next thing I heard was a clammer at the door. Jim could not work the key so I got up and let him in. He was a mess, his hair tangled, his shirt ripped down the front and there were some blood patches on the right sleeve. He looked like he had just seen some kind of Thai ghost. "Paul you gotta come right away. I'm in deep shit. Or maybe we should just pack and get the fuck out of this country. I'm in really deep shit. The couple in the room next door banged the wall and yelled something. I grabbed Jim and placed him in a seat and said, "tell me what's going on." Jim stared blankly out the small window.

"I think that I killed the girl."

I grabbed my shirt, which smelled terrible, and found my pants. Jim and I made our way through the bar area. The bartender was asleep which I took to be a good thing even though I had no idea what I was stepping into. All that I could think of was "I killed the girl." I glanced at Jim. He was pale. "Do you know where you

are going?" He looked for a taxi and then replied, "sort of." He instructed the driver to go to the fountain on the waterfront and then take a left. We pulled up in front of a fairly decent hotel and went in. Luckily their bartender was also asleep. I followed Jim up some narrow stairs to his room. It was obvious that there had been a struggle. The sheets were in total disarray and scattered everywhere. There was a crumpled yellow dress in the corner. At first I didn't see the girl, but then I saw her naked face-down alongside the bed. "How do you know she's dead?" I asked a little too naively. "And what the fuck happened in here tonight?" Jim hung his head. The only other time I had seen him looking so forlorn was when his lacrosse team was beaten by an unknown team from Georgia. "She's dead," he said flatly. "Turn her, well turn it over." I looked at the pale corpse on the floor and said, "I'm not touching her."

Jim held his face in his hands and said, "it's not a girl that you are looking at. It's a boy. A young boy. We were just starting to have sex and things were going OK when he/she rolled over and I could see that there was a huge erection involved. The thing was all turned on. I was turned off and shocked and hit the thing in the face and it rolled over and onto its stomach and then rolled back onto its back and if you can believe it, it was even more turned on so I strangled her. I could see that she was dying when I watched the fuckers hard-on slowly deflate and then there was a loud fart and she was gone. I swear I didn't mean to kill her. I panicked."

I was feeling pretty panicked myself. For the first time I reached for her wrist but there was no pulse. She was dead with a floppy long, thin penis and a small pool of dribble dampening the sheet. "Let's get her onto the bed," I said finally. "By the way you were fucking a girlyboy. People come from all over the world to give it a go but I guess that most know what they are getting themselves into."

"How do you know so much?"

"I read an article on the plane. The police are trying to crack down but it's a lucrative part of the tourist trade. We need to get rid of her body and then get the fuck out of town. The police may be looking the other way but murder is still murder. Then I remembered. The cab driver. He said to give him a call at any time. I dug around in my pocket for his number and called. I noticed that there was a slight crack of light in the eastern sky. He answered right away. After five minutes of explanation he said that he would be there in ten and to not touch the body. Jim looked at me. "I could sure use a fucking beer about now."

The cabbie didn't knock. "Okay," he said, "I hope that you have money, and not just enough to cover a fare. We need enough to cover getting rid of a dead body and paying off a few people. He skipped downstairs and when he came back said flatly, "that's the first payment. The bartender has some boxes to stack in the back room and didn't see anything and won't see anything. Okay now let's get the body out of here. We need to wrap it tightly in the rest of the sheets. She probably doesn't weigh much but we can't have any chunks of hair scraping off on the wall." He instructed Jim to grab the legs and he took the body. I helped as best I could.

We got the body into the bar area. It was empty. Cabbie brought his cab around and the three of us were loading the body into the trunk when a police car came cruising slowly down the road. Jim had some color back in his face from the exertion but as soon as he saw the cop car the color drained again. She landed in the trunk with a dull thud. I could hear her head connect. I could not bring myself to call her anything but a female. She had been a beautiful woman with long jet black hair. The cop pulled alongside. He chatted with the cabbie and then took off. I had a feeling that they knew each other. "Get in." Jim and I piled in

and we took off through the streets of Bangkok just as dawn hit properly and a pink hue painted the east. The cabbie said, “we will settle up at the end. I am glad that you called. The cops around here run by their own rules and sometimes they work in your favor and sometimes they don’t. I have a good relationship with most of them.”

Fifteen minutes later we pulled up in front of a dilapidated house set back from the street. I noted that there were no stairs except for two brick stairs to get through the front door. It wasn’t the kind of neighborhood where people were out walking their dogs and we had the girl inside and on a bed in a couple of minutes. Cabbie covered her with a light, slightly soiled sheet. I am sure that I wasn’t seeing things but I am pretty sure that there was a pink toe sticking out from under the bed. There was a second body. Cabbie said, “OK guys I am going to run you back to your hotel. You need to act as if nothing has happened. That place has breakfast right? Take advantage of it. Act normal.” He dropped us off out front. The bartender had changed hands and even though it was early he was willing to sell us a beer. Jim took a long hit on his longneck and promptly threw up. I slid a \$20 over to the barman and he poured us another round. “Let’s go for a walk,” I said.

We stepped out onto the makeshift boardwalk and I could already feel the heat of the day start to cling. It was going to be another hot one. “I guess that we are not going fishing this afternoon.” I forced a smile. “This time yesterday we were boarding our flight.” Cabbie came by just as we were about to sit down for lunch. “I have retained a lawyer to help you guys get out of this mess. I seriously hope that you are good for some money.” We were good for some money. Jim’s father was a blueblood minus two, meaning that his great grandparents had come over on the Mayflower and his family printed the green stuff. “We are okay for money,” Jim said. “Just get us out of this place as quickly as you can.”

Cabbie left and Jim and I tucked into our fried calamari which was on the edge of being cold. I was starving. Jim not so much but then he had just killed someone. Cabbie returned with the lawyer. There was something shady about him. Maybe it was the dark glasses he was wearing or the suit that already showed thick patches of salt under his arms. He was all business. “There was a lot of evidence left at the crime scene. I can hire someone to do some cleaning and make it look not too obvious. That will cost, of course.” Jim nodded. He was desperate. I noticed that he had peed his trousers a little. The lawyer took notes, had Jim sign some affidavits, and left.

Cabbie swung by at 8. Jim and I had spent the afternoon in the hotel drinking longnecks. Cabbie came straight to the point. I will be back at midnight. There is a small commuter plane that goes to Krong Khemara. It’s mostly fishermen. The crew will need to be paid up front. I will have your bill. I need cash. I hope that’s not a problem.” Jim shook his head. “The girl will be in the trunk of my cab but, poor thing, she won’t be taking a flight to spend the day fishing. I have made arrangements for her to be buried in a shallow grave.”

Jim said, “I am good for the money but I need a couple of hours to pull it together.” Cabbie nodded. “Makes sense.” He left and Jim ordered some spring rolls and another round of longnecks. “Do you really think that we will get away with this?” I just shrugged. “Money goes a long way. From what I read these girlyboys are a problem and their lives are not worth much. We will just have to wait and see.”

Just after midnight Cabbie came by with the bill and then left again. I noticed that Jim didn’t even look at it. “Aren’t you at least curious?” Jim shrugged. “I don’t want to know how much it costs to kill a ladyboy in Bangkok and walk away as if nothing had happened.” I was curious but it wasn’t my money. I saw Jim peel

off some large notes. On the bottom of the bill there was a note. "Use the envelope and fill it with fifteen \$100 notes. Don't seal it."

We sat nervously until Jim said, I need something strong. "Do you want a rum?"

"Make mine a triple." We sat in silence sipping our drinks. Cabbie showed up again. I presume that he had the body in his trunk but didn't dare ask. We were too close to making a clean escape without messing it up with dumb questions. We ducked and weaved our way across town until we came to the airport, well to be more exact we came to a small building adjacent to the main airport terminal. As soon as we stopped two men came out with a stretcher. I could hear them loading the body onto the stretcher and saw them enter the side door. Cabbie was up front counting the money. "Nice touch on the tip," he said. "I have spent my whole life working for tips. Now follow me." I could hear what sounded like a 4-seater going through routine checks on the runway. We entered the building and I saw Jim go pale. It had been too good to be true. We walked into a brightly lit room. The last I saw of the girl was a foot sticking out from under a pink sheet. "Pink," I thought, "how ironic." Cabbie took us into the next room which was also brightly lit. A large man strode in. He was clearly the one in charge. He came over to us. I knew at the moment that we were screwed. It really had been too good to be true. Cabbie handed him the envelope filled with \$100 bills. It's all there Captain. You and your missus should enjoy a nice holiday over christmas, The Captain walked over to us. "So who did it?" he asked. Jim just nodded. I was sure that he saw his life flash in front of his eyes. "Well done," said the Captain. "We have been trying to clean the streets of these girlyboys for years. It has not been as easy as you would think. He took Jim by the hand. "The next few beers are on me but I would advise that you and your mate here stay away from Bangkok for a while. There is

good fishing here and you just snagged a trophy. Okay you need to get going."

The Captain led us out onto the tarmac. Jim and I boarded the plane. Jim handed the pilot an envelope with money. I looked to see if I could see him but Cabbie was long gone. I had a feeling that he had done this before. Jim fastened his seatbelt and so did I. The co-pilot came through the cabin for a safety check and left a dozen beers within easy reach. We taxied slowly waiting for a Thai Air jet to get its act together. As it took off we could feel our little plane shudder and smell the jet fuel. We took off into the dark night. Jim checked the compass on his iPhone. "We are heading southeast," he stated.

I sat holding onto the edge of my seat. Something did not feel quite right. Jim was in a good mood. "I can't fucking believe that we got away with it." I looked at him. "You mean you can't believe that you got away with it." Jim grunted. "I am going to look around. There really wasn't much to see. He left his seat and scampered to the back of the plane. After a few minutes I heard him say, "holy fuck." He quickly returned to his seat. "Paul, "he said, "there must be at least seven or eight bodies back there. I can't be sure but if I was a betting man I would bet that they were all girlyboys." If I had been feeling uneasy before, I was now damn sure that some monkey business was afoot. Turns out I was right.

After an hour or so I noticed what looked like a small island up ahead. We circled once. The co-pilot came back to the main cabin. "You boys enjoy the beer?" he asked. I noticed something different about him and then realised that he was wearing a parachute. "Your course is southeast," he said. "There is enough gas for about an hour or so. Have a nice flight." With that he opened the side door, stepped out onto the jump pad, and jumped. Moments later the pilot followed him. It had all happened so fast that Jim and I

had no clue what to do. Jim tugged at the controls. They seemed to be jammed. It was clear that we were losing altitude with some rapidity. The engine spluttered and the nose dipped. Within seconds we were vertical and plummeting. We hit the water at full speed. Jim died on impact. I was able to survive. I spent 12 days in a liferaft before I was rescued.

The ship that rescued me was Chinese registered and going to New York which was lucky since my apartment was on the upper east side. I felt somewhat alone in the world. Both my parents had dementia and my brother Rob and I had not spoken in over a decade. He had tried to pull a fast one by getting our Mom and Dad to sign their estate over to him. I knew that he was trying to cut me out of their will but I got wind of things and stepped in and managed to sort it out, but we never spoke after that.

After the Chinese ship dropped me off and I managed to get through Customs and Immigration without a passport I made my way to my apartment and holed up there trying to get my head around what had just happened. I debated whether or not to call Jim's parents, well his Dad anyway, his Mom had passed away, but I decided to sit on it for a while. What had happened in Bangkok was too much to explain over the phone.

I KEPT TO MYSELF but every now and then I would venture out to a small bistro on the corner of Cypress and E141st street. I liked the place. It had a friendly atmosphere and a well stocked bar. After a while I got to recognise some of the regulars. A most attractive lady came in on Thursdays. She caught my attention not only because of her beauty, but also because of her appetite. She clearly had been frequenting the bistro for a while and as soon as she sat down a glass of cold white wine and a salad appeared. I remember thinking to myself, "so that's how she keeps her near perfect figure." As soon as the wine and salad were done, the

bartender came over with a massive steak and a full bottle of red wine and the lady would proceed to demolish her meal like a seasoned pro. It was pure magic to witness.

One evening I decided to chat to her. I used to be quite good at picking up women but the murder and plane crash had shaken my confidence a little and besides I wasn't trying to pick her up. I just wanted some company. Turns out she was an associate editor at Vanity Fair magazine. She seemed to like my company and after she paid her check said, "same time next week?"

I got to know her well. Her name was Jennifer Lonsdale and she had been with the magazine for just under a decade. I thought that I could trust her with my story. I was not looking for it to be published; I just needed to get it off my chest and to tell someone so I told Jennifer. I started at the beginning and didn't leave anything out. Despite the murder and plane crash it was the trafficking in girlyboys that caught her attention. "Paul," she said to me. "We need to tell their story. This is too important to sweep under the rug. It's going to hurt, I warn you, because it will open up some wounds and it may open up some legal issues, but I want to write your story. What do you think?" By now all I was thinking was that I would like to get into her undies and readily agreed.

"Good. Let me run it past my boss and I will have an answer and a plan next week when we meet up." Jennifer was good to her word. It was not an easy sell to her editor, but she came around and gave Jennifer the go-ahead to pursue things. We met the following Thursday. "Okay Paul," she said. "I got the encouragement of my editor to dig a bit deeper. Let's go over things once more and then come up with a plan. In addition to being a brilliant writer Jennifer was good at digging and researching and with the help of Judy, her editor, the story was released in the issue that hit the shelves right before christmas. "The idea is to get to our readers



at a time when they are feeling close to their own families and will have a heightened sensitivity to the plight of the girlyboys.”

The story hit all the right buttons and all the right nerves. Some people were outraged at the injustice. Others, well it was bound to happen, others were happy about it. “They got what they deserved,” was their sentiment. It didn’t take long before Jennifer got a call from the FBI. Actually the call went to Judy first and she agreed that they could talk to Jennifer. Judy was fiercely protective of her writers but she felt that it was a very important story. Jennifer met with a Special Agent. She insisted that I sit in on the meeting. Things happened quickly after that. The higher-ups got involved and they made contact with their counterparts in Thailand. The beginnings of a sting operation was being hatched. Jennifer had insisted from the first meeting with the Special Agent that both she and myself be involved and the FBI were good to their word. That was how we found ourselves on a US military plane heading for Bangkok. The plan was to rendezvous in Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam with the swat team from Thailand and go over details of the raid in fine detail. In addition to the operation that Jim and I had become involved with, the Thai team had identified five more operations and the plan was to surprise and take out all of them at the same time.

I had never been involved in anything like this before and neither had Jennifer. We were told that we could be there with them during the raid. Seems they felt that they owed us their respect for blowing the story open to the public. We were in a small convoy heading for the airport where Jim and I had been taken. There were other similar operations going on in other parts of the city as well as in some other cities in Thailand. I sat alongside Jennifer and she took my hand. “Thank you Paul.” That was all she said but she didn’t let go of my hand. As we drove through the streets of Bangkok I could viscerally feel the dread that

I had experienced the last time I traveled those streets. In fifteen minutes or so we were approaching the small airport building. It was just after 2 in the morning. The city was still but the lights were on in the building. There were a couple of cars in the small lot and, much to my surprise, a small aircraft on the runway warming up its engine. It was the only noise that pierced the still night air. I could feel a trickle of sweat run down my back and noticed that Jennifer was dapping her face with a handkerchief. The man in charge of the operations, Jack Spaulding, gave the order. In moments the swat teams emerged from the vehicles and entered the building. Jennifer and I were with them despite being told that we were vulnerable without protective clothing. “I could care less,” Jennifer said. “I’m a journalist and I won’t miss a thing.” The first person I saw was the Captain. Two of the swat team members had him pinned up against the wall. He seemed to recognise me and looked me in the eye with a disgusted look on his face. I said, “it’s time to go fishing.”

The Captain screamed a diatribe all the while looking at me. Most of it was in Thai. Then he said, “you are supposed to be dead.” I smiled, “and don’t forget the beers. You said that you were buying.”

Across Bangkok similar raids were taking place. In all they took in 38 people (including the airplane pilot and his co-pilot). The operation had been signed off by the mayor of Bangkok despite what it would do to the tourist trade.

“It was the right thing to do,” he said at the press conference the following day. “These girlyboys are people and they are citizens of this great and diverse nation. They deserve our respect and protection.” Jennifer squeezed my hand and said, “I don’t have to be back in New York right away. How about we take a few days to ourselves. I hear that there are some beautiful resorts north of the city. I leaned in closer to her and was about to agree when

she kissed me long and hard on the lips.

I never did tell Jim's Dad what happened. If he stumbles upon this story or the article in Vanity Fair he will find out. Jim was a bit of a dick anyway and in some ways got what he deserved.

I am writing this on a small desk tucked under the stairs in Jennifer's apartment. I can hear her in the kitchen readying dinner. I tapped my pencil against my teeth trying to remember all the details of what had happened in Thailand. Jennifer emerged with a cold beer for me and a cup of camomile tea for herself. She kissed me lightly and said, "we are going to need a bigger apartment when this baby arrives."

## RUNNING WITH THE BULLS

**T**URNS OUT I WAS RUNNING with the bulls, in Pamplona, Spain. This was not my idea in fact I had no idea that it was going to happen. I had just arrived to see my friend Giovanni. He and I had sailed together in Sardinia but he never mentioned anything about it. We were having a lunch of grilled octopus with garlic bread when I noticed that he kept looking toward the window. I was a bit jet lagged and the coffee had not yet kicked in, but there was something furtive about him. I knew that he and his girlfriend Gia had been going through some rough times and I thought that he was looking for her. He told me that she could make quite a scene when she entered a room.

"Per Favor," I said to the waitress, who by the way was stunning. And also by the way, my Spanish is terrible. She came over anyway and I pointed to my empty cup and she came back fully loaded with two pots of hot black coffee, one regular and one espresso. I just pointed to my cup and she said, "Te gustarна мбs?" Giovanni leaned over and said, "she asked if you wanted more"

"Gracias," and pointed toward the pot of espresso.

I felt that there was a bit of a buzz in the air but put it down to the two shots of Licor 43 that I had enjoyed with my coffee. I was almost done with both when the restaurant started to shake, just a little. Giovanni took me by the arm and said, "Let's go."

I replied, "but we haven't paid the bill yet."

Giovanni said, "they know where to find me. Let's go." I followed

him out the restaurant and the first thing that I saw was a few dozen men sprinting up the cobble street. "Just wait," Giovanni said, "I want you to have the full experience." Then I knew what he meant. There must have been 50 or so very pissed off bulls coming our way. "Let's go," said Giovanni. He grabbed my arm. "You had better start running or else you are going to get a bull horn up your arse." I ran like my pants were on fire. Problem was I was a good runner fueled by espresso and Licor 43, but the people in front of me, mostly men, were fueled only by weak Sangria or lite beer and they were not running as fast as I would have liked.

I could hear the bulls getting closer.

Then I heard a loud screech from someone behind me. One of the bulls had found a target. My natural instinct would have been to go back to see if I could help but when I looked over my shoulder all I saw were a bunch of terrified Spaniards and some tourists, being chased by bulls and the bulls were closing in. Long story short, I got gored.

I could feel it coming. There was some loud snorting, the kind that can only come from a very upset bull and despite my best efforts by dodging from side to side, I felt his breath on my back just before I felt the horn go in, well you know where. It was quite easy after that. Mr. Bull took a deep dig, pushed me along and then flicked me over a stone wall. The next thing I knew I was in the emergency room at the Hospital General de la Misericordia, also known as the Hospital of Mercy. I most definitely needed some mercy.

It was an eight hour operation to stitch me back together. Things had gotten a little ripped down there. When I woke there was this most beautiful woman sitting next to me. She took my hand and said, "you will be okay. Giovanni told me that you were here. He had to go to some regatta, in Malta I think." I felt like crap, my arse was on fire, but her hand was soft, and warm. I dozed off

for a while and when I woke she was still there, still holding my hand. "Who are you?" I asked.

"I'm Gia. I used to be Giovanni's girlfriend but no more." The nurse came in with some painkillers. I usually gag when I have to swallow pills. She said, "we have been giving you pain medication intravenously, but now you need to take it in the mouth." I tried to smile at that comment, but couldn't. Gia helped me up and held the pills in one hand and a glass of water in the other. "Take these," she said. "They will help." I didn't want to look helpless so I threw the pills in and swallowed as much water as I could. They helped and I fell back asleep.

I could tell that it was late at night when I woke. Even though I had been sedated since I was admitted I had noticed the sounds of the hospital. During the day there was a lot of noise, people coming and going, but at night it got quiet, just some nurses doing their rounds. I looked over and Gia was asleep in the chair in the corner. There was an empty food plate next to her. The nurses must have bought her dinner. I shuffled and she woke right up. "You okay?"

I actually felt much better and three days later I was discharged. I would have to go back in a week's time to get my stitches removed. Gia was there to help me. "That bloody bastardo Giovanni is now at a regatta in Sardinia. I talked to him. He didn't even ask about you so I am taking matters into my own hands. That's an English saying right?"

"Yes it is. What do you mean?"

"Me and Giovanni, we are done. Done, done, done. I am taking you to my mothers house in Bilboa. I have already spoken to her. She says that she will take care of you and besides Bilboa is one of the most beautiful towns in Spain, probably in the world." I had no argument. I could barely walk and would still have to deal with the hospital charges.

Gia said, “my mother grew up in Cincinnati. She speaks perfect English. She fell in love with my father when he was on a scholarship and he convinced her to move to Spain. Their relationship lasted long enough to make me, and then my father took off with a younger woman, a girl actually. She worked at the local bakery. She was always covered in flour. I guess that my father liked flour. They moved to a small town in the Pyrenees and I never saw or heard from him again. It’s okay, I have my mother. You will meet her soon.”

We were driving the road between Pamplona and Bilboa. Gia was giving me her life history and I was trying to be comfortable without it seeming too obvious. The countryside was dry and a little bleak but they had plenty of my favorite trees growing; lemon trees. We stopped at a small roadside shack and ordered a couple of fish taco’s and a pitcher of sangria. With each sip the pain subsided and when we got back into the car I could almost sit up straight.

Bilboa is a sprawling city and the outskirts were scattered with farms, but once we got closer to the city center I saw this most magnificent building. “That’s the Guggenheim Museum,” Gia said. “It’s one of our treasures.” It really was quite spectacular. After about 15 minutes or so we started to go up a steep hill. “Here we are,” Gia said. There was a small whitewashed cottage overlooking the ocean. The view was beyond spectacular.

“Come on, let’s go and say hi to my Mom.” It took me some time to get out of the car, the sangria had worn off, but Gia took me by the arm and led me to the front door. “Mama, I am here with Chip.” There was some shuffling but moments later this beautiful woman came into the room. She kissed Gia and she kissed me and said, “please sit. I have the kettle ready and baked some Brazi Gitano.” She went into the kitchen and returned with three steaming cups of tea and a pastry that looked like something I

had once had on a previous trip to Spain. It was rolled with a crisp outside and an inside that was light and fluffy and filled with raspberry jam. Being gored by a bull seemed a long time ago.

Mom’s name was Patsy and she took good care of me. Gia had to return to Pamplona for work but when she left she kissed me long and hard on the lips. And then reached behind me and squeezed my butt. She came as often as she could to check in on me. I was most definitely on the mend and Gia was most definitely on the move. Her deep brown eyes and long eyelashes told the story. I had Giovanni’s cell number but didn’t call. I was still pissed at him. I made it my mission to go back to the restaurant to settle our bill. I don’t like leaving debris in my wake and I was sure that Giovanni hadn’t done the right thing.

The weather was warm and the view over the Bay of Biscay almost too much to take in. I could see a lot of sailboats out on the water and occasionally some ships heading for Les Sables d’Olonne in France, but for the most part it was just a sparkling blue sea. Patsy had set me up with a chair where I was comfortable. She never mentioned her husband, apparently they never got divorced, but she did talk longingly about home back in the US. I noticed that she had been easing her chair a little closer to mine until we were side-by-side sitting very close together. At one point she reached out for my hand and I let her hold it, grateful for all she had done for me.

Gia took me back to the hospital to have the stitches removed and things were working okay in the plumbing department. It was in the car on the way back to Bilboa that she made her feelings known. “When you are fully healed I am getting us a hotel room. I know a place that is great and not too expensive.” I took her by the hand and said simply, “thank you.”

It was a warm late summer day. Gia was off on a business trip. I was dozing while reading a book. Patsy made a mean sangria. It

was pretty much standard stuff. Chilled red wine and a lot of fruit. I had started to notice that on occasion it tasted a little different. Patsy had been adding at first a slight pour of vodka, but she kept on upping the amount to the point where two of them had me looking for the cow jumping over the moon. I was just starting on my third when I sensed her behind me. She put her hands on my shoulders and said, "Okay Chip." it's time. I thought that it was Gia but when she leaned around to kiss me, I saw that it was Patsy. "It's time," she repeated.

"Follow me." She had me by the hand and it was not hard to notice that she was wearing a sheer negligee. I followed her into the house and up the stairs. I had never been in her bedroom but it was just perfect. A puffed up down comforter with two small throw cushions. One had the words Love embroidered in pink and the other said Peace. It was embroidered in white with a dove flying above. I looked around the room and as much as I tried to ignore it, I saw a condom on the side table.

We were doing it and the 'it' was great. It had been a while since I last did 'it'. I was resting happily in Patsy's arms when I heard a click in the door. It was Gia back early from her business trip. She found us well, under the covers. She slammed the door and stormed out.

I now live in Bilboa in a small whitewashed cottage overlooking the Bay of Biscay.

## NANTUCKET SLEIGHRIDE

**I**T WAS THE SUMMER OF '69. There was a big concert happening on a dairy farm in Bethel, New York. It was a time of peace, love and music and as my friend Roman put it, it was a time of drinking, stinking and going naked. I was doing all of the above but I was not in New York. I was on a 32-foot wooden double-ender cruising the Lower Antilles, what was then known, as the West Indies. Why they changed the name from one that conjured up spices, pirates, nomads and general misfits and replaced it with Caribbean is beyond me, but there you go. Actually Caribbean perhaps better describes the area as it came from the Spanish word Caribe which means that it pertained to the Caribe, an indigenous ethnic group that called the Lower Antilles home. I still prefer West Indies.

I had won the yacht in a poker game played in a smoke filled bar in Johannesburg. I was making my way north from my family home in Margate, a small seaside town about 100 miles south of Durban on South Africa's east coast. I was heading for the bush in Botswana to see lions and other wild animals and hopefully eke out a living trading hides. Hunting in the area was legal at the time and I had heard that many young men were doing okay, well at least they were able to feed themselves while having the adventure of a lifetime which at that stage of my life that was pretty much all I needed.

It was a bit by chance that I stumbled on the smoky bar. I was looking for a cold Lion Lager to wash the dust away and have always gravitated toward the more seedy looking places. This

place measured up quite well. It was dark, smelled of spilt beer and unwashed men; my kind of place. I had sunk my first cold one when I noticed, or rather heard a lot of noise coming from an adjacent room. I stuck my head in and saw that an animated game of poker was going on. I was new to the game but joined in and luck would you have it, I started to win. It was total beginner's luck. As my Mum used to say, "Jannie you have no brains but you have big balls and you were born under a lucky star." Both had served me well over the years and that hot summer night in JoBurg was no exception. What it came down to was this. Four out of my five fellow poker players had cash in hand. When I showed them my full flush they knew that their night was over and dug around to find the cash to pay their part. Harry, an old guy who had been nursing a gin, looked a bit sheepish. "I can't cover my part," he said. "But I have an idea. Hey Mister, can you sail?" He was looking at me.

"Nope. I once went out on a friend's boat and felt sick."

"Don't worry, you will get over it. Here is my proposal. I have my boat for sale in Durban. She's a real beauty. The old lady could take you around the world if you wanted. Let's make a deal." Harry leaned back in his seat. "There is enough money on the table here, plus my bit that I owe to cover the cost of the boat. Why don't I keep the winnings? You were lucky after all. Why don't I keep the winnings and you can have the boat." I kind of liked the idea. My second choice behind trading skins in Botswana was to look for a ride on a sailboat going anywhere. This looked like a good opportunity. My lack of brains and my big balls were fighting it out and the balls won so I asked, "what's the name of the boat." Harry knew that he had a fish on a hook and leaned in. "She's a real beauty with a beautiful name; Nantucket Sleighride. You know what a Nantucket Sleighride is Mister?" I shrugged and said, "I have no idea."

"The boat was built on Martha's Vineyard off Cape Cod in the United States. Right next to Martha's Vineyard is a small island by the name of Nantucket. Back then it was a whaling center and the fishermen used to go out and spear the whales. You see, once they spear a whale their harpoon gets embedded under its skin and the whale takes off dragging the men in their open boat behind them. The whale is usually pissed off and takes the men on a wild ride called the Nantucket Sleighride." Harry had me sold.

"OK," I said. "It's a deal," and that was how I became a boat owner. I fell in love at first sight. The boat had been sitting for a while and was clearly in need of some TLC. To my very untrained eye she looked seaworthy and I spent six months knee deep in paint, wood shavings and grease and the old girl emerged looking like a bride on her wedding day. All was good except that I didn't know how to sail. Luckily I had made some friends along the way and one of the older members at the local yacht club who went by the name Dug the Tug because he was a tugboat captain in Durban Harbor for 40 years, offered to teach me.

We cast off from the small dock which the boat had called home for over two years since Harry tied it up and left. I had the engine working and it purred noisily as we made our way past the Bluffs at the entrance to Durban Harbor. The forecast was for a light to moderate easterly and we soon encountered a bit of a swell. With Dug barking commands I got the mainsail up and the jib ready to go. It was attached to the forestay with brass hanks.

Dug said, "let's hold off on setting the jib until we get away from land and see how much wind there really is. Land always affects wind, don't forget that." Nantucket Sleighride heeled slightly and I heard some things shift below. Soon we were sailing up the coast rolling with each swell that passed under our keel. The surfers were out and we were close enough that they waved and

we waved back. "People always wave to sailors," Dug said. "I only wish that they were as nice on land." Then he added, "I think that we can manage more sail area. How do you feel about setting the jib?"

I scooted forward holding on tightly. The once stable deck that I had become used to while at the dock was tilted and bouncing like a baby bronco finding its rhythm. I hooked on the halyard, clambered back to the mast and raised the jib. Back aft in the cockpit Dug pulled it in and the old girl really took off. The rail was down and some water sloshed into the deck but it was clear that the boat was in her element. So was I. There was a thrill that I felt and it felt good."

We sailed parallel with the coast until Dug said, "Let's turn back for home. I see some dark clouds to the east. That's usually a sign that the sea breeze is going to kick in and we might find ourselves in a little too much wind." Dug was right. Just as we were entering the harbor the wind picked up but we were safely tucked in behind the bluff and took down and stowed the sails. Dug said, "on hot days the land heats up. The air gets warm and it starts to rise. The only way to replace the air is to suck in new cooler air from the ocean. That's why it's called a sea breeze and usually kicks in toward the end of the day. You have to keep an eye out for those clouds. They are a sign." I would learn over the next few months that there were signs all over the place. The ocean is a patchwork of surprises. Dug pointed some of them out but said, "you will need to get away from the influence of land to see the rest."

The thought of heading out to sea was becoming more of a reality and my confidence was growing. I knew that I could handle the boat and had been taking night classes in seamanship and navigation held in the basement of the yacht club. The members at the club were supportive. "You can do it Jannie. Remember,

keep one hand on the tiller and the other on the boat and keep an eye on that barometer and the sky and you can get anywhere you want to go especially if you are not in any great rush." I wasn't in a rush. My Dad had been driving up from Margate on weekends to help me with the boat and he was supportive.

"Your Mum would be okay with all of this."

Mum had died in a car crash on the N2 when I was little and Dad had never remarried. That's not to say that he didn't have a bunch of girlfriends. Funny, I did notice, even as a teenager, that Dad preferred women with flat chests. I had read and my school mates confirmed that most men like big boobs, but not Dad. He liked them flat as a board. For Christmas he bought me a brass sextant for navigating and my brother Sam splashed out on all the sight reduction tables that I would need to find my way around the world using both the sun, stars and the moon for navigation.

I told Dug, "I think that I am going to head for the West Indies. They sound like my kind of place," and Dug replied, "it has always been my dream to cross an ocean." I had been going to the library in Durban and studying weather patterns and it looked like getting down the coast of South Africa might be a challenge, but the prevailing winds from Cape Town to Brazil were the southeasterly trade winds and I could ride them with the wind at my back for the most part. Dug said, "if you like I can sail with you as far as Cape Town. This coast can be rough and you will need another hand until you get the hang of things." I was grateful. I wanted some help but didn't want to ask.

By the end of January Nantucket Sleighride was ready to go. The fact that I was broke didn't bother me. I would find some way to make it. There were a number of boats that pulled into Durban on their voyage around the world and I learned a lot from them. "One old guy on a boat called Secondi told me over a cold

coke. "Buy as much whiskey as you can afford. Not for you but to trade once you get to Brazil. Whiskey here is cheap and whiskey in Brazil is expensive. If you get the good stuff you will make a handsome profit," and so when I got to Cape Town I stocked the bilge of the boat with good Cape whiskey. The old lady was a bit overloaded but I was in no rush and didn't mind. I didn't drink whiskey so the cargo was safe with me.

There was a small gathering when I left the dock. The club members had heard about my whiskey plan and had each bought a bottle of good stuff as a going-away present. It was the start of my cargo collection; I would buy the rest in Cape Town. The Commodore of the club presented me with a South African flag to fly from the stern of the boat and said, "do us proud. Make your country proud, but don't forget us." Then, to great laughter, he handed me a box of laxatives. "These are for when Jannie kan nie kak nie. He also handed me a bottle of Pepto Bismol. "This is for Jannie when he kak's too much. Remember, take care of the boat first and your stomach second, both what goes in and what comes out the other end." With that they cast my lines and Dug and I motored slowly out through the bluffs and pointed the bow south. The forecast was good for at least 48 hours and I had my small shortwave radio tuned to a channel that gave weather information.

The first 24-hours were almost perfect. Dug and I took turns taking watches. Our main concern were ships heading from East London or Port Elizabeth to Durban. I had learned from my seamanship classes how to read their navigation lights and we passed a couple without incident. We pulled into East London after a week at sea and celebrated at the local yacht club with a steak dinner and a couple of Lion Lagers, compliments of Dug. I tried to pay my share but Dug just said, "save your money. You are going to need it."

We were lucky and the second stage of our trip to Port Elizabeth was also fairly easy. We stayed briefly. Dug was keen to get back home and I was keen to keep on going. We might have paid more attention to the weather forecast, but the passage so far had lulled both of us into complacency.

The second night out of PE the weather changed. We were riding a fair current toward Cape Town when a southerly wind picked up. Seasoned mariners know that wind against tide can make for some rough sailing and sure enough things started to get rough. Adding to the wind against tide situation, the water shallows. The continental shelf extends out into the sea and wind blowing up from the deep cold waters of the Southern Ocean kick up a cauldron and we were getting stewed badly. We had not planned well and I didn't have any charts for the coast. My goal was to sail big city to big city and we were starting to get pummeled. Dug said, "I read somewhere that many ships have sunk right about here because of the shallower water." All I could think of to say was, "fuck, we are fucking fucked."

We were in bad shape but Nantucket Sleighride soldiered on while we held tight for two full days and three nights before the wind subsided enough for us to catch our breath. We were wet, bedraggled and starving and had made very little progress toward Cape Town. But at least we were in one piece and I had weathered my first gale at sea and survived.

The rest of the trip was okay. The wind swung around to the north and we enjoyed some decent sailing rounding Cape Agulhas which is the southernmost point in Africa and two days later rounded Cape Point. We sailed along one of the most stunning coasts I had ever seen, dodging the fishing fleet coming out of Hout Bay until we sailed into Table Bay and found our way to the Royal Cape Yacht Club. Dug left right away. The trip had taken a lot longer than we had anticipated and he was keen to



get home. I was taken in by the members of the club and made to feel like I was one of their own. I was just starting to understand the kindness and camaraderie shared by sailors that had sailed blue water.

The boat was tied up against an old seawall which was OK except when the Cape Doctor blew through. The Cape Doctor was a powerful southeasterly wind that blew a tablecloth down over table mountain and dogs off chains if they ventured out along Adderley Street, the main street in Cape Town. The wind funneled between the tall buildings and hit the boats at the club with extra ferocity as the club was located at bottom of Adderley Street.

The first thing I did was buy a bike and find a job. I was going to need money and the club offered me a job waiting tables. It was perfect because I got to meet most of the members and they came to call me and their Klein Kakhuis, a derogatory term but said with warmth that I wore like a badge. During the day I worked on the boat stopping to work the lunch shift and then again the evening shift. I had decided to spend the rest of the year in Cape Town, partly because I wanted to sail across the Atlantic in the summer and partly because I had met a girl. I know, it's the usual story isn't it?

Liz was one of the daughters of a prominent club member. She had a wild streak in her and was attracted to me because she saw the same craziness in my spirit. Her father didn't approve which only made Liz happier knowing that she had made a good decision. Most nights we would sit below on Nantucket Sleighride and sip wine from a box. Liz was okay on guitar but she more than made up for it with her beautiful voice. Later we would tuck up my small bunk in the forepeak and most nights make love. It was an almost perfect life but I knew that one day I was going to have to say goodbye. I wanted to sail across the Atlantic alone.

For Christmas Liz gave me a kitten. She was a sweet calico cat but she had a mean streak when hungry. Liz whispered to me, "now you can have some pussy all the way across the Atlantic."

I left the day before my 21st birthday. The boat was stocked with food and fuel, a lot of fishing gear and more than a dozen cases of whiskey. I would not only be a sailor but a trader of goods. Leaving was bittersweet. I was excited to go but I could see the sadness in Liz's eyes. I had given her a ring carved from elephant tusk and she was twirling it on her finger. Some of the members came by with bottles of whiskey and then it was time to go. I kissed Liz and could taste the salt of her tears. I looked into her lovely brown eyes and felt guilty. The sooner I was away, the better. I knew that I would not be able to hold back my own tears for much longer. Liz had named the kitten Sunflower, but I called her Sunny. She was pacing the deck stopping every now and then for a scratch behind her ears and then the lines were ashore and I was off.

Table Mountain looms large and is quite possibly the most spectacular mountain in the world. It throws a long wind shadow and the water was calm. I motored Nantucket Sleighride past Robben Island where Nelson Mandela was being held prisoner and soon picked up a light breeze. The boat heeled slightly and water trickled down the hull. Table Mountain started to sink into the sea behind me and by the following morning was out of sight. I was finally alone, at sea, on my boat. There was a small rain squall and I took advantage of the free water to scrub the soot and grime of the docks off the deck and enjoyed a quick shower. That was when Sunny's nasty side came out. I had forgotten to feed her.

Looking back on things I had been lucky. I had slipped the grip of land, something that stops many sailors from following their dreams. I had left behind a beautiful girl who I knew would

remember me for a long time and on my second day I picked up the trade winds. "What do you think Sunny?" I asked. "Should I make you a lifejacket?" Sunny rubbed up against me and gave me that look that said, "I don't need a life jacket but I do need some food."

I read somewhere that there is rhythm to life at sea and it did not take me long to find my rhythm. Nantucket Sleighride had a small wind vane on the stern of the boat that would steer the boat when I was asleep. It worked well and I slept a half hour at a time. I set my small alarm clock to wake me and I would poke my head out of the companionway and check on things. Mostly I was checking for ships but we were well out of the shipping lanes and other than a couple that I saw on my first night at sea, there was just me and the open ocean; oh and Sunny too. She had quickly found her sea legs and liked to climb up onto the boom and rest in the crease along the foot of the sail. From there she had a great view of all her surroundings which to a cat must have been a little monotonous. That was until we were visited by our first pod of dolphins. They came at us squeaking and splashing and played in the bow wave darting under the boat and basically having a blast. "What do you think Sunny?" Sunny just meowed quietly but watched the beautiful creatures with great interest. I was mesmerized. Sunny was hungry and as soon as the dolphins left I fed her. Liz had made a small litter box for her and once a day I tossed things overboard and filled the box with fresh litter.

At night I would listen to the radio and since it was single-sideband I was able to pick up stations from as far away as the Soviet Union and all over Europe. I like to tune to the BBC which broadcasted out of London. Late in the evening they would air some drama shows and I cuddled up with Sunny next to me listening. Nantucket Sleighride was sailing herself and we were making good progress. Around noon each day I would take a

sun-sight with the sextant. It was a magical process. You would point a mirror at the sun and then read the angle between the sun and the horizon off the sextant. I would take the time which was accurately synced with the BBC and then use the Sight Reduction Tables to get lines of longitude and latitude which I would then plot on my chart. Little by little we were making progress

My first stop would be the British island of St Helena. It's a small island that was originally discovered by the Portuguese (wasn't everything) but is now British owned. After three weeks at sea I saw a small smudge on the horizon. I thought that it was just a low cloud but as we got closer the island seemed to rise up out of the ocean. "Look Sunny," I said, "it's our first landfall as a team." Sunny just meowed and rubbed against my leg. She could care less about the landfall; her bowl was empty and her little tummy was rumbling.

It was sunset when we pulled into the small bay off the main town of Jamestown. I anchored off the dock and launched my surfboard. It was my only means of transport from the boat to land. I had the ships papers in hand, but it turns out that the Customs office was closed for the day. I asked in a small cafe. "Don't worry about it. You can come back tomorrow and clear your papers. You are supposed to stay on the boat until then but no one cares so if you want to come ashore for the night it won't be a problem."

"Is there a good place to eat?" The lady in the cafe shrugged. "There are no bad places on the island. What do you fancy? Fish or steak." I had forgotten how much I missed fresh food. "Steak," I replied.

"Then walk up the main street for a couple of blocks. You will see a place called The Blue Lantern. They have good food." I paddled out to the boat. "Hey Sunny," I said. "You want to go out on a date tonight? You will have to dress up a little. I am

taking you to a fancy place.” Sunny just meowed and stared at her bowl. “You have plenty of food and I don’t want you to ruin your appetite.” I had made a small backpack and squeezed Sunny in and strapped the bag to my back. “Okay, let’s go.” I hopped back onto my surfboard and paddled ashore, Sunny looking over my shoulder as if she was some old sea captain in charge of her own ship.

We walked up through town looking into shop windows and looking for the Blue Lantern. Sunny was trotting along beside me acting as if she owned the place. We found the restaurant and stopped in. The food was great, the beer cold and best of all they loved Sunny, bringing her a bowl of milk and some scraps of fish. She looked pleased to be back on land. The next morning I cleared customs and asked directions to the Post Office. I had given it out as an address and there were a few letters waiting for me. I decided to wait until I was back on the boat to read them. I paddled slowly and Sunny was there to greet me. She was running up and down the deck meowing loudly. “OK next time I won’t forget you,” I said. I had bought a six pack of beer and settled in the small cockpit to read the letters. The first was one from my brother. It started, “if you are reading this you didn’t die. We have been worried about you.” He went on to talk about some rugby scores. The Springboks were on fire and would likely make it to the World Cup. I already knew this because I had the BBC to keep me informed. I took a long hit on my beer and continued reading. “If you are reading this you are alive but my next bit of news might kill you. Dad admitted to me that he’s gay. I stopped by unexpectedly to see him and he was there with some other man. They both looked guilty of something and when the man left Dad asked me to sit and told me that he was gay. He said that he knew it since he was a child. He says that he knew it when he was married to Mum. I’m OK with it. What do you think? Please

write back with news of your trip and also tell me what you think about Dad’s news.”

I finished my beer in one long pull and set it aside. I kind of had a suspicion about my Dad but it’s not something you talk about with a parent, at least in our home those things are better left unsaid. “I think I need another beer,” I said to Sunny. She opened one eye and went back to sleep. I cracked the beer and sat for a few minutes. All that I could come up with was, “well I guess that’s why he liked women with very small breasts.”

There was a letter from Dad but he didn’t bring it up. There was one from the Royal Cape Yacht Club telling me that I still owed R3.00 on my tab but that they would forgive the amount because it was their mistake. Then there were five letters from Liz. I looked at the postmarks and started with the one that had been mailed first. It was clear that she was devastated. “I cried and cried after you left. I drove to the top of Lions Head and watched you sailing out of Table Bay. I watched you until I could not see you anymore and then you were gone and I cried some more.” The other letters had some news about our friends but it was a paragraph in the last one that caught my eye. “I’m sorry to tell you about this in a letter, but there is no other way. I met someone at my dance class. He’s really nice. I think that you would like him even though he is really different from you. We have only been out a few times but he has already hinted that he wants to marry me. You never know.” Instead of a full-stop she drew a smiley face. I never did hear from her again. “That’s the life of a sailor,” I said to Sunny. She just meowed and looked longingly at her bowl.

We stayed in St Helena for a week. By we I mean me, Sunny and Nantucket Sleighride. We were becoming a family. I cleared Customs, upped anchor and watched as the sun set spluttering and sizzling as it dipped into the ocean ahead of us. We were

heading for Ascension Island some 700 miles away. We were already in the tradewinds and early the next morning I heard a thump on the deck and some scuffling. I glanced at the foot of my bunk and saw that Sunny was not in her usual place. I quickly went on deck and there was Sunny chewing on a flying fish. A second one crashed into the coachroof and Sunny quickly put it out of its misery. She was going to have a feast. I had only heard about flying fish but had never seen one. I read somewhere that when there are a lot of them it's called a 'glide of flying fish' (love that term) and when there are a lot of them they are usually being chased by some kind of game fish. I grabbed my fishing line and chucked it overboard. It trailed a bright silver lure and within a minute I got a hit. I slowly pulled the fish aboard as it fought desperately to escape, but soon it was in my net and on deck. I whacked it between the eyes with a winch handle and it flopped around for a minute or so until I got another chance to hit it. The fish was a mahi mahi. It was a stunning green, just a beautiful fish and I felt quite bad about killing it. I felt even worse when all the color drained out of it and moments later it was just a dull gray fish covered in blood. Sunny came over to check on things. "This is too much for you to eat you greedy girl," I said. "Plus you have already had two fish of your own."

I gutted the fish and filleted it, the beautiful slices of fish smelling so sweet and fresh I thought of eating it raw. Nantucket Sleighride had a small alcohol stove and in moments I had it going. I still had some fresh butter that I had bought in St Helena. It took only a minute each side to fry the fish and I had it with a little lemon for my breakfast. In fact I would have fish for every meal until I dropped anchor off Ascension island. My life as a sailor was shaping up to be one grand adventure.

Ascension Island is a bit of a strange place. For a start it's barren and rather featureless. On the west side is an American military

base and on the east side there is a British military base. I guess both were chosen for strategic reasons but they did nothing to beautify the island. I happened to drop my anchor on the west side but had to clear customs on the other side of the island. Luckily enough Sunny and I ran into a guy driving an old Chevy. I had my thumb out and he pulled over. "You need a ride?" he asked in a strong Texas accent. It seemed obvious that I needed a ride but didn't say so. The man gestured and I hopped in beside him. He took me and Sunny to Customs and it took a full three minutes to clear in. The man waited for me. "I will drive you back to your boat but you must promise me that you will come to the bar tonight. Me and my missus go every Tuesday and Saturday night and we get well and truly hammered. There is very little else to do on this island other than get drunk." He pulled up to a small jetty and Sunny and I climbed out. "I will pick you up at six," he said and took off in a cloud of dust. It was clear that the chevy needed some work done on the muffler as I could hear the car long after he turned the corner.

Sunny and I cooked up the last of the mahi mahi, actually it was the last of the third one I had caught on the passage to Ascension. Hooking one was like shooting fish in a barrel and I only went for the smaller ones because I didn't have any kind of refrigeration onboard. "You fancy something different for lunch?" Sunny just meowed. To her food was food and her tiny belly was always grumbling. I decided to try my hand at spearfishing. I had never done it before and was eager to get in the crystal water. Sunny watched me gather the pieces I needed and as I dropped into the water I looked up to see her concerned little face looking down at me. I spat into my goggles to keep them from fogging and said, "don't worry about me. I'm going shopping."

It was a different world under the water. I did a quick examination of the hull and all was good except for a small amount of weed

that had grown around the base of the keel and on the rudder. I would have to dive on the boat before leaving and scrape it clean. The water was not deep and I snorkeled among a few bits of coral and some rocks. It was quiet and a little serene and there were fish everywhere. A school of small fish with big teeth swam by. They looked like the piranhas that I had seen in books. Luckily they left me alone. A large grouper swam up to me and stared into my eyes through my goggles. He was safe. Mr. Grouper could have fed a family of four for a week or more. He lost interest and swam away. Even with Sunny's voracious appetite it was still too much food for us to eat and I didn't want any waste. Then out of the corner of my eye I saw lunch. The small octopus, well disguised against the sand and gravel on the bottom of the ocean, scuttled along looking for a rock to hide under. I ignored it and swam away where I readied my speargun. I took a deep breath, dropped to the bottom and ambushed the octopus. Beginner's luck I guess (I seem to have a lot of that - I was born under a lucky star after all as Mum once told me) but I hit the octopus right in its soft belly. The poor thing struggled for a bit but I had hooked and me and Sunny looked forward to a nice meal.

I cleaned the octopus feeding Sunny scraps. I heated a pot of water on my little alcohol burner and let my lunch simmer for the better part of an hour. It softened up nicely and I was getting hungry. I had a small amount of olive oil left and a few cloves of garlic which I chopped and let simmer gently in the slowly warming olive oil. I dried the octopus off, cut it into bite sized chunks and dropped it into the oil. In a few minutes I had a meal fit for a sailor. Sunny was full from scraps but that didn't stop her from coming over and trying to help herself to my meal. She was not used to hot food and the garlic was unfamiliar so she spat it out and found a place in the shade to take a nap.

That night the man, Bill was his name, picked me up. "This here

is my missus," he said pointing to a very busty blond perched on the seat alongside him. She scooted over to make room for me. She smelled good. "I'm Dolly," she said and extended her hand. "Pleased to meet you." She reminded me a little of pictures that I had seen of Dolly Parton.

The bar was massive. I had never seen such a place. It was an American bar with at least a hundred bottles hanging upside down above the counter. The two bartenders were pouring drinks as fast as they could, but as the place filled up they were having a hard time keeping up. Bill said, "the drinks are on me so have at it."

"That's very kind sir," I replied. Dolly giggled a little and sipped on a gin filled to the brim with ice. I noticed that the bartender had poured her a triple. Bill and I settled for beer and I had my first Budweiser. Bill said, "now that's true and authentic American beer, probably the best in the world." I was going to argue. Lion Lager would beat out the pale tasteless piss that passed for beer, but decided against saying anything. Bill was buying. Dolly came over. I could tell that the gin was kicking in and noticed that she had unbuttoned the top button of her blouse, setting her two wobbly breasts free to find a place of their own to rest. "So Bill tells me that you are sailing that boat alone. Is that true?"

"Yes," I said, "technically I'm alone but there are two of us on board." That had Dolly thinking for a bit. Someone put The Beach Boys on the jukebox and Dolly said, "you just said that you were sailing by yourself and now you tell me that there are two of you on board. How does that work?" My second beer had kicked in and with the noise in the place and Dolly clearly flirting with me I replied, "yup it's just me and my pussy." Dolly looked confused. "You have a girlfriend on board with you then?" Bill came over with a fresh beer and another gin for Dolly. He left in search of someone to talk to. I could see wheels turning in Dolly's brain. "If

you have a girlfriend why didn't you bring her to the bar?" I faked surprise. "I'm talking about my cat, my pussy. Her name is Sunny." Dolly shrieked with laughter. "You are a riot," she said. "I thought for a moment there that I might have some competition. She pushed her breasts out and smiled. "Pussy, well I'll be damned. You had me there."

The bar got noisier and I wasn't sure if they would be able to fit another person in, but they kept trying. I had a good buzz going and Dolly was clearly drunk. "I don't want to hog you all night but I have spoken to all these people so many times I find them boring. I find you interesting." Her boobs jiggled like small bowls of Jello and I thought about my Dad. I guess that he was not interested in women with big breasts and I was starting to see why. They would be a challenge to contain in bed.

"What did you mean when you said that if I had a girlfriend on the boat she would be competition?" I knew what I was doing but not sure how to pull it off. Dolly giggled and leaned in close. She had to come in close so that I could hear what she was saying above the din in the bar. "I'm going to leave out the back door. Follow me in five minutes. Don't make it too obvious. People on this island talk." She licked my ear (just a little) and left. As she walked away I took a good look at her strong legs that went up and up until they were lost from sight behind the soft fabric of her miniskirt. Her arse was small and I could tell that it was well toned. Dolly must spend some time in the gym to pass the boredom while floating on a small island in the middle of the South Atlantic. I looked around and saw Bill in an animated conversation with a short man with a well groomed mustache. They were on the far side of the bar. I found the back door and slipped out. The night air was warm and smelled faintly of stale beer, but there was no sign of Dolly. I hesitated for a moment and thought that maybe she had been playing a joke on me, but then

I heard a quiet "pssst. Over here." There must have been a dozen or so garbage bins filled with empties. Dolly was at the end. "We have to be quick. I don't want Bill to come looking for me. I got a bit of a head start." Dolly giggled and turned around lifting her skirt. She had removed her panties. The view was stunning and in a second I had dropped my pants around my ankles and was humping her. She abruptly turned and said, "you need to see these things too you know" and she undid her blouse. Her breasts sprung free and they danced in the slight moonlight. I cupped one and it weighed a lot and kept trying to escape. Dolly giggled. "Okay let's finish. We can always come back later and do it again. The night is still young." Dolly turned around, lifted her skirt and leaned over one of the garbage cans. It didn't take long. I outlasted her but I think that it was because I was nervous and kept expecting Bill to grab me by the shoulder. Dolly fumbled in her purse and found her panties. "You go ahead. I will follow." Moments later we were back at the bar. Bill came over with a cold Bud and a fresh glass of gin and said, "you two look thirsty." I was well and truly done by the time the bartenders called for a last round. Bill handed me another beer and said, "Dolly it looks like you have had enough. Come on my sailor friend. Let's finish these beers and I will run you back to your boat." Dolly giggled. We left the bar. I piled in with Dolly between us and we took off down the dusty road. It was a quick trip and I was just about to get out when Bill took me by the arm and said, "You enjoy those bins?" Dolly giggled.

I left Ascension a couple of days later. Bill gave me a ride to Customs but didn't say anything about the bins. I got my papers stamped and returned to the boat. "Well sailor, have a safe trip wherever the wind blows you." He shook my hand and took off up the dusty road. I could still hear his muffler long after he had turned the corner.

Pack Sunny," I said. "It's time to hit the road." Sunny just meowed. She was still mad at me for leaving her on board while I went out drinking and she gave me a long look at her rear end before finding a place in the shade to take a nap. "Little prick," I said out loud. "Sometimes a man gotta do what a man gotta do."

My next destination would be San Salvador on the east coast of Brazil. Also known as Bahia, the city is an old trading hub and a place where many of the slaves that were brought over from Africa were documented. When I was working on Nantucket Sleighride in Durban one of the transit yachts was from Bahia. It was being sailed by a young Brazilian couple from Bahia, or, to be more exact, from a small city to the north called Camazari. They had extended an open invitation for me to join them if I ever made it to Brazil. I sent them a letter from St Helena and gave them a rough ETA.

I was still in the trade winds and a warm wind blew at my back. Nantucket Sleighride was riding the waves as if she was born to be out on the open ocean. By now I knew each and every creak and groan and could read the mood of the boat from below just by listening. The wooden mast especially was a good indicator. If I was carrying too much sail it would complain in a plaintiff way, creaking and squeaking. As soon as I reduced sail the noise stopped.

Sunny and I were still eating like kings with as much mahi mahi as we could stuff down and almost every day we were visited by dolphins. One time a pod of Pilot whales came over to investigate. There were a dozen or so of them all around 20-feet in length and they seemed to take a real interest in the boat. Perhaps it was the sounds that she made or maybe the hull below the waterline reminded them of something. I was a little worried but after a few hours they took off and there was just Nantucket Sleighride and me and Sunny out in the middle of the big blue. I had not seen

a single ship since leaving St Helena and as a result was getting more sleep at night.

Most evenings I listened to a scratchy broadcast from the BBC and the big news was that the Americans were about to launch Apollo 9 and it was heading for the moon for what, they hoped, would be the first time man set foot on the lunar surface. I was glued to the radio and luckily the sound was clear. The commentators from NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida were providing a gripping blow by blow account. The rocket launched without a hitch with three astronauts on board and just over an hour later it was approaching the moon. "Come over here you mangy cat," I said. "This is history in the making." Sunny opened one eye, stared at me for a few seconds before going back to sleep. It was just me and the radio. I looked out at the companionway and up at the sky but saw nothing; just a vast emptiness. It was the middle of the afternoon and the sun beat down. I was beyond myself with excitement and when the Eagle, a small lunar capsule, was released from the main spacecraft and floated toward the moon's surface I could barely contain my excitement. There was some interference and the broadcast was scratchy but I could clearly hear Neil Armstrong say, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." I celebrated by opening a warm beer and Sunny and I sat in the cockpit each of us with our own thoughts. I felt like an astronaut who was on his own expedition on the open ocean.

The line on my chart slowly made its way past the island of Fernando de Noronha and as I got closer to the coast of South America there was more shipping. The way that Dug had explained things to me was that I couldn't sail directly across the Atlantic, that there was a huge high pressure system in the way. "Go up and over the top of it," he said. "That way you will stay in the trades." This was the reason I approached Bahia from the north

and I sailed down the coast until I could see the loom of the city and decided to anchor in some shallow water and wait until daylight to make safe harbor. I cleared Customs just after lunch and found a place to change money.

It felt strange to be in a big city again and Bahia throbbed with a distinctly South American beat. I didn't have a phone number for my friends so I mailed them a letter telling them that I was at anchor a couple of hundred yards off the yacht club. Then I got to work cleaning and servicing Nantucket Sleighride. I also had business to transact. I needed to find a place to sell my whiskey. My money was running low.

There is a huge elevator that transports people from the dock area where the yacht club is located, up to the main part of the city. Pelourinho Square was teeming and I found a small restaurant down a back alley and had one of the best meals of my life. The local beer was Brahma Choppe and I may have had more than my fair share but made it back to the boat despite being a tad unsteady on my surfboard.

A couple of days later I was sanding the mainmast when I heard a voice on the VHF calling the boat's name. It was Joao and Beatriz, my friends. They invited me to their estancia to stay for a few days. "That's a wonderful offer," I said, "but I have a cat and have no one to feed her."

"Bring your cat," Joao said, "our ranch is big enough for one more animal."

Sunny and I spent a week on the ranch. It was stunning. Beatriz arranged a special dinner for me and invited some of their close friends. Joao made an assado and there was more meat than an army could manage and the red wine flowed like a tap with a broken spigot. There was also a beautiful girl who I learned later was the daughter of one of Joao's best friends. She came over and said, "hello, my name is Ana. I am the daughter of Jose who

you were just talking to." Ana was around my age. She had long silky black hair, olive skin and a set of bright white teeth. When she smiled, which seemed to be all the time even when she was talking, her teeth caught the light and glimmered.

So you are a sailor then?"

I blushed, "hardly," I said. "I have sailed from South Africa but I am still learning. Do you sail?" It turned out that Ana had done quite a bit of sailing. She and her father had joined Joao and Beatriz for part of their circumnavigation. She actually sailed into Durban but had to leave right away to return to Brazil to finish her studies in landscape architecture. "I am between jobs," she told me. "The place where I was working was not challenging enough so I am looking for a better opportunity." She added, quite fortuitously as it turned out, "what I really want to do is sail some more before I settle into my career."

Ana and I talked most of the afternoon. Every now and then I had to go and find Sunny who liked to wander off and tease the pigs and bother the chickens. She was having the time of her life despite not being able to speak a word of Portuguese. At dinner I sat next to Ana and tucked into what is quite possibly the best steak that I have ever had. I had noticed that they cooked the steak with the skin still attached. Ana explained. "They cook the meat first skin-side down. The heat melts the layer of fat that sits between the skin and the meat so that the meat itself is initially cooked in it's own fat. At the end they cut the skin off and char the meat when it's time to serve it." I would have noticed all of this had I been paying attention. In fact I had been paying attention but it was to Ana and not the assado. After almost a gallon of red wine I built up the courage to ask Ana if she would like to come and see Nantucket Sleighride. She nodded and said, "yes I live in Bahia so it will be easy for me to see the boat. I would really like that."



For the next month Ana came almost every evening to share dinner with me and Sunny. She had borrowed a small wooden dinghy to get back and forth. The surfboard was not very practical but it did make her laugh and when she laughed my tummy did a flip and I dared to feel that I might be falling in love. Turns out the feeling was mutual. We were sitting in the cockpit after cleaning up from a dinner of crayfish which I had caught right under the boat. Sunny was curled up on her lap which was a good sign. My little furry girlfriend was quite possessive but she liked Ana. I opened another bottle of wine and we watched the sun set to the west. The night air was thick with the sound of music coming from Pelourinho Square. Ana smoked thin cigars and she lit one letting the smoke drift lazily off to leeward. Then, without warning, she leaned in and kissed me. Her mouth tasted smoky and sweet and I kissed her back and she asked if she could stay the night and I said yes and I was very happy that I had washed the sheets earlier in the day and Ana and I made love in the forepeak stopping only to watch the sunrise and enjoy a cup of coffee before collapsing on my bunk and sleeping most of the day away.

“Oh I forgot to tell you,” Ana said. “I was so nervous about what I was going to do and surprise you with a kiss, but I spoke to Jose about the whiskey that you have for sale and he said that he would take the lot and pay you a fair price.”

That was how it went but our new sweet love was tinged by the fact that I couldn't stay in Brazil forever. I needed to make my way north. It was after a pretty sticky love making session, the stickiness coming mostly from the humidity and not bodies, that I remembered what Ana had told me the first time we met. She had said, “I really want to do some more sailing.” I dared to think about it. I wanted to do the trip alone but the thought of leaving Ana behind was too much so I asked her if she would join me and

without hesitation, she said “yes.” Suddenly that invisible weight that had landed on my shoulders after meeting Ana was gone. We would sail north together.

I was keen to get to the West Indies but we did stop briefly in Natal and Fortaleza. Ana told me that they made beautiful handcrafted hammocks in Fortaleza. I was looking to buy something that I could sell at a profit and once I saw the intricate designs of the hammocks I bought two dozen and wrapped them tightly in plastic and lashed them to the overhead. I had noticed how much better Nantucket Sleighride sailed without the weight of all that whiskey.

Some fellow sailors that were anchored in Fortaleza told me that they passage from there to the West Indies was one of the best they had ever done. “The wind is perfect this time of year. The Christmas Trades are winding down so it's not blowing too hard, and it will be on your starboard beam most of the way. Ana and I cleared Customs and we set sail for Trinidad and Tobago. Sunny, happy to be back at sea where she knew that there would be an endless supply of fish to eat, found her spot in the fold of the mainsail along the boom and promptly fell asleep.

Turns out Ana was an excellent sailor and she and I split watches at night. We were both awake during the day and I fished and cooked while Ana sewed some chafe gear onto the sails where they had been rubbing and I felt as happy as I had ever been. I had been able to patch a call through to my father from Ana's apartment and we chatted for a while. “You probably heard from your brother,” Dad said. “Jim and I got engaged a month or so ago.” I was surprised.

“No I hadn't heard Dad but you have my blessing. Who is Jim?”

“Jim. You know Jim. Jim Tesco. He has the car dealership on Main Street. We have actually been seeing each other for a couple

of years but you know how it is. We had to keep it quiet. We got engaged not knowing if we will ever be able to marry but at least it shows commitment.” The call was costing a lot and I told Dad so. “I have to go but I wish you well Dad. You deserve happiness. I will try to call from the West Indies.” I sat for a couple of minutes. The news had come as a surprise. Ana took my hand and I explained things to her. She said, “Ugh, even in Brazil it’s the same. The Catholics make sure of it.” Then I started to laugh. I did remember Jim Tesco quite well but what I remembered about him was that he was slightly on the chubby side and his boobs were probably bigger than any of Dad’s girlfriends.

It took us just under a month to get to Trinidad and Tobago. Both Ana and I were tanned dark brown and were strong and healthy. Sunny, well Sunny had put on some weight but her fur was shiny and she was also healthy and strong. The island rose up out of the ocean ahead of us and Ana said, “let’s share a beer to celebrate.” The beer was warm but it didn’t matter. I was happy and Ana leaned against me as we closed in on a small anchorage. I had finally made landfall in the West Indies and I had done so with a beautiful women by my side. Occasionally I wondered what my life would have been had I not stopped in that smokey bar in JoBurgh. A few games of poker had changed my life.

We stayed for a week at anchor off a beautiful white sandy beach just south of the main city Port of Spain. We swam, snorkeled, fished, went spearfishing and made love. There were streaks in Ana’s jet black hair that had been bleached by the sun and she looked beautiful. We were sharing a bottle of wine in the cockpit when I asked her, “are you happy?” Ana kissed me and said, “I have never been happier in my life.”

“Me too.”

I had heard so much about the islands and was really looking forward to stopping in St Lucia. I said to Ana, “I know that I am

being a bit greedy here but let’s skip Grenada and Barbados and head straight for St. Lucia.”

“You are the boss. You could take me anywhere and I would be happy.”

“It’s about three days from here to St Lucia. The trade winds look steady. We can slow down at night but I would rather we made landfall and anchored in daylight so working backwards I suggest that we leave here on Tuesday morning.”

“What day is today,” Ana said laughing. “I have lost track of time.”

“That’s a good thing. It means that you are on island time. It’s Saturday.”

We pulled anchor after a breakfast of papaya and strong coffee. It was so much easier having Ana on board. I motored forward slowly to ease the pressure on the anchor rode while Ana hauled it aboard. “Since you did the hard part,” I said, “why don’t you come aft and take the helm. I will raise the sails.” In minutes Nantucket Sleighride was rail down with a decent bow wave cutting through crystal water.

When I was in Brazil I had bought a proper fishing rod but hadn’t used it. I preferred to use the hand line but thought that I would see how things went with the new rod. I hooked up a lure and within seconds had snagged a Wahoo. It was too much for just the two of us so I dropped it back in the sea much to Sunny’s consternation.

“Swim on my friend. You get to live another day.”

We sailed past Grenada as well as St Vincent and the Grenadines leaving both islands to starboard. The trade winds blew strong and steady during the day and softened a little at night. “The air smells different here,” Ana said. “There is a sweetness to it. It’s very different from the heavy air we have in Brazil.”

I think it might be telling you that you are in love.” Ana smiled. “I am in love,” she said and then teased me a little. “I’m in love with the life, the ocean and the wind.” She adjusted the headsail trim knowing that she was toying with me. After a couple of minutes she looked me in the eye and said, “and I am in love with you.” I was about reply when the new fishing rod let out an awful shriek. I had it set with different tensions and the shrieking let me know loud and clear that we had hooked something big. I grabbed the rod and gave it a solid jerk. Whatever was on the other end had the hook firmly embedded in its mouth and was not happy. The fish dove deep and the line ran out some more. I stood braced against the lifelines and said, “Ana, we need to stop the boat. Can you manage the sails.” Ana engaged the wind vane and dashed forward quickly lowering the headsail. She lashed it with some sail ties and then dropped the mainsail lashing it to the boom. Sunny had been asleep in the crease of the sail and was unhappy about matters. She didn’t like to have her sleep interrupted.

Nantucket Sleighride wallowed. I hung onto the rod. It was a little easier now that I was not pulling against the speed of the boat and I started to slowly reel the fish in. I quickly lowered the rod creating a little slack in the line and then took advantage of the slack to reel in the fish. It was a slow process. Ana was standing right next to me helping when she could. She said, “I don’t think that we are keeping this one. It may be too much food for a dinner for two.” She smiled at her own joke but she did have a point. “Well I could cut it away and lose the lure or we could fight it. I say we fight it. I want to see what we have.” After an hour we had made little progress. Every now and then Sunny would come over to inspect my fishing skills and she was clearly not impressed. I gave the rod to Ana while I took a little break. My hands were sore but my heart was full. Ana had just told me

that she loved me. I watched her fighting the fish. Her legs were strong and tanned a golden brown, her breast pale against the rest of her body. She only went topless some of the time. “I like going topless,” she told me, “but the little buggers get in the way when they are not harnessed.” She noticed me looking at her. “Stop looking and come and help. I’m getting tired.”

After three hours of doing battle I got my first glimpse of the fish. At first I saw a little white underbelly as the fish had seen the boat and was trying to get away with renewed effort. Ana yelled, “I saw it. It must be four feet long, probably more.” The fish dived deep and I had to let some of the line run but it clearly was getting tired because I was able to reel back what I had just given away, plus quite a bit more. This time I could see the striking blue of it’s body and noticed that the dorsal fin was a bright yellow. “It’s a yellow fin tuna Ana,” I said. “I have seen photos.” It was a stunningly beautiful fish and after another 20 minutes or so we had it alongside. I gave the rod to Ana and went below to get the gaff which was hung from the overhead. Nantucket Sleighride wallowed, Sunny was darting back and forth anxious for an extra large meal, and Ana was laughing. I leaned over the side of the boat and with a quick jerk embedded the gaff in the soft area below the gills. “Help me Ana,” I said, “and you get out of the way cat, you are not being helpful and you are in the way.” Ana and I struggled but after a last ditch effort we had the fish in the cockpit. It was bigger than the cockpit and the head stuck out one side and its tail the other. I noticed that we had almost ripped its jaw off as it was trying to escape. Ana was still panting. “What are we going to do with it? We can’t keep it and if we throw it back it’s going to die.” I thought for a moment and then said, “I have an idea.”

We saw the tall peaks of the Pitons from 30 miles out. It was just after sunrise and Ana was standing watch. The new day was

being painted across the sky in hues of red, yellow and orange. “Jannie come up,” she yelled down the companionway. “We have land ahead. I stuck my head out and ahead of us was what looked like a smudge of clouds, but the clouds had hard edges and it was soon obvious that it was land. We had been told by other cruisers that we had to make landfall at the Pitons, that it was stunningly beautiful and so that was where we were heading. We would later clear Customs in Castries. “Look here you mangy cat,” I said. It’s another landfall.” Sunny had not been happy since we landed the tuna. I had taken a halyard and strung the fish from the backstay out of reach of her little paws.

I gutted the fish and we planned a beach party. As we got closer it became clear why the mountains that bookended a gorgeous white sandy beach were called pitons, the French word for breasts. They were shape like breasts and stood proud and beautiful. As we sailed into the bay we noticed that there were at least another dozen yachts at anchor. There was a slight breeze in the lee of the land and I found a place to drop anchor. It took right away but for good measure I grabbed my goggles and dove down to inspect how it was seated. The pointy end had sunk deep into the soft sand. I adjusted a few things for no good reason and climbed back on board. Ana had prepared a breakfast of pineapple and a homemade bread which she had made in a pot on the stove.

Ana said, “after we clean up I will take Sunny in the dinghy and we will row to the other boats inviting them to dinner.” Now, who could turn a beautiful woman and a scraggly cat down? Ana rowed back to the boat. “They are all coming except for that blue boat and that’s only because they had planned to sail to Antigua this afternoon.”

We had a dinner party to arrange. When we pulled into the bay in the morning we had been greeted by a bunch of kids hawking fruit and veg. Some of them were still walking on the beach. Ana

and I took the dinghy leaving Sunny to complain as we rowed away. The kids spoke Patwa; I spoke none but somehow we managed to convey to them that if they made some fires on the beach in the evening that we would give them a large part of the tuna for their troubles. We rowed back to the boat and I set about filleting the fish. It was a giant task. Ana estimated that the tuna weighed close to 150 lbs but by early afternoon we had so many fresh tuna steaks that we could feed half the island. We rowed ashore, this time taking Mr Grumpy the cat with us, and saw that there was a huge fire burning. Along the beach in a neat row were a number of pits dug and some metal grating which we could use to cover the coals and roast the meal.

The sun was still far from setting when the first guests arrived. They brought a large fruit salad and some paper plates. Someone brought potatoes which they had wrapped in mud. They would throw them on the coals and after a while extract them from the fire and crack the mud which had hardened to reveal perfectly baked potatoes. All that we needed was some butter and salt. Someone else brought that. I guess that the big hit of the party, second only to the fish of course, was the case of Barbados rum. The crew on Night Star had visited the distillery in Barbados and cleaned them out, well almost. By the time the leftover rays of the sun painted the turquoise water pink, we had a feast on our hands. Our local helpers took shovels full of embers and filled the pits covering each with a metal grate. Someone from a boat called Summer Style had a guitar and everyone pitched in. “What do you think Ana?”

“You sure know how to throw a party Jannie. I think that this little gathering matches any of the big assados that Jose puts on around Christmas.” Around two in the morning people started to row back to their boats. Ana had taken Sunny back to the boat in the early evening and we left while the party was still in full

swing. Music and singing floated across the bay while Ana and I made love in the forepeak. Early the next morning I went ashore. The local kids had cleaned the beach so that you would never know that there had been a party there. I handed over at least 40 lbs of tuna to some very hungry children who disappeared into the low scrub that lined the beach. They would have their own feast.

Ana and I stayed in St Lucia for almost a month. We had sailed to Castries and cleared into the country. "You are free to sail anywhere in our waters," the Customs man said.

We were anchored in Rodney Bay, a small protected anchorage north of Castries, when a man from one of the other boats in the anchorage rowed over. "Permission to board?" I took his hand. He introduced himself as Chas and said that he was from Tasmania. My friends call me Chas from Tas. Chas was there to invite us over for dinner. He had been at our party on the beach and wanted to reciprocate. "We have fresh turtle," he said. "My son and I like to hunt them.

"Isn't that illegal?" I asked.

"Only if you get caught. Actually we are just on the cusp of the legal hunting season so I figured that we are fine." Ana and I rowed over to their boat and his wife served the most delicious turtle stew. Chas wiped his plate with some home baked bread and said, "when you live this kind of lifestyle you learn how little you need, not how much. Between the fish and crayfish, which are free, and fruit and vegetables which are dirt cheap, we can live really well. Our big ticket item is rum and even that's cheap down here. I used to be a banker in Hobart but had some heart issues and my doctor told me that it was from all the stress I had with my job. We already had Flying Cloud and Pat and Mick and I set off to sail around the world. We don't have a timetable and I guess that's one of the most appealing things

about our current situation." Ana cuddled closer to me and said, "you mean I wasted my time getting that degree in landscape architecture?"

Chas smiled. "Knowing that you always have something to fall back on gives you added peace of mind. What do you have to fall back onto Jannie?"

"Sweet fokall."

We left the following morning and sailed to Martinique. "You know Ana," I said, "you can live off the land for almost nothing. Our big expense has been Customs fees. How's about we skip clearing into Martinique? Someone at the beach party told me that there was a sweet little anchorage on the northside of the island. Let's just go straight there."

"You are the boss," Ana said. "So far things have worked out great. I trust you." As it turns out, with the benefit of hindsight, she should not have trusted me.

We had a great passage rocking it along in the trade winds and eating as much fish as we could. Sunny was thrilled. Not only was she getting three square meals a day, she was also getting to snack on flying fish that were still abundant. She could be fast asleep down below when there was a thump of a fish hitting the coachroof and in seconds she was a killing machine determined to get a meal before it flopped itself back overboard and swam away. Within seconds of being in dreams where only cats go, Sunny had nailed, killed and eaten the fish. "You make a bloody mess," I told her. "This is your boat too. You need to take better care of things and maybe you can stand a watch or two. And by watch I mean keeping an eye out for fishing boats, not watching me and Ana get all sweaty in the forepeak." Sunny meowed and Ana laughed. I dropped the anchor and backed down to set it. "What's the name of this place," Ana asked.

“It’s Saint Pierre. There was once a volcano that erupted on the island and this town was buried in ash. That’s what that guy at the party told me. I can’t wait to go ashore.” There were some other boats in the anchorage and we ran into the crews at a tiny bar right on the beach. It was clear that they were not locals and a tall man beckoned me. “We watched you come ashore so we know that you are sailors. Can I get some beers?”

By mid afternoon, after plenty of beer had been washed down, Ana laughed and said, “Jannie thinks that a beer has the same effect as taking a shower so if you can smell something funny it’s him.” The table laughed then the tall guy chimed in. “I think that showering is overrated. Hey did you guys hear about the volcano that happened here?”

“I heard that there was something that happened here but not much more.”

“It’s a good story,” the tall man said. “Around the turn of the century there were some warning signs that Mount Pelée might go off. That’s the mountain that you can see behind us. No one believed that it would erupt but then it started to become obvious that it was going to blow.” Tall Man took a long hit on his beer. “The locals were getting restless and the governor of the island thought that he would make a point to show everyone that it was safe and he and his wife moved to Saint Pierre for the night. Bad timing. The volcano erupted that night killing everyone in the town including the Governor and his wife. Stupid ass politician. He probably brought bad luck with him. But there is a good part to this story. There was one survivor. Some dude was imprisoned in an underground dungeon. I think that his name was Ludger Sylb... something-or-other. Anyway only a small amount of ashes reached his cell and they found the poor bugger when they were searching for survivors. He later joined the circus. What would you do Jannie?”

“I would have taken my boat and sailed far out to sea. There is no way that I would have stuck around if there was even the smallest chance that the island would explode.”

Ana said, “Jannie is very smart when it comes to that sort of thing.” Turns out I was not as smart as Ana thought that I was but that would come later. We sailed north toward Antigua. I was worried about pushing up against hurricane season which starts in July and was told by fellow sailors that there was a good hurricane hole in Antigua, a good place to batten down in the event that a hurricane had the island in its sights. But first I wanted to stop in Dominica.

“Hey Ana,” I said. “How are you with cannibals?”

“Not very good, why do you ask?”

“I heard, or read somewhere that there is a river on Dominica called Indian River. If you travel to its source there are still cannibals living there. What do you say we check it out?”

“Easy for you to say,” Ana said. “You know that if they had a choice that they would eat me first. But let’s check it out.” That was how we found ourselves in a leaky boat paddling upstream on Indian River. I had rented the boat from a kid and paid him what he might have made using the boat to catch fish. He seemed happy enough to spend the day in the shade while still making money.

We had not asked anyone for advice. I didn’t want to clear customs and figured that a quick visit would go unnoticed.” Did you bring the barbeque sauce?” Ana joked. “I am sure that I will taste better with a little smeared on me.”

The air was thick and heavy and the river languid in parts and we enjoyed most of the day watching the birds come to drink and laughing about our fate. Let’s just say that I have never been much of a planner and had no idea how far it was to the source

of the river. We had bought some snacks, but that was it. Ana said, "I think that we should spare ourselves and turn back. It's going to get dark soon. "Okay, well at least we tried to get eaten." Like most places in the tropics it goes from day to night in just a few minutes and soon we were paddling in pitch darkness. Then the night sounds started. There was some low rumbling and some high pitched shrieking. The hair on the back of my neck stood upright. "I think that they are only monkeys," I said, but Ana was not convinced. It turns out that it was just monkeys and we got back to the anchorage after midnight after tying up the boat to a post. "I think that I need a stiff rum after that," Ana said.

Years later I visited Grenada. The cab driver was from Dominica. I told him about the cannibals. He, his name was Scoobedoo, just laughed and said, "There are no cannibals and never have been. It's a made-up story to keep dumbass tourists from coming to the island." I guess that it worked.

We had enjoyed almost perfect weather since Ana had become permanent crew on Nantucket Sleighride. There were squalls of course, but they were welcome and we used them to rinse off the salt, but so far the most wind we had seen was 25 knots. "You know what I think that we need Ana?" I asked. She laughed and said, "maybe later we can have sex but not now, I am making us lunch."

"No I'm serious. We need a holiday. The guy on Southern Comfort told me about some islands a little to the north that are completely deserted. They are a little off the track for boats heading to the US so very few people go there. What do you think?" Ana shrugged and smiled her beautiful smile and said, "Let's do it."

We spent a week mostly naked, snorkeling, spear fishing and laying in the sun. Sunny had explored most of the island when I said, "Ana I have been thinking. We need to keep moving. I'm not sure why but hurricane season worries me. I know that there

are hurricane holes in Antigua where we can ride out a storm, but I would rather get further north, to the states if possible. I think that we will be safer there and we can both find work. And it's probably a good place to sell those hammocks."

"It sounds like a good idea." And in that short conversation and decision our fate was sealed. We pulled the anchor the following morning and headed for the British Virgin Islands. "We can provision there and then make the hop to Key West in the States. I have heard that it's a really funky place. Lots of gay people."

"Isn't that where Ernest Hemingway lived?"

"Yes I think it's where he wrote 'For Whom the Bell Tolls'. I think I remember reading that somewhere. What do you think Sunny? You are a big Hemingway fan aren't you?" Sunny yawned, stretched and then found her food bowl. I really loved that cat. "Sunny, you can become an American cat and we can watch football together." Sunny ignored me. The fresh crab meat in her bowl was much more important.

As we headed north the weather became more unsettled. The trades still dominated the weather pattern but the early morning and early evening squalls were becoming more common and more violent. Nantucket Sleighride was romping, taking each squall in stride. We were still fishing for our food but there seemed to be less fish and a lot more birds. "I am so glad we met," Ana said out of the blue. "I have always been happy and have had some wonderful times in my life, but living this way with you and Sunny has been a real gift." I had been tying on a new lure but set it aside and kissed her. Her mouth tasted of salt with a hint of peach that came from a balm that put on her lips each morning. "I'm happy too," I said, "not only are we living a dream but I get to live it with a beautiful woman."

We stocked up in Virgin Gorda and readied the boat for the passage to Key West. We took a couple of days off from our

preparations and visited The Baths, a stunning formation of massive granite boulders that rested in crystal turquoise water. We were alone and took our clothes off to swim and then made love on the soft warm sand. "This place is beautiful," Ana said.

It's well over 1,000 miles from Virgin Gorda to Key West and we set off in a light southerly wind, Nantucket Sleighride slicing the clear water and making miles. Sunny somehow knew that we were on a long trip and settled into her routine of eating and sleeping. She still loved to curl up in the crease of the mainsail along the boom. From there she could observe what was going on but that never lasted long. She would curl up, keep one eye open in case there was a chance of food, but within minutes was fast asleep.

Ana and I also settled into a rhythm. I taught her how to navigate using the sun and the stars and we plotted our position twice a day as we crept toward the US mainland. At night we listened to the chatter on the radio and picked up the weather from the BBC. It looked good for a few days but the announcer talked of a low pressure system moving eastward in the waters ahead of us. "There will be a lot of steady rain associated with the front and some strong winds as the front approaches, but on the back side the wind will change direction and ease a little."

"I think that we are in for our first bit of rough weather," I said to Ana. "Let's just keep an eye on the barometer and tighten up ship. This old girl," I paused and patted the deck, "this old girl has seen some weather in her time and will ride it out just fine."

We watched the barometer drop and soon the sky to the west started to darken. Wind gusts ahead of the front were pushing 25 knots. Nantucket Sleighride heeled to the new breeze and romped on toward Florida. Within a few hours it was really blowing and sheets of rain drenched us and washed the boat clean. Ana said,

"this is fun." I agreed but the fun would not last.

We were through the front in a matter of hours and on the backside were the predicted northerly winds. They were light and the sea bumpy making for a bouncy ride at a very slow pace. Sunny didn't like the bouncing and decided to sleep through it. By the following morning the sea state had settled and we were back on a good track to Key West.

Two days later we got some news from the BBC that would change our lives forever. The announcer, in his dry British accent, noted that the cold front seemed to be doing something unusual. It had stalled, gathered more steam and seemed to be changing direction. "This is very unusual," the announcer said. "We may be looking at the first hurricane of the season. Our meteorologists will keep an eye on things so stay tuned."

"What do you think Jannie?" Ana asked. "It doesn't sound good does it?" I didn't know what to think. I was worried but kept it to myself. I didn't want Ana to worry, but a hurricane would be a nightmare to deal with and we had few options. I had purposely given the island chain to the south of us a good berth. I pulled out the chart. The closest place were the Turks and Caicos islands but they were low lying islands and would offer very little protection. Our best bet would be to try and make Haiti. We could shelter at Port-au-Prince but it was at least three or four days sailing away. Sunny seemed to sense the change in the mood on board and snuggled with Ana. "Let's wait for the next report at midnight before doing anything. For all we know the storm might turn to the north."

Ana looked worried. "Hurricanes usually track west until they hit the US mainland and then turn to the north. I'm worried that it might come our way. No matter if it's going north of us we are going to feel its effects." I hugged her and said, without much conviction "I'm afraid to say that you are right but we will be fine



no matter what happens.” In my heart I knew that I was lying partly to ease her concern, and partly to ease mine.

The midnight report had to get through the news before it got to the weather and the war in Vietnam was first up. Even though I knew very little about the war and the reasons for it, it seemed to me that it was a waste of time and money. Ana said, “come on you wankers. We need weather information.” As if someone heard her the announcer turned to the weather focusing specifically on the first hurricane of the season, Hurricane Blanche. “The low pressure has intensified to Category 1 status and is heading west. The predictions are for Hurricane Blanche to keep the same course for few days and then turn to the north once it gets close to the Bahamas. It’s still early to be more certain but for now that’s what our experts have to say. The center of the storm is traveling at around 10 knots and the system is likely to increase in strength as it gets back into the warmer water.” I looked at Ana and she looked at me and neither of us said anything. I had done a mental calculation; there was no way that we could reach Haiti before the storm hit. Ana said, hopefully, “the system has changed direction once, maybe it will change direction again.” We both knew that she was grasping at straws. We watched the barometer drop slowly and then it took a deep dive down and we knew that the hurricane was getting closer.

It hit in the night.

I was on watch, Ana was trying to get some rest but I knew that she was laying awake in the bunk. I had been unable to sleep since we got the news. We listened to the BBC forecast and it was clear; Blanche had us directly in her sights.

By dawn the wind was gusting 40 knots and the sea was getting churned with wisps of white froth making it look ominous. For now the little wind vane on the stern of the boat was working well and keeping us on course. I decided that it would be best

if the three of us stayed off the deck as much as possible. I had deep reefed the mainsail and set the storm jib which helped the wind vane keep us sailing in the right direction. Actually there was no right direction. The hurricane covered a large area and we were just looking to keep moving. It didn’t really matter in what direction so long as we were moving and the wind vane was handling things.

Then the shit hit the proverbial fan. Gusts were up to 60 knots and the rain was coming in horizontally. Nantucket Sleighride had been taking all the wind in stride but a big wave caught us on the beam and we were knocked down. We thought that we had secured everything but there were still stuff flying around the cabin. “You okay?” I asked Ana. “I’m fine. I have Sunny. She’s scared and so am I.” I had dropped the mainsail earlier and lashed it to the boom so the only sail we had set was the storm jib. “We need to heave-to,” I said.

“What’s that mean?”

I am going to disconnect the wind vane and lash the helm. I will also back the storm jib so essentially we will be going nowhere. We will be at the mercy of the waves but there is not much else we can do. I’m going to wait for a lull and then make a dash for it.”

The barometer dropped even more and I knew that we were no longer on the outer edge of the storm; we were riding a hurricane. It was time to heave to and hold on. “You be careful my love” Ana said. “We can’t have anything happen to you.” I had my lifejacket and life harness on and cautiously opened the companionway hatch. It was just getting dark but I could see that we were in a cauldron of seas broken apart and cresting. “Shit, fuck,” I said. “It’s blowing like fuck out there.” The interior of Nantucket Sleighride had offered some protection from the real elements. Now it was time to face them. I crawled into the cockpit and

Ana quickly closed the hatch behind me. I clipped my harness on and released the line that was holding the storm jib. It made a noise like two formula one cars colliding. I took the other jib line and wrapped it around the winch and wound it. The sail was backwinded and the boat confused until I released the wind vane and lashed the rudder. Things settled down and I took a moment to look around. It was a scene from hell. The tips of large cresting waves were being whipped off and the spindrift flung across the ocean. The water was no longer an inviting turquoise but instead had become dark. If there wasn't spindrift on the surface of the water it would be hard to know where the water ended and the sky began. It was an ominous bruised blue that held the promise of more wind to come.

It was around midnight when the mast came down. Ana was holding a terrified Sunny when there was a loud crash and a crack as the mast broke and slammed into the deck. Ana screamed and Sunny fled trying to find a safe place. I knew that I would have to lash the mast so that it wouldn't do anymore damage and grabbed my lifejacket and harness and crawled on deck. It was hard to see in the dark but the mast had broken about six feet above the deck and was grinding back and forth with each wave, cutting into the deck. It was only a matter of time before we were breached. I had grabbed some rope from below and started to lash the mast when Ana appeared on deck. "I'm here to help," she yelled trying to be heard above the screaming of the wind.

"I'm okay. You should stay below." Ana had dragged herself to where I was working and started to help me lash the mast. I was climbing to the other side of the boat when I heard the wave. There was a low rumble and I turned to see this massive wall of water hit us side-on. Nantucket Sleighride was suddenly upside down. Both Ana and I were trapped under the boat, but then another wave hit and flipped the boat back upright. I felt

myself being dragged and then dumped into the cockpit. Ana had stayed with the boat too and was right by the mast when another wave lifted the mast and dropped it on her. It came down hard and landed on her lower body. She screamed, "Jannie, Jannie I need help." That was when another wave hit, lifting the mast and dropping it on Ana's chest. I had to help her but I didn't want to suffer the same fate. There was blood staining the deck, leaving a puddle in the water alongside. Ana had been knocked unconscious.

I know that I have said before that I am an atheist and I still am, but I did pray to God that she would survive. Seconds later we were hit by another wave and the mast was lifted off her. I grabbed her harness and dragged her into the cockpit. "Don't die Ana," I cried. Despite the wind and waves I could still feel hot tears running down my face landing on Ana. She was unconscious and limp. I had to get her below. She would be safer there. Suddenly, as quick as it started, the wind dropped. We were in the eye of the hurricane.

The reports that I was able to read later stated that Blanche was a Category 2 hurricane. I had no way to judge but knew that somehow we had to survive. I dragged Ana to the companionway and tried to get her below, but her body was a dead weight and hard to move. The wind and rain may have momentarily stopped but the waves were still massive. I squeezed by Ana and climbed down below. I managed to pull her over the lip of the cockpit and then with a mighty heave she came down the stairs and landed on me. I was okay. I was just happy that she was below. Sunny was there and even though cats don't have facial muscles, I could see a look of deep concern on her face. I was dragging Ana onto the bunk in the forepeak and hadn't noticed that Sunny had climbed the stairs. She sniffed the air and hopped onto the deck. In a cruel twist we were hit by a square wave and Sunny

was washed overboard. I didn't notice that she was gone until I had Ana safely secured and called for her, but my yelling was caught in the wind and flung across the ocean. It took me a while to realize that my best friend was gone.

Then the wind started again. We were on the backside of the hurricane. I did manage to get a line around the mast and secured it as best I could but it was not safe on deck so I scrambled below

I sat with Ana crying. I was crying for Sunny. I was crying for Ana and I was crying for Nantucket Sleighride. I could only curse myself. The wind continued to howl. It was only then that I noticed that my shirt was stained red. Something must have hit me on the side of the head but I couldn't feel any pain. I was numb. I managed to brace myself next to Ana and passed out.

Hurricane Blanche had started to turn to the north and when I came to the wind was down to a reasonable 15 knots. Ana was still unconscious and covered with my blood. I looked again for Sunny but she was gone. I simply couldn't believe it; my partner in crime, my best friend, my little buddy, my mangy flying fish eating cat was gone and I sobbed. I had no energy to do anything but I knew that somehow I had to save us. Ana was still breathing and until she took her last breath I would try and save her. Saving her would mean saving myself.

I managed to claw my way through the companionway and survey the damage. The mast was a total loss and despite my effort to lash it, the deck was scraped badly where it had rubbed. "Ugh," I thought. "I can rebuild the boat but I don't think that it will ever have so much love as Ana and I had experienced." My beautiful Sleighride was broken but I could tell that her spirit was still there. Like a bird with a broken wing she hobbled in the direction of Cuba. My mind was in overdrive. I was wondering how I could rig a jury rig to keep sailing. I knew that I could cut down the sails to fit whatever I came up as some kind of mast,

but there was not much to work with. Time was not on our side. Ana was still alive, but barely.

We flopped around for a full day until the trade winds came back. I could barely eat and worried so much that Ana was not getting any nutrition. She was still alive and occasionally moaned, but there was no telling how long she might be able to hold on. Then luck struck. I was on deck cutting away at some of the loose rigging, trying to fathom a plan to build some kind of mast when I saw a cloud on the horizon that had square edges. I was exhausted and didn't trust myself but found the binoculars and looked again. It wasn't a cloud, it was a ship. I grabbed our emergency bag and found a couple of flares and a box of matches. I scrambled back on deck but the ship was gone. "Fuck, fuck, fuck," was all I could think of. I sat with my head in my hands and tried to stop crying. "Keep it together," I told myself. Then the ship reappeared. It had been hidden by a haze. I only had two chances to get their attention and set off one of the flares. I waited but the ship kept on going. "Fuck," I yelled. "I need help."

The ship was over the horizon and me and Nantucket Sleighride were left wallowing. Ana had not moved since I had strapped her into the bunk. I went below to check on her and her pulse seemed weaker than before. "Stay with me Ana," I said. "I need you. I need us. Don't leave me my Love." As if in response she exhaled and then took in a deep breath. That was when I heard a low thumping sound. I poked my head out the companionway hatch and there it was. A big, beautiful ship flying a Cuban flag. They launched a small boat which motored over to us. There were three crew on board, none of whom spoke any english but it didn't take them but a few minutes to assess the situation. I wasn't quite sure what was going on when they all climbed back on board their little boat and took off in the direction of the ship.

I had no clue what do do. I could hear Ana moaning quietly as

it started to get hot in the cabin. Then a much larger boat came steaming our way. "I am Captain Camilo." I large man extended his hand and I helped him board. It took him just a few seconds to sum up the situation. "Your lady friend will come with us and we will get her to a hospital in Havana as quickly as possible. He pointed to a man who was examining Ana. "That man is our ship's doctor. Our ER room on board is fairly rudimentary but we can get her hooked up to drips etc and keep her safely sedated. I don't know much about medicine but Doctor Gonzales does." The doctor looked worried. He spoke in very clipped english. "Emergency. Weak pulse. Very, how you say, dehydrated. We must move." He pointed to Ana and barked some orders to the other crew that had boarded. They knew what they were doing and in a few minutes had Ana strapped to a stretcher and handed off into their small boat. "Don't worry," Captain Camilo said, "we will take care of her as best we can but you need to decide what you want to do. I would have thought that maybe you could sail the boat to Havana but I don't think so. There is another strong weather system coming and you might be in trouble. I think that it would be best of you came with us. Your lady friend will need as much of your emotional support as you can give her. If we are able to revive her and she finds herself on a strange boat with strange people it won't be easy." He let his words hang in the damp air before adding, "I have my own boat. I can't imagine leaving it. You are the Captain of this yacht and you must decide."

I looked at Nantucket Sleighride. She was badly broken. The boat was broken and my heart was broken. The love that me and Ana and Sunny had shared was over. We had to keep Ana alive. "I will come with you," I said. "Thank you."

"Okay I will instruct my men to take her to the ship. They will come back for us. You will need some time to get your papers and to ready the boat for sinking." He waved at his men and they

took off steaming toward the ship. It had not occurred to me that I was going to have to sink my beautiful yacht but it made sense. A 32-foot yacht floating aimlessly in the middle of nowhere would be a shipping hazard." I just nodded. It was all I could do without crying. Captain Camilo knowing what I was going through put his hand on my shoulder.

"It's the right thing to do. Please tell me how I can help." I asked Captain Camilo if he would check the through-hull fitting to make sure that none of them had seized up. My plan was to cut to hoses and open the fittings to let water flood the boat. I told him where they were and while he was digging under floorboards I gathered the ships papers, passports and any other relevant papers. I also packed a small bag with Ana's personal belongings and did the same for myself. I had given Ana a necklace with a carved ivory zulu shield and placed it in her bag. One quick look out the companionway and I saw the ships rescue boat coming our way.

It was time.

My heart was slowly breaking into a thousand pieces. I looked around the cabin and saw Sunny's little bed at the foot of the bunk. I saw some photos that Ana had taped to the bulkhead and the warmth of what used to be flooded over me.

It was time. I nodded to Captain Camilo and he cut the hose that led to the head adjacent to the forepeak bunk. Water started to gush in. The water intake for the engine was open and he cut the hose. More water. There was a through-hull in the small galley and Captain Camilo cut the hose. He looked at me and said, "I'm sorry captain."

I didn't take long for the boat to flood. The captain went on deck to instruct his men. I stood at the bottom of the companionway and watched the water rise. It was soon above the floorboards and in a couple of minutes it was lapping at the mattress on the

bunk. I climbed up to the top of the companionway steps and watched my poor beautiful Nantucket Sleighride start to sink. She was going down stern first. The bow rose slightly. It was time for me to abandon ship. I took one last look around and then stepped into the ship's rescue boat. In less than a minute she was gone. The last thing I saw was her bow sticking above the water and then it disappeared beneath the ocean leaving barely a ripple on the surface.

Late the following evening we steamed into Havana. Ana was still alive. They had her well sedated and on a food and saline drip, alternating between the two. I sat by her side holding her hand and I'm sure that she knew that I was there. I squeezed her hand and felt a soft squeeze in return. Captain Camilo said, "I have spoken with the port authorities as well and customs and immigration and there will be an ambulance waiting. There will not be any issues with you entering the country without a visa even though you are from South Africa and by statute you should not be allowed to step foot on Cuban soil. It's because of apartheid, but I know everyone of importance including Castro so we will be okay. I have also spoken with my wife. I will need to ship out on a week but you will stay with us while I am there and even after I leave. You will be our guest."

Ana was taken to Hospital Clínico Quirúrgico Calixto García. It was just a mile from the port and I rode in the back with her. The moment we arrived Ana was whisked off into the emergency room while I sat in a dreary waiting room waiting for news. Captain Camilo came by with some food and some Cuban peso's. "Please take this," he said. "I talked with the head of the emergency room. Ana is doing okay, not great but she is at least responding. You will be here all night so use the money to buy coffee. I will come back in the morning." With that he left and I was left sitting listening to the sounds of sirens and the clatter of stretchers being

loaded. There was a particularly annoying fly that would not leave me alone. I was dozing when just after dawn the doctor came in. "Your friend is doing okay. She sustained a lot of injuries. Both her legs were broken and her pelvis was shattered. Those are bones and they will heal. She had a pierced lung. You are very lucky that you were able to get her to our hospital in time. A pierced lung is not usually fatal right away, but over a short amount of time it can be.

I sat in numb shock listening. "She was also concussed which was actually a good thing. The concussion meant that she was unaware of things. Her collar bone was also cracked and there is a crack in her skull right above the right ear. Right now she is sedated and we will keep her that way for at least a week. It's important that you spend as much time by her side as possible. She will know that you are there even if she can't respond." I was exhausted and not sure what to say so I just said simply, "thank you doctor and that was when the tears really started. I had no control. The doctor put his arm around my shoulder and said, "you need to be strong."

Ana's parents arrived the next day. I was worried that they were going to be angry with me but they could not have been kinder. I think that Ana sensed that they were in the room but I couldn't be sure. They were staying in a small rundown hotel because it was all that they could find. After a week it was time for Captain Castelo to ship out. He came and saw us and said, "I will be gone for a month. Please stay as long as you need. I have made arrangements with the government so there will not be any problems. Now I must go." I took his outstretched hand. "Thank you Captain. Thank you." He just shrugged. "I was in the right place at the right time. It was God's mercy." He said goodbye to Ana's parents and was gone.

Ana's Mom said, "you know he's right. God is looking out for

her.” As I mentioned before I am an atheist and was going to ask, “well why did god send that storm our way?” I decided to leave it unsaid.

It took six weeks for Ana to heal. They had slowly weaned her off the sedation and she found her brilliant white smile when she saw me. “Come closer,” she said. I leaned in. “I love you Jannie. Kiss me.” I kissed her lightly. She seemed almost delicate and I didn’t want to break her. Ana looked at me and then she broke my heart wide open when she asked, “how’s Sunny?”

I was sure that we could rebuild our lives together but truthfully I had no idea how I was going to do it. I had no money, no boat and at times very little hope. Captain Castilo had arranged for a driver to pick up myself and Ana when she was discharged and take us to his home in Miramar, one of the more affluent areas of Havana. It was only a few miles from the hospital and should have been a routine trip, but it wasn’t. We were driving along the waterfront. Ana had wound her window down because the air conditioner in the car barely worked. We rounded a bend just about a mile from the captain’s house when there was a loud popping sound. Gunfire. Two rival gangs were having at it. Our driver seemed unfazed and kept on going and that was when the stray bullet hit Ana in the face. We never made it to the captain’s house. Instead the driver spun the car around heading back to hospital at full speed. I could tell that there was no way that she had survived. Her already broken body had taken another hit and she lay slumped over on my lap. She was pronounced dead as soon as we got to the hospital.

I was in so much mental pain at what had happened. Ana’s parents arrived and arranged for her body to be returned to Brazil and there was an assado and a small celebration of her life, but none of us felt like celebrating. I stayed on in Brazil for a couple of week before returning to South Africa. My Dad had arranged

for a plane ticket and he and Jim Tesco picked my up at Durban International Airport. Nothing was said about Dad’s sexuality. Jim was kind and caring and I slowly recovered. I cried each night for Ana and for Sunny. One night while laying awake trying hard to sleep where I knew the pain would be less, I decided that it was time to keep on moving.

My bush camp is on the banks of the Thamalakane River just south of Maun in Botswana. I have been here for two months hunting and trading hides. It’s okay, not the life that Ana and I shared on Nantucket Sleighride but a distraction and a way to make a living. Ana and Sunny and Nantucket Sleighride are not far from my thoughts night and day.

I am sitting on a small camp stool with a fire going and a propane lantern burning so that I can see to type. Earlier I had heard lions roaring on the other side of the river, just a little to the south of my camp. I was in a place that Ana would have loved but she is gone, Sunny is gone and I am still barely holding on. I knew that I had found and lost a true love. I remember the life that we shared out on the open ocean, walking endless white sandy beaches, swimming in warm turquoise water and despite it being broken in two, my heart is full.

## LOW COUNTRY MURDER



ON ONE OF THE BACKSTREETS off a tiny tidal bay in South Carolina there is a breakfast joint run by Collette. She too is tiny, but she had a huge personality and an even bigger temper. I got to know that first hand when I served a customer white bread instead of wheat. The customer was, as it turned out, her uncle.

“What, are you trying to kill him? You know that he can’t eat white toast.” She took a pot of hot coffee and poured it onto my feet, when, by the way, I was wearing flip flops.

The breakfast joint was a few blocks back from the waterfront in a seedy neighborhood just south of Charleston, but I guess that the rent there was less and the customers were definitely more friendlier than the snooty ones that lived downtown. Colette was a hustler. She also ran the docks where the shrimp boats came in. She would work the breakfast joint in the morning and the docks in the late afternoon, once she had slept off her bottle of white that she loved to enjoy with her lunch.

“Come on you motherfuckers, just pull it in. Pull it in. There is only so much dock space here so the quicker that you can get it in, the quicker you can get it out.” That was actually what she once said to me one night after a bottle of cheap brandy when we ended up in bed together.

There was always a line of shrimp boats ready to offload their catch and Colette was the conductor who made it all happen, and she was damn good at it, until one day when one of the shrimp

boats came in with a dead body. They had dragged it up in their net.

“We can’t take these shrimp. You should just have chucked the body back where it came from. These shrimp might be contaminated. Don’t you guys ever think?” A few thousand dollars worth of shrimp were about to be chucked back into the ocean; plus one dead body. Colette said, “that looks a bit like Jimmy. I always wondered what came of him. Just chuck him back.”

Jimmy Robinson had worked the fleet for years. He had a little problem with the moonshine which he brewed in his basement and would always take a couple of hip flasks with him, that plus the half bottle that he chugged with his breakfast cereal before the boat left the dock. It was a good arrangement, until it wasn’t.

They were off Folly Beach when Jimmy got his foot stuck in the nets; supposedly. In truth they should have been closer inshore where it was a bit more swampy, where shrimp like to hang out, but the boat captain had made an executive decision to head offshore and that was when it happened.

Actually it wasn’t an accident. It was just Jimmy and Joe on watch. They both came from a long line of fishermen. They were working the aft deck when Joe hit jimmy on his head with a winch handle and then heaved his body overboard. There was no net involved even though the captain claimed in his police report that it could have been the only reason that he could have gone overboard.

Turns out, as these things often do, there was a lot more to the story. Colette told me this late one evening while we were getting drunk at one of Jimmy Buffett’s bars. I can’t remember the name of it. I think that it had something to do with margaritas.

“There has been a long feud between families,” Colette said.

She was well into her cups, if you know what I mean. “Joe had accused Jimmy’s family of fraud. Jimmy said that he had no idea what he was talking about, but he did. When his dad was checking out, so to speak, taking his last few breaths, he pulled Jimmy in closer and said, “we screwed them badly but it wasn’t our fault. We needed the money and they had plenty.”

Jimmy was a tad shocked but replied, “who?” Dad was gasping but said. “Joe’s Mom and Dad. You know the ones who ran the car dealership on West Shore Drive?” Jimmy was about to reply when the monitor straight lined. His dad had gone off to wherever people go after they leave this beautiful life.

I went off to Boston College but there was salt in my veins and I was a crap student. I joined the rowing team and we did OK in the annual Head of the Charles Regatta. Now rowing is kind of a hot, sweaty sport and I made the mistake of approaching the captain while he was in the shower, naked of course, and so was I. At the time it seemed like a fun thing to do. There was just the two of us in the shower but he was not that pleased about my advances. Up until that time I had no inkling that I was gay. To his credit he didn’t say anything to anyone and we never mentioned it again.

I actually wasn’t sure that I was gay, I mean me and Colette had done the dirty deed so I thought that I would consult her.

“You fumbled a lot,” was pretty much all she said. “You couldn’t find first base let alone second. I think that you were looking for something that I didn’t have but that was OK. It was fun and you are fun but I’m closing soon and will be heading down to the docks to sort those motherfuckers out. You would think by now that they would know the procedure.” I finished my cup of coffee and said. “well thanks for listening.”

I knew that I was a little different from my friends, even in Middle School, but like any teenager, I denied everything. There



was this time when my brother's and I stole my Mom's car and took it for a long drive around town after she had passed out just before finishing a half bottle of brandy. She had noticed that the gas gauge was almost empty when she yelled, "did you little bastards take my car again last night?" We fessed up and we were grounded for a month. We rode our bikes to school and home again and then it was straight into our rooms. That was where I figured that I might be gay. I found a very sketchy website on this new thing called The Internet. I found myself browsing photos of naked men and rarely looked at any photos of naked women.

I was eating a pile of pancakes when Colette came over. "Hey, you need more syrup?" I had a big jar right in front of me so I knew that something was up. She glanced at my plate and said, "OK, I have job proposition for you." I leaned back in my hard wooden chair and said, "I am all ears." I had been out of a job for a couple of months and needed a little revenue.

"I'm thinking of opening up this place for dinner, but as you know I need to be at the docks around dinner time." That was all she said. I stared at my mostly empty plate of pancakes and cup of coffee which had already gone stale and said, "OK." Colette was just getting up to leave when I asked her to sit. "If I am going to run this place in the evening I need more than a minimum wage."

Colette said, "you can eat all the pancakes you want and have a pot of coffee each day, on me, but my Dad started this little restaurant and I ain't giving up an inch, but you are welcome. We can have a grand opening next week, well it might not be that grand, but it will be an opening."

I became the general manager of Colette's Breakfast and Pancake Joint. It was a decent paying job, but I was still wondering what ever happened between Jimmy and Joe. It's fair enough that there

are feuds, but a winch handle over the head, that was taking things a bit too far. It wasn't too hard to figure out. It was all about money; it always is.

Joe and his wife Helen, well Helen mostly, had counted on a decent inheritance. Joe was and had always been a bit of a bum and Helen was and always had been a bit of a gold digger. They had a modest home on the banks of Morris Island Inlet, but Helen had her eye on a much bigger place in a new development just north of Charleston. She had no idea that Jimmy's family had drained a fair bit of the family fortune from the car dealership. For a while her hair and nail appointments were covered by Joe's credit card, but, well as these things often do, the bill came due.

It was a rainy, sultry, South Carolina afternoon with low scudding clouds and very high humidity when Helen thought that it might be a good time to bring it up.

"I see that you have not been making any payments on our credit cards." Joe reached for the popcorn and said, "hey it looks like the Raiders might just win this one." Joe had grown up in California. Once a Raiders fan, always a Raiders fan, as they say.

"Now Joe, I am serious," Helen said, "is there something that I don't know?" Joe just shrugged. "There is a lot that you don't know." He flicked the channel to the Home Shopping Network knowing that it was Helen's favorite show, but she wasn't taking the bait. "There is something going on here and it's not about me. I need to know what's going on and if you ever want your balls rubbed again you are going to have to tell me."

Joe was a tad incompetent, in general, but this time he was clever enough to keep his mouth shut. He was six Budweisers in and thought better than to say anything. "There is nothing going on. Everything is just fine," he said. Then he burped and farted at the same time.

“I am going to call your sister,” Helen said as she stormed out of the room.

It was not only that Jimmy’s parents had siphoned off some of the car dealership money, but Joe also had a bit of a gambling problem. Let’s just say, he was not a very talented gambler.

Helen called his sister, “do you have any idea where the money went?” She could hear his sister take a long drag on her smoke. There was some silence. “What money are you talking about?”

“Your parents were rich, or at least that’s what Joe told me, otherwise I wouldn’t have married him.” There was another long pause. Helen could hear her exhale. “The money was gone a long time ago,” was all she said.

Meanwhile I had met someone. His name was Billy. He was the manager at the local Family Dollar and was set to inherit a fortune, well a small fortune at least, once his parents died. Now, just so that you don’t get me wrong, I loved Billy for his soul and great spirit but I did ask, “how old are your parents?” Billy just shrugged and said, “I don’t really know.”

Joe was knee deep in debt and while the job on the boat paid OK, he needed to make a plan. Turns out you can, in South Carolina, take out a life insurance policy on a friend. Truth is that you need the friend to sign off on it but when the paperwork came in he just faked the signature. Jimmy was an easy one to fake. He just wrote ‘J’ on his checks. That was when Joe decided to go for it, and it worked, at first. A few days later the life insurance paperwork came in.

Billy and I were walking along the tidal pool. We had just enjoyed a picnic lunch that may or may not have included a couple of bottles of cheap red wine and a sandwich from SuperSub. By the way, that Australian wine with a kangaroo on the label is total

crap, but we didn’t know it at the time. We were just walking along holding hands when Billy said, “is that some kind of swamp animal out there?” He pointed to a pale white thing drifting in with the tide. “I’m not sure,” I replied, but I was kind of sure. It was a dead body and it washed up on the beach right where we had been picnicking.

You know where this is going, right? It was Jimmy.

The coroner came over and took a look. “Looks like he was bashed on the head with some kind of blunt instrument,” was all he said. They took Jimmy away in the back of an ambulance. This being South Carolina there was a full investigation. They needed full employment and the governor was running for President. The cops found the winch handle and took Joe off to answer to the judge. They also took Colette off to testify. She was the one who, after all, had told Joe to chuck his body back into the sea.

I lost my job. Colette got 5. Joe got 25 and divorce papers.

Billy and I started a great little restaurant just up the street from where Colette had her place. Colette’s Breakfast and Pancake Joint was shuttered and looked a little lonely. We called our place Happy and Horny. It was just perfect, as only a gay couple could make it. We had pink napkins with flamingo’s on them, a menu of grilled brioche and a spread of free omelettes on Monday mornings. Monday was always a slow day anyway and it was a way to build goodwill and to bring people in to see the place. Soon business boomed. Most people came in for the fish-fry Friday, they drank too much Schlitz and it took them until Sunday to recover. Each night during happy hour we packed the place which ended at 6-o-clock and we still made money. We watered the half price beer down.

About six months into her sentence Colette called me from the

prison phone. It was a collect call. “When I get out of here I am going to wring your nuts off.”

“And why is that?”

“You stole all my customers.” I just smiled and said, “when you get out, Billy and I will be in the Bahamas. I just bought a new boat. We are heading south. Good luck finding us.”

## JO AND THE NUTTERS

THEY SAID THAT IT WAS the best summer in 80 years. And it was, for our small crew at least. There was just Jo and me, a couple of lonely souls sailing away from our troubles on a sailboat delivery from the south coast of England to Helsinki, Finland. We had met, electronically, six months earlier while I was on a mission from hell, and well, some good fun stuff too. I had taken a job on a boat in the Bahamas. Just a few weeks work to fill in the empty spaces of my bank account and, as is often the case when people flee to the Banana Republic, to fill in a hole in my heart caused by a long marriage that was heading for troubled waters. (I know, I stole that line from Simon and Garfunkel but there was no bridge involved or I might have jumped off it). What started in the hot waters of Grand Bahama ended in the cold waters of Finland and as so often happens with time spent at sea, a much better perspective on the trials and travails of life.

It's hard to know where to start. Let's just say that the holes in my bank account were as a result of some less than ethical activity on the part of my business partner. The crumbling marriage; I take full responsibility for that. My wandering heart, and at times wandering eye, was piece by piece dismantling years of a white picket fence relationship that resulted in two small boys. I was a sailor at heart and time in the traffic and jams of life on land had left me feeling uneasy. I needed to get away. Then out of nowhere, I got a voicemail on my cell.

“Can you spare a couple of weeks in your calendar? I was not sure who had left the voicemail.” Turns out it was my friend Bill.

The phone rang again. It was Bill. He’s a yacht broker that lives in England but we went way back to when the both of us were sailmakers working for the same company.

“It’s a piss easy job,” he said, “and the money is quite good. How about it?” He caught me at a time when I was driving home from my job at Home Depot in a blinding snowstorm. I looked through the snow covered windscreen and said, “yes.” I knew that my wife would go along with it. We were at a time in our marriage when it was better for me to be out of the house, or better yet, out of the country so long as I was sending money home.

“There is a couple needing help commissioning their boat in the tropics,” was all he said. I was on the first plane out. Little did I know what I was flying into.

The couple, both religious fanatics, Scarlett and Mark had met in a bar in Belfast. She was recently divorced and had money in the bank. He, well I never really got to know him like I did Scarlett. He had a boat, she had never sailed, he had a dream, and a few glasses of Chablis later they had hatched a plan. He would sell his boat, combine the proceeds with her money and start a new life, in the yacht charter business, in the Bahamas. A cold, gray rain beating down on the empty streets of Belfast only added to the certainty that this was a great idea. Add me to the mix, combine it with the extreme heat and grime of a boatyard in Freeport on Grand Bahama in the middle of summer, a boat that looked good on paper but under the thin veneer was falling apart, and you end up with a sad story. That part of the story has very little to do with the best summer in 80 years, but it is where I met Jo, electronically, as I mentioned.

The couple were very nice, but a little off if you know what I

mean. I’m a devout non-believer. She was pretty, very pretty in fact, and for her new persona as a charter captain, even though she had no clue how to sail, she had changed her name from Mary to Scarlett. I found that quite sexy.

“We are glad that you are here,” Scarlett said. “The boat is in great condition but might need a little TLC.” I took a look on board. The boat needed a lot of TLC. For a start, and this is a true story, there was a dark, slippery stain on the floorboards leading to the galley. I was surprised that they had not mentioned it. It was a little greasy and while it didn’t look like blood, it did look like something that I had never seen before.

I called my friend Bill. “Things are going quite well here,” I said. “They seem nice, the boat seems OK, but there is a terrible stain on the floor just as you go down the stairs and head into the galley.” There was a long pause. I could hear Bill breathing.

“Hi Bill, are you still there?” I asked. I could hear some shuffling of papers on his end. After a pregnant pause (not sure who first came up with that ‘pregnant’ line, but anyway it’s a good one), Bill said, “well there is something that I should have told you.” Now it was my time to pause. I took a long pull on my Heineken and waited.

“Jo, who you will meet someday, she’s really nice, and her partner Chris.” I knew that he was stalling for time but then he continued, “they ran a quite successful charter business out of the Bahamas. Very successful in fact. I saw their books.”

“OK, sounds good.” That’s an old South African fall-back comment. “Sound’s good”, but I needed to know more. “What about the stain? They don’t want to talk about it.” I could hear Bill shuffle his papers and then he continued. “Well you see, Chris was getting the boat ready to sail to England to put it up for sale when he tried to get the headsail hoisted and things apparently

got a little out of control. I'm guessing that there was a sudden squall. You get them all the time in the Bahamas, especially in the late afternoon." Bill stopped and that was when I realized that it was not papers that he was shuffling, it was a large bottle of Myers Rum. I knew that it was his favorite. He took a sip and continued.

"Well things, apparently, went badly wrong. He did email Jo and told her that things had gone bad and then he went down to the galley to make himself a cup of tea and, how do I put this delicately, he had a heart attack and fell down the stairs. Unfortunately that stain on the floor was him. It was on a Friday afternoon. The boatyard people had all gone home for the weekend. It was, apparently, an extremely hot weekend even by Bahama standards. Jo called and called but it was also a long weekend, a bank holiday if you know what I mean, and they finally picked up on Tuesday morning." Bill paused. "This is what I have since learned by asking Thurber, the boatyard manager. He told me what happened."

I took another long pull on my Heineken and felt that liquid hit my gut with a pleasant slosh and the sun got just a tad brighter.

This is what Bill said. "Jo called Thurber." He took a pause to take a sip, and then continued. Jo said to Thurber, "I have not heard from Chris for a while. Last I heard that he was trying to raise the headsail by himself, silly bugger, but can you please go by the boat and see how he is doing?"

That was when they found Chris dead on the floor. They moved him, which was probably not easy given that the Bahama heatwave was still in full force and Chris was not a small man, but they left the, well even I don't know what to call it, on the floor at the bottom of the stairs leading to the galley. OK so I will call it what it was because that's what happens when you die. The body juices had started to leak out. He had banged his head on the

corner of the doorway to the guest bedroom on his way to make tea. Apparently the knock on the head caused a heart attack."

I stayed in the Bahamas for a few weeks working on the boat. I did clean up the mess but it was hot as buggery, as they say in England. I got the job done and it wasn't that much fun, but there you go. Everyone needs a paycheck.

It was on a sultry Sunday a week later when Scarlett invited me out for lunch.

"Thank you," she said, "that stain had a weird smell about it. Thank you for cleaning it up." She ordered another bottle of chardonnay and continued. "I think that this boat charter business is going to go well, don't you think?." I thought, but didn't say it, "maybe not."

I could see a twinkle in Scarlett's eye. "There is a place on the beach that does a pretty good pina colada. The view is amazing. Let's go. It's my treat." She lightly touched my hand and I could feel my nuts do a 360. It was a short walk and we found "Jimmy's Jerk Chicken." The 'off' had been crossed out but was still there. Must have been some food inspector that found the name offensive. Scarlett and I found a place overlooking the beautiful Bahamian waters and Jimmy came over. Scarlett said, "I'm ordering. Two pina coladas and I want them in the big glasses, not those crappy little one's like the last time I was here." Jimmy smiled and said, "I remember you lady. You are a little feisty." He laughed at his own joke. "Two big ones coming up."

Scarlett added, "and a plate of your jerk." She looked at me and smiled. "I was talking about the chicken."

The pina coladas were good, a little too sweet for my taste, but they went down, as my late father used to say, "they went down like they were singing hymns." Scarlett leaned forward and said, well she kind of whispered it to me, she said, "you know, if we

do it you will be only the second man in my life.” I wasn’t sure what she meant until I felt her foot rub up against my shin. Now this is true. When her foot touched my leg her eyes startled to sparkle even brighter. I may have mentioned this before, my marriage was falling apart, but I wanted to be discreet, keep it on the low-down, so to speak, so, well, me being a sailor, I asked her if she would like to go with me on a dingy ride to watch the sunset. I could see her eyes flutter when she said, “I have condoms.”

We finished another pitcher of pina colada’s and somehow we made our way back to the boat. The sun was getting low in the sky and the dinghy was bobbing just where it should be; right behind the boat which by the way, and I forgot to mention this, was called Endless Summer. How ironic. I knew that it was going to be a good evening.

We left the dock just as a slim sliver of a moon was rising. Actually it was just rising behind what I called, The Field of Dreams. Yup, it was at the far end of the boatyard where people, I guess people that had once had their boats hauled but didn’t have enough money to relaunch them and there they sat. A field of dreams. They sat until their covers came off, their sides fell off and after a while, their masts came down.

Scarlett and I motored out into the harbor. The sun dropped into the ocean coughing and spluttering as it sank, and it suddenly got dark, as in pitch dark.

Freeport is a working ship harbor. The night-time shift was in full swing over at the ship-loading dock, the faint light from the moon glimmered on the water and it was just perfect.

No-one could see us or hear us because the lights were too bright, and the noise of the cranes loading cargo too loud. I asked Scarlet where she kept her condoms. She reached into her tiny

top and pulled one out and, well let’s just leave it at that, but the moon was trying to make an impression above us, not like the sun that seemed to protest each night as it set.

We both dozed off and our dinghy drifted a little out to sea. I woke, and Scarlett looked so peaceful even though I knew that she had a troubled mind. I asked her, “you ready to go back to the boat?” She took my hand and said, “it’s OK. You were my second best.” I pulled the outboard, the engine spluttered at first but then started and we motored slowly back to the boat and pulled up very quietly. We didn’t want to wake Mark.

Scarlett said to me, “That was more fun than all the Christmases I have ever had.” She was just stepping onto the dock when she added “Times ten.” I kissed her and then she added, “he was a nut job and a bully.” I left it at that. A nut job and a bully but I guess that he was fairly decent at sex. How could he not be? She had a great looking arse.

Let’s leave that there right where it is and go back to Jo. From her home in Northern England, via Skype, she reeled off a list of tasks that needed to be done on the boat before the final sale could go through. It was menial work but menial or not, boatyards charge their full hourly rate and I was doing my best to save everyone money by helping Jo. It was all working out fine until Mark revealed the twinkle in his eye to Scarlett who declined his advances. I guess that he had not noticed that the dinghy was gone most evenings. I don’t want to boast but the sex had been good and each time we got closer to the dock workers where we could be seen, but even when I looked up there was no one watching. I knew that being watched would turn Scarlett on, and I was right. One night there was a crane operator looking down at us and that was fun.

Mark got pissed when he found out why the gas in the dinghy was always bordering on empty. Scarlett revealed her mean streak.

“You know that you have made me ruin my covenant with the Lord,” she said.

“I was just doing my job,” I replied.

“It was not your job to shag the boat owner.” I could see Mark’s head turn but, to his credit, he said nothing. He was covered in grease from working in the engine room. It was another hot Freeport day and I think that maybe she had slept badly. I had enough of the whole mess and now that Scarlett had turned, I did what most others would probably have done; I fled. I flew back home to a divorce agreement which, as bad as it was, was better than the storm brewing over paradise and a couple of horny boat owners.

Later that year I got another call from Bill. He had sold a boat to a man in Helsinki. The man in Helsinki was too busy earning money to pay for the boat, or to sail the boat, and so I struck a deal, a good one I might add, and once again, sight unseen, I flew off into the night. I asked Jo to join me. There was money in the budget for a crew but Jo had plenty of money so I pocketed both of our salaries.

We met for the first time in person on a balmy summer afternoon in a small boatyard on the south coast of England. The boat was submerged in a few feet of foul smelling mud. Low tide mud. Jo, compact and efficient, told me not to worry. “A rising tide raises all ships,” she said, and true enough a few hours later we were sitting drinking a cold glass of wine bobbing gently in the late afternoon warmth while a couple of swans paddled by, clearly in love. The Bahamas, the broken boat, Scarlett and the squabbling couple seemed like a lifetime away.

The owner of the boat stopped by. He lived in Finland but was in England doing business. “This boat has been a dream of mine. I saved and looked around until I found the perfect one.

Sadly my wife hates the boat but I am sure that she will come around.”

We left the following morning on a fair tide. Jo said, “I’m fairly wound up. I can take the first watch tonight if it’s Ok by you.” Years earlier I had sailed into Portsmouth to complete my first lap of the planet. Now, half a lifetime later, I was sailing out the same harbor, turning my bows for a destination well to the north in the hope that some time at sea would heal the hurt in my heart and give Jo some time to reflect on the sudden change in her life.

“You know I had never been on a boat until I met Chris,” she said. “He taught me how to sail, in fact he taught me how to live.” Jo was quite a bit older than me, and me, a tired, sad sailor, gazed on the lush green hills of England as they slipped slowly out of sight. We both hoped that the next few weeks and the rhythm of life on a boat would heal our hurt. And it did.

Our first night at sea was marred by a constant stream of ships and fishing boats each intent on running us over. I bobbed and weaved while Jo slept, and she bobbed and weaved while I slept until an early morning downpour had us both awake. The rain washed the grit off the deck and the world clean and the early sun sparkled off the white cliffs of Dover. All was good. The following wind bent to the south as we turned to the north and a strong but fair current propelled us into the North Sea.

“Jo,” I asked, “do you hear that grinding noise coming from the back of the boat?” Jo laughed. “I thought that it was your tummy after last night’s curry.”

That was when the autopilot stopped working. I knew perfectly well that I should have taken more time to go over the boat before leaving, but the boat had just been surveyed and deemed good as new. After a quick look at the chart we altered course and plugged in the coordinates of Ijmuiden, Holland into the GPS.

“That seems as good a place as any,” Jo said.

One thing that I have learned from three decades at sea is that you have to expect the unexpected. I have also learned that often the unexpected is a gift as was our brief visit to Holland. The town was small but had what we needed to get the autopilot working again, and with a belly full of good beer and a galley stocked with pickled herring and Dutch chocolate we set off once again. While the VHF sounded warnings of wet weather over southern England, the forecast for Germany was a pleasant 82 degrees and a southwest wind. We were heading northwest, the boat enjoying the conditions.

Jo said, “did you hear the forecast for Holland? It sounds like we got out of there in the nick of time.” I had not heard the forecast but I had noticed the barometer dropping and knew that we were being chased by some bad weather.

Jo was a superb companion and a perfect shipmate. Each evening she would pull together a plate of goodies and a glass of bubbly and we would toast the sunset. One nice thing about a catamaran is that it remained level and the foie gras and champagne remained in place as we scooted north, the lights of Germany ahead looking just like the lights of Holland astern.

“Let’s stop for a night,” I said. “We seem to be outrunning the bad weather and I could use a cold glass of German beer.” Jo just nodded and said, “me too.”

Soon we were negotiating the tricky entrance of Cuxhaven and tying up in a small marina. As luck would have it the French were playing the Germans in a semi-final match of the Soccer World Cup and the town was hopping. I joked that I would wear a French flag on my back and walk through town to see how long I’d last, but instead Jo poured a large glass of wine and we relaxed into an early slumber as car horns and screaming fans

faded behind a curtain of contentment. We woke to find that the French had won.

From Cuxhaven it was a quick sail up the Elbe River to the entrance of the Keil Canal. The Keil Canal was finished in 1895 but still eats up a huge amount of shipping and we were among those taking a short cut through the beautiful countryside of Germany. Jo said, “you know, I could get used to this.” She had made a spread of salami and cheese and since we were not actually sailing, she had opened a bottle of red. I was watching out for ships while Jo, who insisted on cutting the salami very thin, was cutting the salami very thin. She also brought out some olives which she had squirreled aboard in England and life slipped by at a very pleasant rate of six knots. Sounds like the title to a Jimmy Buffet song (RIP my friend)

I heard the VHF sputter and listened. There was a forecast of rain and windy conditions in Holland, but for Keil and surrounding waters it was idyllic 82 degrees and sunny. The wind we didn’t care about as we were to motor through the canal and for the next 10 hours we were amazed by the size and proximity of some extremely large, extremely close ships. At times we could just about touch a ship on either side of us as foreign looking crew looked down at us looking up at them.

Jo said, for the fifteenth time, “I could get used to this.” I thought to myself, me too knowing that I was pocketing a double paycheck.

The autopilot was still giving us grief and the dockmaster in Kiel put us in contact with an electronics expert who lived across the bay in the quaint town of Moltenort.

“Jo,” I said, we should probably stop in Moltenort to have someone look at the autopilot. Jo had drunk most of the two bottles of red wine, and said, “you are boss.” She said, you know



I haven't smoked in 20 years, but I think that today is the day that I am going to break that bad habit. I have pack in my bag. You want one?" I wasn't sure, but said, OK." It was disgusting but Jo was having the time of her life and by now she had become more than just a friend, if you know what I mean. She was no Scarlett but sometimes life gives you a long and winding road.

A warm breeze from behind made the late afternoon sail one of the most pleasant experiences of my life and the seafood dinner at a tiny shack-of-a-place in the marina was also most memorable. All in all things were shaping up real good. I called the post owner. "I just can't wait to see you and spend the rest of the summer sailing," he said. The electronics expert changed out the brain of the autopilot the following morning and we cast off for Sweden as the forecast for Germany turned wet and windy.

We were on the south coast of Denmark making good progress. "I will take the first watch," I said to Jo just as the sun slunk below the horizon. Jo went below and climbed into her bunk. I envied her. I was tired but that's sailing for you.

I have to admit to a degree of complacency after decades of trouble free sailing and so I was a bit taken aback when a large, very official vessel roared up from astern as we sailed through the dark night. I chose to ignore them as they drenched my sails with a fierce searchlight. Below decks the VHF cracked but Jo was asleep and I was reluctant to leave the helm with people watching, so I ignored it. Finally the boat drew alongside and a man on the bow with horn yelled into the cool night air.

"You must stop immediately," he commanded. "You are sailing into danger." That got my attention. I called for Jo and lowered the spinnaker. The boat slowed to a crawl and the official vessel pulled closer. "You must follow us very closely," the voice behind the mega horn admonished. "There is a wind farm under construction directly ahead. It's not on the charts and it's not lit."

Within moments, out of the pitch dark night, a massive structure loomed to leeward. We were less than a hundred feet from it. Suddenly a similarly sized wind tower appeared to windward. We had been sailing directly into a few hundred brand new towers still under construction, all unlit.

By this time Jo was on deck and although she looked a bit sleepy, she was wound up tight. I told you that she was short and compact and like most bulldogs she was ready for a fight until she understood what was going on.

"You are a bit of a wanker," she said. "How could you have missed this?" It was not a good time to bring that up but she admitted later that she had been having a bad dream.

"They are not on the flipping chart. These men are going to help us through these unlit monstrosities. Jo flopped down on the cockpit seat. "I'm sorry," she said.

For an hour, a very nerve wracking hour, we followed the official boat as it wound its way slowly between the looming danger. Then, as suddenly as they had appeared, they were gone and we set the spinnaker again. The breeze was still from astern and blew warm off the south shore of Denmark. I gave Jo the helm and, I have to admit, poured myself a stiff glass of aquavit. OK to be honest, and I have to be honest because this is my story. Half the bottle of aquavit was gone before I could fall asleep.

Thirty years earlier I sailed into Visby on the island of Gotland as a wide-eyed kid seeking adventure. Three decades later Jo and I pulled into the same marina. A few miles had passed under my keel since that first visit but the thrill of arriving in an exquisite Swedish port was still there. "Jo said, this place looks nice."

Let me try and set the scene. It was mid summer and as such the sun had no intention of setting. Instead it bathed the harbor in a pink light that reflected off the walls of the old city. Stunningly

beautiful women pushed stunningly beautiful babies in carriages while their handsome husbands bought ice cream and candy from street vendors. It was as if I had dropped into a perfect Disney movie. Jo and I ate arugula pizza and shared a carafe of house red while I pinched myself at my own luck. We would leave in the morning just as the forecast for Denmark was turning bad.

Jo said, "that place was nice." All I could think of was this most stunning woman with a toddler on her hand and legs that went north of the north pole. I said, "yea that was fun. I heard that there was some weather coming in so we had better unfurl the headsail and keep on moving."

We had left early, the same time as a massive, slab-sided ferry, and for a while all I could see was the Silja Lines logo and a few weary travelers heading for home. Our next stop would be Helsinki; well somewhere in Finland.

Jo asked, "do you want some breakfast?"

"What do we have?"

"I can get us some of that hard bread with the fake fish roe, or I can cut the avocado and serve it. Dealers choice."

"I will take that fish spread." We watched Visby slip slowly into the ocean and I enjoyed the hard bread with the fake fish roe. Jo had poached an egg and all was good with the world.

I tuned the radio to the BBC and learned of searing heat in Moscow. The temperatures had been above 100F for a week and people were dying in their cramped, stuffy apartments. I said to Jo, "I think that we are better off out here." Jo grunted. "It's still pretty hot," was all she said.

We picked up a steady tailwind that blew in fresh and a little damp. A few hundred miles to the east I could almost hear the collective groan of suffering. The lights of Latvia, Lithuania and

Estonia were to leeward, their residents had been spared the searing temperatures. Out where we were the weather was still a perfect 75 degrees. Apparently it was the best summer weather in Scandinavia in the last 80 years.

It was only a few miles from the Finnish coast that the wind changed direction and for the first time since leaving England we had headwinds. I eased the sheets and opted for a night at anchor in the famous Finnish archipelago. Just as the light from a long twilight faded we anchored in a stunning bay. Jo came on deck. She had a cold bottle of vodka in her hand with two glasses. "I snuck this on board," she said. Just for this moment." The anchorage was as best as one could ever hope for. There is something about a Scandinavian evening that makes a person's heart sing.

I heard a crackle from down below at the navigation station. The VHF weather update talked of rain in Sweden, the first in weeks but we were already well to the north. I looked out the tiny porthole next to my bunk and the purple hues of a midnight sun cast long shadows. Back home my small boys would have been getting ready for bed perhaps wondering where their Dad was. I was in a slice of a different kind of paradise. The heat and hardship of the Bahamas a distant memory. The pain of a marriage gone bad was still there but it had been tempered by time and the beauty of the open ocean. Jo seemed happy and content. She had taken a chance on me and gone sailing to find her soul. In all the little boat had offered us sanctuary. We went sailing to find ourselves and somewhere between England and Finland, we did.

The owner was there on the dock to take our lines. He was very excited. I was going to ask where his wife was but thought better of it. I learned from Bill a few months later that the boat was up for sale. His wife had given him that ultimatum familiar to sailors.

“It’s either the boat or me,” she admonished. Turns out she was the one with the money so the boat was listed and the dream over. I happened to be in northern England visiting Jo when Bill delivered the news. Jo took my hand and said, “I guess that’s life. At least you pulled a double paycheck for a couple of months.”

## THE LETTER

I GOT A LETTER IN THE MAIL. Well to be honest, and I need to be honest because this is my story, the letter was pushed under my front door. I noticed it when I went downstairs to get my first cup of coffee. It read simply, “OPEN ME.” So I opened it. There was a hand scribbled message on some rather flimsy paper. “Your life is going to change today.” I looked at the envelope and there, I guess, quite obviously, was no return address.

I poured myself a cup of coffee and took one up to my wife who likes to have hers in bed. She actually needs quite a bit of coffee before she becomes human. There was a dim light in the east as the sun tried to come up but it was Fall in New England and the days were getting shorter and the sun was not making enough of an effort. I read the letter again: “Your life is going to change after today.” I sat drinking my coffee and thought for a bit, but I too needed coffee before I could really think so I poured myself a second cup and let the letter just sit there. Every now and then I glanced at it but; I thought that I might have recognized the handwriting, but it turned out that I didn’t.

The day was busy. Kids needed to be scrubbed behind their ears, jackets and shoes on, and taken to the corner to wait for the school bus. I didn’t mention the letter to my wife, but the next morning there was another letter under my door. Again it read simply, “OPEN ME.” I left it on the counter until I had delivered the coffee upstairs to my wife, who is a school teacher, 2nd grade Special Ed by the way. She was barely coherent and just grunted.

The letter sat there until I had finished my cup of coffee. I like mine black and strong, not unlike my first wife who I had met in Botswana while on safari back when I was just 20. I used a letter opener that I had received as a prize in a spelling contest which I had won back when I was in High School. I took the envelope and cut it open. It read, “and it’s not going to be good.”

I didn’t sleep much that night. Sally was tossing and turning. She might have sensed something. To be honest I was a bit reluctant to go downstairs and get another coffee, but then I thought, “well screw it.” So I went downstairs. There was another letter shoved under my door. Again it read simply, “OPEN ME.”

I had two cups of coffee and a blueberry yogurt smoothie before I opened it. The handwriting didn’t look the same as on the other two letters. In some kind of chicken scrawl it read, “Your grandfather was part of the Gestapo.” Well that took me by surprise. My grandparents had immigrated from Germany in ‘43 and I didn’t know much about their history. Dad said that he didn’t like to talk about it. Mom was also quite tight lipped but every now and then she let things slip. There was this one time when she said, almost casually after dinner, “your grandfather liked to dress up in uniforms.” I let her words dangle in the air for a while before I replied. “how come I never met him?” Mom sighed and said, “it’s better that we don’t talk about any of this.”

Both of my grandparents have now since moved on to greener pastures, well I hope so. I have never been there but they needed greener pastures, especially my grandmother. My grandfather, well I don’t know the whole story but once I found some letters tucked under the mattress long after he died and they were all written in German. I knew that it was probably not the right thing to do, but one of my classmate at school came from Germany and looked at the letters and said, “I can’t tell you,” and he didn’t but years later, thanks to Google Translate, I translated them. They

were short and to the point. Pretty much what they said was, “we did a good job killing all those Jews.”

Now I know enough about the holocaust to understand what the writer of the letter meant but I really didn’t want to see it. I had Jewish friends at school and on more than one occasion I had enjoyed Yom Kippur with a close friend. It’s a day of atonement, a time to reflect on things that had happened in your life and so I got to thinking about the letters.

I really didn’t want to do this, but I called my friend Noah. He had long since moved to Washington, DC and was married. As soon as he picked up the phone I blurted, “my grandfather was a Nazi.” There was no response from the other end of the line. After about a minute or so I heard Noah exhale. He kind of choked on his words when he said, “are you sure?”

I wasn’t really sure but I always had a feeling. Grandpa was always a little militant in everything he did. For example, now this brings back a memory, he used to line up the toy soldiers that we were playing with. On one side there were tiny little soldiers with very big guns. On the other side there were just small female soldiers without guns. Grandpa used to say, “now you see that’s how we won the war.” It wasn’t true but I didn’t know it at the time, but I did go to my local library and looked it all up. The Nazi’s did win for a while and the Jews most definitely lost, well around six million, and I mean six million of them lost; badly. It was around that time that I remembered that my grandfather used to like dressing in uniforms. The memory was vague and I wouldn’t have thought about it unless Grammy, that’s what we called her, hadn’t mentioned it.

It was a Saturday morning. Dad had made me and Mom blueberry pancakes and then he left to go the hardware store. He needed some spray paint for a project that he was working on. I looked at my Mom who was smoking a Chesterfield Lite. She was looking

out the window. They were both living with us since their house had been foreclosed on. She looked older than I remembered but I guess that's what happens every day. She took a long draw on her smoke and said, "Tommy, there is a lot in this world that you don't know." She let the smoke come out of her nose and said, "a lot." I didn't have anything to say in response so just finished my coffee. "I am going to take another cup to Sally," I said. "She has been having a hard time at work these days and I let her sleep in. She will like the coffee."

Dad hit a lamppost on the way home. The police report, I guess in consultation with the coroner, said that he had a heart attack and had no idea but I am just glad that he didn't hit anyone on his way to the lamppost. I never really liked him.

Mom got up and started to sweep the kitchen floor. I could tell that she was deep in her thoughts and I let her get on with it. She liked to keep a cigarette between her lips and would take an occasional puff and every now and then some ash would drop onto the kitchen floor.

"This place is a mess Tommy," she said. "There is ash all over the floor." I didn't say anything. I heard Sally coming down the stairs and thought it might make sense to say nothing. I noticed that it had started raining. Just a light drizzle. I also noticed that the wind had picked up and the birch tree outside the kitchen window was starting to slap against the glass. "Mom," I said, do you want more coffee or are you done?" Mom just shrugged and kept on sweeping.

Sally sat at the small table in the kitchen drinking her coffee and scrolling through her phone. I poured her a second cup and she drank it in silence. The rain finally stopped, but the wind was still whistling and the birch was still slap, slapping against the window. Finally Sally said, "I found the letters." I, of course acted like most men do, I acted like I had never seen or heard of the letters.

"You know Tommy," she said. "There should be no secrets in this house. You should have told me about the letters." Mom moved closer. "What letters?" she asked. Sally said, and by now the second cup of coffee was kicking in,

Sally said, "Tommy has been getting death threats." Mom stopped sweeping and walked to the coffee machine and poured herself a hot cup. She sat down at the table and said, "what's going on?" I had no idea what to say so I said nothing, like I usually do when confronted, but Sally spoke up.

"Tommy has been getting letters. I am not sure where they come from but they are threatening. They say that grandfather had something to do with the Jews. Are we ever going to talk about this?" Mom sniffed, she took a long sip on her coffee, decided that she needed more sugar and then lit her smoke which had gone out because she had forgotten to inhale while she was listening to Sally make her announcement.

I knew that this moment would come. "Mom, it's OK if you smoke in here but not when the kids are around." I was buying time, but Sally was not having any of it. "What's going on? Just tell me. What's with all the letters?" Mom shuffled closer and said, "I think I know. There may be a few things to sort out here and I will try my best to make sense of it all. Your grandfather was a close aid to Adolph. You know his name. I have been trying to forget his name and won't say it but it's hard." I looked at my Mom's hands and they were translucent. I could see her veins and her delicate bones. She took another puff on her Chesterfield Lite and blew the smoke over her shoulder.

"Give me a second," she said "I have to pee." Sally looked at me and said, "I knew that this day would come."

Mom took a while to get it all out and there might have been a few cups of coffee involved. I switched to Red Bull halfway

through but the point remains the same. In the mid-40's my grandfather had been a close ally of the most delirious man on the planet. Gramps had hit the road just in time and escaped Germany into Belgium and then made his way to Holland where he was able to change his identity and hook a ride on a fishing boat to New Romney, a small fishing town on the east coast of England. New Romney had, for a while, held the title of 'Best Fish and Chips in England.' That was where he met Mom. They fell in love, as we all do at that age, but theirs lasted and they finally made their way to Connecticut which is where we live now.

Mom came back from the bathroom. She was still hitching up her pants, but I knew that she was also just buying time. "It was complicated," was all she said. "Very complicated but your grandfather was a good man and deserved a second chance, but when I picked up Joey from school a few weeks ago he wasn't talking. Wouldn't say a word." Joey is our second born and much against my better judgement I let my mother pick him up after school. She was and has always been a terrible driver.

"He told me a couple of days later that he was getting bullied at school. Seems like some of those kids have been surfing, if you know what I mean, the Internet or whatever you may call it. And one of the kids, I think Bert was his name, yes Bert, that was his name, had come up with some information about your grandfather. I don't know how they get this stuff but I guess that it's all there somewhere in outer space. He threatened Joey and that was why Joey would not talk to me." I made a mental note to take with Bert's Mom. She was the one who did all the dropping off and picking up. I remembered Bert because he was the one who always wore football gear; a singlet in the summer and a gaudy jacket in the winter. The singlet always showed too much skin.

Sally sat silent just sipping on her coffee but I knew that she

was listening. "Marie," she said, "why didn't you say something to us? About any and all of this." Mom went quiet for a while and then said, after taking a long pull on her smoke, she said, "I was embarrassed. Your grandfather and me kept it a secret and after he died I told him that I would keep it a secret, but now you know and it's a good thing that you know. It's part of our family history.

The next morning I set an alarm. It was on vibrate and I stuck it under my pillow so that it would not wake Sally. It was still dark out. That measly Fall sun didn't bother to show. It was overcast and damp. I snuck out of bed and grabbed a coat and watched from behind a big rhododendron bush which was also struggling to get into the rhythm with the changing seasons.

It was just after six when I saw him, the little bastard. He dropped his bike off on the lawn. By the way, he could have taken better care of his bike and leaned it against the tree on the street but he didn't, he just chucked it onto the lawn. He looked around before creeping slowly toward our front door. He was a slight kid with a bad haircut and even in the very early morning light I could see that he had bad acne. He had a letter in his hand and he slid it under the door. He had a New England Patriots jacket on and embroidered across the back was his name; Bert.

## A CHILD OF AFRICA



**T**HUTO AND HIS FAMILY lived in the shadow of Cathedral Peak, one of the most spectacular areas of the Drakensberg mountain range. Their home was modest. It was a simple place, just one room made from mud and cow dung with a frame out of willow branches. The roof was thatch. Some entrepreneur, many years ago, discovered that if you mixed dung with water, waited until it set hard and then polished it you could end up with a decent floor. It probably won't make the cut for House Beautiful but it kept the home cool in the summer and warm in winter. You could also paint the floor for a more cozy feeling and cozy living it was. Thuto lived there with his parents, two sisters, one younger and one older, and a much younger brother. Their beds were straw mats with a rough blanket for each child. Mum and Dad slept in a wooden cot set aside for a little privacy although in a place like theirs privacy was less than optimal. Later in life when Thuto understood 'those things' he wondered how he managed to end up with siblings, but that was the way of life and even though it was tight living, the vast expanse of the beautiful outdoors made it feel like they were living in their own small pocket of paradise

Thuto and his family were part of the Amangwane tribe and spoke Nguni, a mix of Xhosa, Hlubi, Zulu and Ndebele and while his Mum and Dad kept the language alive and taught it to their children Thuto and his siblings also learned English. Their father, Bheki, whose name by the way means broadminded, had a deep love for his family and the surrounding mountains and Bheki

instilled in his children their own sweet and kind love for each other. Bheki was single-minded in his insistence that they get an education and make something of themselves. Many years later when Thuto won the South African PGA Championship, the Master of Ceremonies made note of his heritage as if he was some kind of curiosity and not a golfer of immense talent.

All of this, the golf, the fame and the fortune was well into the future but as a child Thuto herded goats on weekends for extra pocket money and applied himself to his studies during the week. Thuto was a top student at the local school which is not saying much as there were only eight kids that attended the school which taught all grades, still he was bright and hard working. He was also very good at sports and on weekends a small group of boys gathered to play soccer on a patch of dirt which they had cleared for just that purpose. They had spent long hours clearing the pitch of stones and small rocks and raking an area where they could play soccer and other sports. A couple of times each summer they would play one of the other local schools in the district and it quickly became clear that Thuto was not only a top student, but also a talented athlete.

In the winter a cold wind blew down from the Drakensberg escarpment and Bheki and his wife Weziwe sat huddled with two blankets each to keep warm. "It seems like the winters are getting colder," Bheki said. "I know that I have said that before but when I was young there was very little snow. Now it seems to come on a regular basis." Every now and then the wind would gust and smoke would back down their chimney filling the room. To Thuto it seemed like a fair trade. The fire kept the place warm; an occasional puff of smoke was hardly worth worrying about. Some mornings they would wake to a world turned magical as a blanket of snow covered the mountains. The only problem was that the trough with water for the goats would have a thick layer of ice

on it and it was among Thuto's chores to crack it allowing the morning sun to penetrate and melt the rest. Thuto loved his goats and it always made him sad when one was taken for slaughter. Usually this came on the advice of Dr. Dommett, a large-animal vet who volunteered his time donating his services to Bheki and other subsistence farmers that scratched a living from the land.

One day Dr Dommett said to him, "Hey Thuto I watched you play soccer last weekend. My son was on the other team. You could have given them a chance." Thuto laughed and said, "I don't give anyone a chance. They have to earn it." Dr. Dommett was impressed by his candor. "You know Thuto," he said, "I set up a scholarship a few years ago at Maritzburg College in Pietermaritzburg. You know where that is, right?"

"Yes Sir," Thuto replied. "I have heard that they have a really good soccer team. And rugby. They also have a golf team. I can't believe that there is such a place." Dr. Dommett came over and placed his hand on Thuto's shoulder. "Two things," he said. "That old female has to go. She won't bear any more babies. I can arrange for the truck from the slaughterhouse to come and pick her up sometime tomorrow." He could see that Thuto was sad so quickly added, "I will talk to your father about this. I will also talk to him about allowing you to attend school in Pietermaritzburg. The school will grant you a scholarship based on my recommendations. There will be boarding fees but I can cover them. Let me talk to your Dad and see what he says." Dr. Dommett left and Thuto sat for while looking at the goats and the spectacular mountains that were the only home he had ever known. His sister saw him deep in thought and came over. "Is everything OK?" She was a beautiful blossoming teenager with a kind heart and a ready smile. Thuto told her what Dr. Dommett had said. She scratched in the sand for a bit before talking. "What are you going to do? My friend Daisy has a friend who goes



to school in Pietermaritzburg. It's an all-girls school close to Maritzburg College. She said that it's an amazing place. If Dad says yes I would go for it." Her eyes sparkled. "There are a lot of girls there." Tuto smiled. "Let's see what Dad says."

\*\*\*

Three months later Dr. Dommett was helping me unpack and stow my few possessions. He had bought me new school uniforms and said, "once you decide on a sport I will get you all the kit you need." I could tell that he was going to start tearing up when it was time to go. My eyes were full but I just said, "It's really dusty in here."

It wasn't long before I was co-captain of the soccer team. I loved it and we took home our fair share of victories. I was starting to find myself. My grades were excellent and I had made some really nice friends. One morning Mart, my best friend came to me. "There is word going around school that a group is planning to go for the Victoria Cross tonight. They invited me and I am going to go for it. You can come if you want." The Victoria Cross was a new award set up by the school kids. The highest award for bravery on the battlefield was going to be our reward, providing that we didn't get caught. It wasn't going to be easy and against my better judgment I found myself behind the changing room, taking my clothes off and leaving them off. There were seven of us. In order to get the VC we had to run naked for a mile and a half to the all-girls school at the end of the road. Providing that we didn't get caught, the plan was to climb through a hole in the fence and make our way to the swimming pool. The pool just happened to be right outside the girls dormitory but it was a quiet night. My heart was thumping, and with my palms drenched in sweat I followed the others to the pool. We had to climb to the top of the diving board, jump or dive into the water, and then swim the length of the pool. What we didn't know was that the

girls had all been given notice and the second we were on the diving board the flood lights came on. We were bathed in a stark bright white light making us feel even more naked. We jumped and hit the water with a collective splash but not before I heard someone yell out. "Hey everyone, the guy at the back is Thuto." It was too late. I might be a decent athlete but I'm not a good swimmer and was last to get out of the pool on the far side. There was screaming and a few girls shouted my name. I so wanted to tell them that there was more to see when I wasn't so scared but sadly there was no chance. We bolted for the hole in the fence with the sound of laughter following us. On the way there we saw very few cars; going back the road seemed packed and a few people honked when they saw us. We were seven scared schoolboys almost with a VC in hand. That was until one of the cars being driven by Howie, our English teacher, drove by. He pulled over. "Get in," he said. He acted mad but I could see behind his scowl that he was smiling. We were jammed together feeling awkward in our puberty, our naked bodies rubbing against each other. Howie said, "What's a VC worth without any discomfort?" He drove us to the downtown area where the fancy shops were. Thankfully all was quiet. "OK get out and make a run for it and I won't say anything to anyone." After an hour or so we made it back to the changing room. Howie kept his word and nothing was said, well that's not quite true as I found out later. That night I had my first wet dream. I had no idea what was happening and woke up with the sheets covered in some kind of slime.

There was no immediate fallout from our little run and swim although I worried constantly what the conversation at the girls school might entail when it came to my size, or more to the point, lack thereof. It's true, but not only had I been scared, the night had also been a bit chilly and the two conspired leading to my profound embarrassment. Then one day our soccer coach

pulled me aside. "I know about the swim and that little run that you guys took, but let's just leave it at that shall we?" I shifted uncomfortably but didn't say anything. "I have an idea for you," the coach said, "and I don't need you distracted. I have spoken with Mart and some of the other golf players and they tell me that your handicap is around four. That's pretty good," I wasn't bragging or anything but replied, "I find the game quite easy." Coach Armstrong looked me squarely in the eye. "You know most people find golf one of the most difficult and challenging sports there is and you are telling me that you find it easy?" I nodded. "I didn't want to make the others feel bad so I started missing holes on purpose." The coach looked at me. "My wife is a phenomenal golfer. She was going to turn pro but instead we decided to start a family but as it turned out she couldn't have any children. Would you mind if she came and watched you play?" I shook my head. "Only if it's OK with the others."

"I have already spoken to them. They are fine with the idea." The following Saturday Coach Armstrong's wife was there nursing a cup of coffee. She didn't speak to any of us. Her name was Giselle and she was petite, compact, and had a shock of blond hair and olive skin that gave her a kind of exotic foreign look. I could not imagine that someone so beautiful had married an ordinary, slightly overweight High School coach. I knew that my other golf friends were thinking the same. We teed off early. There was still a light frost on the fairways and greens, but I had no problem playing an excellent 18 holes and finished well under par. When I looked up after sinking a long putt on the 18th, Giselle was gone. I joined the boys for a cold drink on the patio at the club. One of the group said out loud what all of us had been thinking. "How did a dork like Coach Armstrong get a wife that looked like that?" We had another couple of cokes and then my best friend Mart asked, "Hey who is going to the Royal Show this weekend?"

The Royal Show was a big deal. Farmers came from far and wide to show off their cattle and sheep and there were horse riding competitions and two folk singers who closed the show each evening. We talked to the Dorm Master and he agreed that we could go so long as we were back before 10:30. Mart and I spent a few fun hours watching the pigs being judged and visiting the local exhibits. The one we liked the most was the sugar stand. They had a huge building filled with raw sugar and we were allowed to climb on the pile and eat as much sugar as we liked. Later, as the show was winding down, we all gathered in the main arena. It was dark, around 8:30, and suddenly this Kombi van came trundling into the arena stopping in front of the spectator pavilion. The lights went out and we could hear faint guitar playing coming from inside the van. Suddenly Des and Dawn appeared through a trapdoor in the roof and climbed onto a small stage that was mounted on the Kombi. They were hit with a floodlight and started playing. "And the Seagulls Name was Nelson" and "Die Gezoem van die Beyer," two of their big hits. I was totally transformed by the music and even more so by the two singers. Des was OK, but Dawn looked stunning and went by the stage name Dawn Silver. It was pure magic to know that I was sitting right in front of a singer whose last name was Silver. That night I fell asleep in my tiny bed back at the boarding establishment with dreams of marrying Dawn and a career on the road, golf and school be damned.

The next night we were at the show grounds again. It was just getting dark and Mart and I were cruising the exhibits. "Come," Mart said, "I have an idea." We snuck behind the beer tent. Inside we could hear people getting drunk and they had spilled over to a small patio sloshing beer on their shoes and flirting with each other. Luckily no one saw us. Mart said, "This is going to be easy. Just watch. He stuck his arm under the tent flaps and moved it

around until he found a beer bottle that still had some beer in it. Looking around he saw that there was no one nearby so he pulled the beer clear of the tent. It was still half full. He downed half of it and handed me the bottle. "Here," he said, "you finish it." I had never tasted beer before and didn't like it much but after draining a few partly full bottles I started to feel lightheaded. "You are getting a buzz on," Mart said. By now it was completely dark and I found a bottle that seemed to have quite a bit left in it. Without looking I snuck the bottle out and downed the contents. Someone had been using the bottle to snuff out their cigarettes and I sucked down at least a half dozen damp butts. The whole mess all came back up in a jet of stale beer, puke and as much as it pains me to write this, there were a good four or five butts among the mess. Mart, to his credit, stayed with me until someone saw us and yelled. We ran, well at least I tried to make a run for it but I was weak and sick. That was my first and last beer for a very long time. The Royal Show incident, as it came to be known, had cured me once and for all and I think, looking back on it, that it had been both a blessing and a curse.

Giselle coached me every weekend and sometimes on weekday afternoons. The arrangement with the school was that so long as I kept my grades up I could devote some of my time to golf. Giselle had pressed Coach Anderson and he had gone to the headmaster on my behalf and pitched a fairly compelling case. After six months Giselle said, "I think that you are ready for your first tournament. There is the Durban Open coming up. It's a tough course but I think that you will be OK."

We took Giselle's old VW Beetle and I played as best I could and it was good, but it was not good enough. I ended up three over par and 13th overall in the tournament. I was disappointed. Giselle just said simply, "you have never competed before and that was to be expected for your first tournament. We need to get

you out there and compete more. Just watch, your average will come down." For my 13th place I won R500 and gave it to Giselle to cover her petrol bill and her time. She took the money and said, "you have just earned your first paycheck as a golfer and also a full year's coaching." She looked at me with a twinkle in her eye. I felt my tummy do a flip. It had never happened before and I was not quite sure what was going on.

My parents came to visit every month. For them it was a long trip on a bus but they were proud of me. "Your father got a job as a dishwasher at the Cathedral Peak Hotel," Mum said. She was awfully pleased. Dad added, "we have sold the goats." Their time as subsistence farmers was over; a way of life was over and it made me sad. I won the Umhlanga Rothmans Challenge. It was my first tournament win and I gave the money to Mum and Dad. Their days of being cold were also over.

Most weekends for the better part of a year we traveled to tournaments. They were all in Natal and we would drive back afterwards, sometimes getting to the boarding establishment well after midnight. I had one more year left of school and then I had to decide what to do. I was thinking of a career as a civil engineer. South Africa was booming and Affirmative Action guaranteed that I would get into Natal University and after that a great, well-paying job. I told Giselle. She didn't say anything for a while. "I was hoping that you would consider a career in golf. You have a genuine gift and it would be a waste using your talent to design bridges and train stations." I was deflated until Giselle said, "there is a big tournament in Cape Town next month. I can get you in to play and will make all the arrangements. What do you think?" I thought that it was a good idea and said so; our first overnight trip was going to happen.

There was a new airline called Kulula Airlines and they offered cheaper tickets than South African Airways. "I have arranged a

place for us to stay in Cape Town,” Giselle said. “The place is a short drive from the city but my old schoolmate Linda lives there and she offered us a bed for a couple of nights. What do you think?”

“You’re the boss,” I replied.

I did lousy the first day of the tournament. I’m embarrassed to say this but my mind was totally on Giselle and the fact that we were going to share a bedroom. Her friend Linda and her husband were away for a long weekend. There was plenty of room in the house, but Giselle insisted that we sleep in the same room and my mind was consumed. I was well aware that she was Coach Anderson’s wife and that he was trusting, in fact I managed to convince myself that I was just overthinking things. I finished the first day down 11. Giselle acted as if she hadn’t noticed. “Let’s get you cleaned up and some dinner in you and we can talk about all of this later.” We never did have any dinner. I took a shower and when I came out I noticed that Giselle had poured herself a large martini. “Let’s sit on the stoep. The view from there is really nice.” I agreed. From the stoep we looked over the Cape Flats toward the city. It was a great view but didn’t compare with Cathedral Peak but I didn’t say anything. I was still kicking myself about my game. Giselle read my mind. “You were too tense. Your mind was elsewhere. Tomorrow you need to relax more. Just have fun.” Giselle poured herself another large martini and settled into the lawn chair to take in the view. As soon as it was properly dark they lit the side of Table Mountain with blue floodlights.

I heard the ice in her glass tinkle. Giselle said, “Just one more. I am starting to feel a little bit of a buzz. Are you sure that you don’t want anything stronger than a Ginger Ale?” I almost said yes but then remembered the cigarette butts and how they tasted going down and how they tasted coming back up again and said “no thanks”.

Giselle was most of the way through her drink when she stood. “You were just too bloody tense today. I am your coach and I need to see that tomorrow goes better.” I felt her hands on my shoulders. They were soft and strong and she massaged my neck and used her elbow to dig at the knots. “You were definitely too tense. That was why your swing was off.” I could hear a phone ringing somewhere in the house and a dog barking out on the Flats. “I will be right back,” Giselle said. I heard the tinkle of ice hitting the glass and the soft sound of something, which I presumed was vodka, splash onto the ice. I just focused on Table Mountain and looked straight ahead. I knew what was going on and I knew that she was going to ‘friend’ me. That’s what we called it at school. Some of my classmates had already been friended; me, I hadn’t even had my hands up a girl’s blouse. There was some shuffling and Giselle came back. She leaned over and placed her glass on the small side table alongside me and when she did I felt her nipple brush against my shoulder blade. She continued the massage. Her voice was a little slurred but it was also soft and velvety. As she leaned to get her glass again she didn’t hide things. Her naked breasts were pressed up against my hot skin and then it happened. I don’t think that Giselle remembered too much of the rest of the evening. The bottle of vodka was gone. “Remind me to replace the vodka tomorrow,” she slurred. I don’t remember much either and I hadn’t taken a drink. Somehow we got to the bed and she undressed me. I had never felt anything like it and was worried that something was going to happen ‘down there’ just as it had done that night after we ran and swam for the Victoria Cross. The light was dim but I could see that she had stripped and for a brief second felt some guilt. Coach Armstrong had been very kind to me and he was nothing if not trusting but Giselle’s body was perfect especially in the soft light of an almost full moon. I did my best but there was suddenly a mess on the sheets. “Don’t worry,” Giselle said. “It

happens.” She rolled over onto her side and started to thrust her hips. I wasn’t sure what was going on until she let out a long moan followed by some sounds that I had only heard a puppy make, and then she immediately fell asleep, snoring lightly and farting occasionally. I got up to take in the night air. The dog on the Flats was still barking. The mountain had turned red and around three I climbed into bed alongside Giselle.

The next day my game was even worse. I just could not hit the ball straight and I was missing putts that I usually could usually manage with my eyes closed. It was a disaster. Our flight was a late one and we took off and banked over the City of Cape Town. It sparkled and I noticed that the lights on the mountain were red. Giselle and I had barely spoken all day and she sat silent in her seat reading a Cosmopolitan that she had picked up at the airport newsagent. We landed at the King Shaka International Airport and drove the 50-odd miles through the Valley of a Thousand Hill back to the boarding establishment. I felt very uncomfortable in the silence and it was only when Giselle dropped me off that she said anything. “You did just fine.” I wasn’t sure if she was referring to my golf game or the other thing so I quickly closed the door to the car and found my bed. The breakfast call would come soon enough.

The following Tuesday afternoon Giselle was back to her usual self laughing and coaching me on my swing. “There is a tournament up near Salt Rock. There is not much prize money but I think that it may be time for you to get back on the horse, so to speak.” I wasn’t sure if she was referring to my golf game or the other thing but she quickly added. “We can drive there and back. It’s only a day tournament so there won’t be any need to stay overnight.” She had been referring to my golf game. Luckily I found my stride again and won handily. The level of competition was low but I had fun and the prize money, while it might not

have been much, was going into an account that I had set up to buy Dad a car. He would have to take driving lessons of course but I figured that it would be much easier for him to get around and to come and see me and my siblings who were all at boarding school in Underberg.

We were sitting out at the clubhouse when Giselle leaned in. “Don’t panic,” she said but there is a big one in Johannesburg in two weeks. My husband wants to come along to watch. The golf that is,” she had a definite twinkle in her eye when she spoke. “It’s a bit of a drive to Johannesburg but we can manage it. What do you think?”

“Let’s do it,” I said, and we did it and I nailed it. Well that might be a bit of an exaggeration. I won by one stroke, but the person I beat was a prodigy of Gary Player, South Africa’s best known golf player. The tournament came down to the 18th hole on the second day. I had a good drive and a decent chip shot. The putt was going to be a bit of a challenge. The hole was at the end of a long slope and to my eye the surface was more than a little uneven. I had to sink it. My opponent had bogeyed the hole, the green had given him trouble. If I sank the putt I had the win in the bag. If I missed, well... A good size crowd had gathered. Coach Anderson had been my caddy. He looked at the lie. “You are going to have to hit it lightly and to the left. After that it will be easy.” I lined up behind the ball and took a few practice putts. Then it was game time. The crown was getting restless. I hit the ball firmly knowing that there was a slightly steeper slope toward the end. I took Coach Anderson’s advice and hit it to the left. The ball didn’t have much momentum but I knew that once it hit the slope we could be in good shape. The ball just made it to the crest of the slope. It kept on going, corrected itself and went right into the hole. There was going to be another R15,000 in the account toward Dad’s car.

We drove home late, the mood buoyant. For the first 200 miles it's flat farmland dotted only by a few farmhouses, otherwise it was quiet on the road until we got to Van Reenen's Pass and hit the top edge of the Drakensberg escarpment. There was still very little traffic and we wound down and down until we hit the green farmland of Natal. It didn't take us long to get back to Pietermaritzburg. When they dropped me off the school was in darkness, just a solitary light in the night watchman's small office. "Good night Champ," Coach Anderson said. "You did good son." I felt a twinge of guilt when Giselle leaned and gave me a kiss. All she said was, "we need to talk about your future."

The week before Christmas I bought the car. It was a bright red, well worn Volvo but I was able to pay cash for it. In fact, funny story, the car salesman recognized me. The Natal Witness had done a feature on my win in Johannesburg. "I will throw in some new mats and seat covers. It looks like you are going to be famous one day and you can't be driving around in a car with old mats." I knew enough about selling cars to know that he would be getting a bonus for a cash sale. The next hurdle was going to get my Dad to agree to taking it. I drove the car to Cathedral Peak and pulled into the short dirt driveway of our family home, such as it was. Mum started crying when I showed her the car and then she insisted that I return it. I looked at my watch. I knew that Dad got off work at 11 and ignored Mum's pleading. I had arranged for our whole family to be there since Mum had cooked a meal of boerewors and pap. Boerewors is a favorite farm sausage. The pap, a hearty porridge that when covered in gravy is delicious. We ate the meal chatting until we heard a car pull up in front of the hut. Dad had been getting to and from work with a neighbor who drove an old pick-up truck. I heard Dad's voice. He came into the hut and saw us all sitting there. "What's going on and whose car is that?" I knew that he suspected something and said, "it's yours

Dad. It's your Christmas present. Mum spoke quietly. "I told him to take it back." Dad went out to take a second look at the car. Cathedral Peak towered above us. There was a slight moon. "I don't like color," was all he said. Dad drove the car for the better part of a decade, Mum riding proudly alongside him. Once a month I sent money so that he could fill his tank.

The meeting with the headmaster about my future plans went well. Coach Anderson was there as was our Guidance Teacher. Hector, the Headmaster, came straight to the point. "Our job as educators," he said, "is to guide our students." It does no-one any good if we stand in their way. You clearly have a talent for sports and golf in particular, so who are we to say don't follow your heart?"

"I am only going to take a year to give it a go. If it doesn't work out then I am sure that I can go to university, but I feel my future in my bones that it's going to be a good move for me." Hector nodded. "We support you," and then as an afterthought added, "I heard that your dive was splendid." I knew what he was talking about, but acted as if I didn't. "I knew about the Victoria Cross a long time ago but sometimes it's just best to just let sleeping dogs lie. When I was your age we snuck a rooster into our dorm rooms in the boarding establishment. It was fun and I thought that we were clever but the whole plan fell apart when the rooster started to crow at sunrise. One of my schoolmates suggested that we chuck the rooster out of the window. We did, and that seemed to work at first. I think that the rooster was a bit dismayed but he quickly found his lungs and started to crow again, waking everyone. Long before the breakfast bell went off there were a dozen of us chasing the rooster around the quad. We were all in our pajamas but the rooster was too quick and clearly liked his new digs. From then on he would sit on the fence across from my room and wake the whole boarding establishment." Hector

smiled at the memory. I was really surprised when I looked at him. It was as if he was a school kid again. "It was good to be young," he said. "Good luck with the golf and keep us posted."

Giselle set up a few good gigs in South Africa including another go at the fateful one in Cape Town. By now she and I had been sneaking away on a regular basis and I had started to get the whole sex thing down. "You are really good," Giselle said. "I might just have to keep you." Coach Anderson never suspected a thing and I was runner up in Cape Town. The prize money was good and I had won so many competitions I was given a small appearance fee to show up and play. It was on the way home from that tournament that Giselle said, "you know that we are going to have to go overseas and play. That's where the money is." I nodded. I knew that she was right. "What about Coach Anderson? Will he be ok with it? To play the circuit we will have to be in England or the States for months." Giselle just looked at me. "He will be fine but there is one catch. I want to get paid a portion of your winnings as your manager. I will take care of everything so that you can concentrate on golf, and err, the other thing. I think that you know what I am talking about."

I broke the news to Mum and Dad. They were okay with it. "I always said that I wanted my children to make it in the world," Dad said. "I never thought that it would be golf but Jesus has a plan for all of us." I had given up believing in Jesus years earlier but I knew that their belief kept Mum and Dad happy so I went along with it. "Yes I know," I replied. "I think that his plan for me now is to win a lot of golf tournaments." Dad shook his head. "That's not how it works," he said. "Just listen to what Jesus says and you will be fine." Across the valley I could hear goats and a swell of nostalgia hit and it only got worse. "Dad," I said. "There is money in golf. A lot of it. When I make enough I will send it so that you and Mum can buy a new house." Dad is a

man of few words but this time he almost spat them out. "We do not need a new house. We have a beautiful home and it has been good for us. Your mother and I plan to stay here until we die." I looked around our childhood home. It seemed even smaller now that I was grown. The mats were still rolled up and ready if any of my siblings came by for a visit. I could see that Dad had done some work to try and fix the chimney problem and saw that their bed was much smaller than I remembered. I think that Dad felt like he had been a little too harsh. He said, "We have been very comfortable here. Our home provided a place for us to love and raise our family. We learned a long time ago how little you need to be happy, not how much. I hope that when you are rich and famous you will remember what I have said." Mum had been quiet but when I looked over at her standing behind my father I saw that she had been crying. The salty tears had formed little lines down her cheeks where they cut a path on her weathered face. "Stay well my son and come and see us when you can." Dad walked me to my car and put his arms around me. "Too much money and fame can be a bad thing. Remember that." He gave me one last hug and I climbed into the car driving slowly away. I didn't know it then but it would be the last time that I would see my home. Dad's words would ring true in the year ahead.

The shadows were getting longer and the side of Cathedral Peak was a dark blue where the sun had already given up its time. The mountain looked spectacular; the surrounding countryside looked like a young child's dream. Every now and then I would have to slow down to let a small boy or girl herd a bunch of scrawny goats. Their bleating was a sound of my childhood and suddenly, and without warning, I felt hot, wet tears run down my cheeks.

In a half hour or so I reached the N3 and gunned the engine. I was driving toward my new life but there was a sad and somewhat bitter taste in my mouth, almost as if I knew that something might

happen. I was becoming a man of the world but I was not sure that the world was ready for this man, or if this man was ready for the world.

COACH ANDERSON DROPPED Giselle and Thuto at King Shaka International Airport in Durban. The first part of their overseas trip was a flight on British Airways to London. It was a stiff departure. Coach shook Thuto's hand and said simply, "Good Luck." He did not kiss or hug Giselle. In moments they were caught up in a tide of people all heading for security and their various flights. "You noticed that, didn't you?" Giselle said. Thuto tried to look as if he had not noticed the brush-off goodbye but there was no avoiding the matter. "We are getting divorced," she said simply. "The bastard has been screwing Elizabeth from Hector Common's office. You know her. The petite innocent looking one." I nodded. "How could he be having an affair right under my nose and getting away with it all this time?" Thuto thought, "oh the irony." That was the first and last time that they talked about sex, marriage and divorce. To Giselle the last two were a thing of the past. For Thuto he was uncomfortable with all the subjects and felt that it was better to avoid them completely.

Heathrow airport was totally abuzz. They made it through Immigration without any problems but had to wait a while for the golf clubs to come through to Customs. Giselle said, "the last time that I was here I had one of the most spectacular breakfasts ever. They served it in a pub called the Pig and Whistle. It's called a Full English Breakfast. I am not sure which terminal it was in but let's find the place and have a good feed." They had landed at Terminal 5 which was used exclusively by British Airways. The directory showed that the Pig and Whistle was in Terminal 2 so they took the underground escalator. It was all a new experience for Thuto.

They found the pub and ordered their breakfast. Giselle was right. It was spectacular. Two eggs, baked beans, four rashers of bacon, hash browns and some blood sausage with endless coffee or tea and as much toast as they wanted. They left feeling full and tired.

The first tournament would be the Betfred British Masters held at a very beautiful course on the outskirts of Birmingham. Thuto and Giselle got there early to get a lay of the land. "You realize that this is going to be a lot more challenging than playing in South Africa?" Giselle said. "I have looked at the line-up and it's quite tough. Jack Nicklaus will be playing one of his last tournaments before retiring. Seve is playing and even Arnold Palmer will be there, but he's past it so not a threat." Thuto just nodded. "I can handle things."

It was his first four-day tournament and going into Day 4 he was trailing in 13th place overall. He had a hard time finding his stride but a last minute charge helped him finish 5th. Later he told Giselle, "I liked the pressure. It's almost like a writer having a deadline. You just have to get the job done." They played the rest of the circuit in the UK with varying results, most of them good and by the end of summer Thuto had netted close to \$400,000. That was after the nice hotels that Giselle had booked them into as well as her fee which she had deducted. He wired money to South Africa, enough to buy each of his siblings a brand new car. "In November we will go to Australia and New Zealand," Giselle said. "The prize money is not huge but both are spectacular countries to visit, especially New Zealand."

Thuto had a few very good tournaments and won his first major; the Australian Open. The purse for first place was close to \$250,000 and that plus an appearance fee was a good day's work. He and Giselle were having sex at least once, sometimes twice a day. Giselle was enjoying her Martinis by the pitcher; Thuto was



sticking to Ginger Ale. In a short break between tournaments they took a trip to the South Island of New Zealand. There was a crowd at the airport in Wellington when they landed. Thuto was becoming a household name. They slipped into a waiting car and in an hour or so were on a ferry sailing across the Cook Strait to Arapoa Island. "What do you think?" Giselle asked.

"it's nice," Thuto said, "but not as nice as Cathedral Peak."

They finished out the tournaments and took a week off in Florida waiting for the US circuit to start. Thuto was ready. "These greens feel a lot different from those in England and Australia," he said. Giselle sipped her martini. "It's the grass. Only Florida has it. It's called Bermuda grass. If there is any kind of dew on it, it slows the ball down. Just make sure that you are near the lead and you will be able to tee off after lunch when the grass has dried out. It's a much different surface to play on once it's dry." Thuto lounged back in his beach chair and listened to the waves rolling up the white sandy beach. "I could get used to this," he said.

Giselle had Thuto practicing every day but the nights were free and Thuto suggested a few days away in the everglades before they got into the thick of competition. "I have always wanted to eat alligator," he said. Giselle smiled and said, "Let's do it. We can leave tomorrow morning. I already paid for the hotel for tonight and I had a little surprise planned." Thuto lifted one eyebrow. "A surprise huh?"

"Yea once the season starts things are going to get busy. I ordered room service. It's a perfect night. We can eat outside on the little deck off the bedroom." Thuto kissed her and said, "I can't believe how lucky I am."

Room service came. Giselle had organized for someone from the hotel to set up a nice dining area on the deck and they went all-out with a pressed linen tablecloth, tasteful china and

champagne glasses that Giselle swore were spun from leaded glass. The appetizer of foie gras and caviar came with a bottle of chilled Dom Perignon. "Are you sure that you won't have any champagne?" Giselle said. "It's really good." Thuto looked out toward the ocean and watched the lazy swells roll onto the white beach. "I will have a little," he said, "only because you have gone to so much trouble. The appetizer and champagne were delicious as was the Lobster Thermidor and Giselle ordered another bottle of champagne. Thuto was drunk when he took Giselle in his arms and led her to the bed. "Leave the door open," Giselle said, "I want to be able to smell the ocean. They made love. Giselle stroked Thuto on his shoulder and arms and said, "you know that your skin smells different from others? Yours is salty and smells a little of a campfire." Thuto smiled and said for the first time, "I love you Giselle."

The next morning they took a right toward Miami International Airport and then continued west along the TaMiami Trail, a straight highway that would take them all the way to Tampa. Halfway along they found a small motel for the night. "Let's take an airboat out into the Everglades," Giselle said. "I heard that it's a fun ride." They hired a driver who took off blasting deep into a thick jungle of mangroves. The driver had given them headphones to drown out the sound of the propellers. The birdlife was incredible and along the way they saw many alligators. "The crocs in SA could eat these guys for lunch," Thuto said. "Tiny little fuckers." Giselle agreed. The airboat dropped them back at their hotel and they found a place at the bar. A large man with a colorful shirt that had a message plastered across the chest, 'You are in Jimmy Buffett country now', made his point. He sauntered over. His ample belly hung over his pants. "Hey aren't you that golfer dude?" Thuto said that he was and in minutes three ice cold beers in chilled glasses had been placed right in front of them. Thuto started to protest

but for some reason he didn't and sank his beer. It had been a hot and dusty day and he was thirsty. Giselle looked at him but didn't say anything. Almost by magic three more beers appeared. The large man said, "well good luck," and left. Giselle ordered a pitcher of beer and two alligator burgers and by the time they made it back to their small motel Thuto was drunk. He started to sing. Giselle giggled. "OK I know that you don't drink," she said, "but you are suddenly a lot more fun." Thuto sang louder. Giselle dug through her bag and found the vodka. "Just a small one?" Thuto nodded. He was halfway through his martini when he fell asleep. The next day they arrived in Tampa. "I'm never doing that again," Thuto said, his temples throbbing, but he did in fact his drinking escalated.

The first US tournament was in Jacksonville. It was an easy course but Thuto was beaten out on the 18th green by an upstart player named Tiger Woods. Tiger was a prodigy and knew his way around a golf course. It didn't hurt that he had family there for support and Thuto was starting to feel homesick. He looked at the amount of his winnings and the longing went away. Thuto was starting to go against what his family had told him. He wanted more money and he was getting it. His first US season was a success and he and Giselle flew back to South Africa to see family. They rented a car and drove through the mountains to Cathedral Peak. It was stunning, as if the Drakensberg had put on a display just for them. The siblings had gathered for a few days over Christmas. He begged Giselle to stay but she said that she had been invited to spend the Big Day with her sister. Her lawyer also had some papers for her to sign and four days before Christmas she and Coach Anderson unhitched themselves to start new lives. It was a liberating feeling but she could not wait to get back on tour. They caught a flight to London and what they hoped would become a bit

of a tradition they had their first meal in the UK at the Pig and Whistle.

Thuto played the course at St. Andrews and finished just two strokes off the leader. The oldies, Nicklaus, Seve and the rest had formally retired and the way was open for young players like Thuto and Tiger. It was Tiger who had held steady to win at St. Andrews. Thuto could not let it go. "I am going to crush that guy one day," he told Giselle and in his next tournament he did just that. The win gave him the confidence that he needed to really shine on the international circuit.

He and Giselle took some time off to go hiking. They loved to hike in the morning, find an old pub for lunch, and hike in the afternoon. Thuto was becoming a bit of an expert when it came to beer and had started to enjoy a few pints with lunch and a few with dinner. Giselle loved it. "I needed a drinking partner," she said. When they got back to London there was a piece of gilded mail waiting. It was an invitation for Thuto to play The Masters. Ever since he had started to play professionally Thuto wanted to play that course. Giselle called and accepted. They would leave the following week to prepare. "This is a big one you know," she said. "You get to win that hideous green jacket if you win. You have to wear it for the photos but after that we can ship it to some homeless person in Durban. Can you imagine the look on someone's face if they ran into a man begging on the street wearing that green blazer?" It was a huge deal and Thuto was ready.

The course at Augusta was immaculate. It was steeped in so much history that Tuto felt a little overwhelmed. At the end of the first day Thuto was at the front end of the middle pack. "You are still too tense," Giselle said. "Tonight I will make sure that some of the tension goes away." She smiled and giggled and by the end of the second day Thuto was just two shots off the lead.

Tiger Woods was still buried in the pack. "Tiger needs some of your magic," Thuto joked. At the end of play on Saturday Thuto was just one shot off the lead. He was sitting with Giselle at the clubhouse and a pitcher of beer was delivered to their table. Thuto, almost smelling victory, downed the beer and a second pitcher which had somehow miraculously appeared. He was definitely too drunk to drive and Giselle suggested an UBER. The place that they had rented was in the country. "I will think about it," Thuto said and downed most of their fifth pitcher. "Let's go. I need a good night's sleep." Giselle was worried. Thuto was really drunk but they made it back to the house OK and Giselle brought out a tray with two martini glasses. Thuto downed the first and was starting to sip the second one. "You pour one mean drink," he said, the edges of his mouth having a hard time keeping up with his brain. "These things can kick the shit out of a mule." Giselle also had her fair share and she decided that it was time to cut Thuto off. "Tomorrow is a big day," she said. "Let's call it a night." Thuto was in no mood to quit. "I want another drink." Giselle had never seen that look in his eyes before. She hesitated. "Well fuckit," Thuto said. "If you are not pouring I will find someone who will," and he stormed out of the front door. Giselle heard him start the Aston and heard it as he gunned the engine. There was no way to stop him. Thuto pulled onto rt272 and picked up speed. He knew that the bars in town would still be open. What he didn't know was that deer liked to rest in the middle of the road soaking up the last bit of heat of the day. Thuto saw a large buck and swerved to miss it. "Stupid fucker," he said and then he hit the accelerator hard.

When the police found him there was no way to recognize who it was that had been driving the car. There were skid marks on the tar and two deep furrows where he had skidded along the soft shoulder trying to straighten the Aston, but it was too late.

Thuto hit the edge of the road and was airborne until his flight was arrested by a large Red Maple. The car wrapped itself around the trunk. Thuto had died on impact.

Giselle alerted the police that he had not returned all night. It didn't take them long to find the wreckage. The scoreboard at Augusta showed simply WD, withdrawal, alongside his name. Tiger Woods won his first Masters title that sad and sultry Sunday afternoon and would go on to win four more.

Thuto's ashes were strewn at the base of Cathedral Peak. His family each took turns to spread a handful before handing the urn to Giselle. The tears had drenched her light shirt. She dipped her hand into the urn. The ashes were cool with some hard shards which Giselle figured were bone fragments. She took a handful of the soft ashes and dropped them where the other ashes lay scattered on the dirt. A sudden whisper of wind took the ashes and they drifted on the breeze. "Rest well you Scatterling of Africa. Ride the wind and come back and see us when you can." It had been a closed celebration of Thuto's life, a family-only affair, but they noticed a lone person walking their way. It was Dr. Dommett. He embraced Becki and Weziwe and held them tight. "I'm sorry," he said. He felt Weziwe's shoulders shake. Becki said simply. "You gave him wings so that he could fly and he did fly."

The small funeral party walked slowly along the footpath leading back toward Thuto's family home. There, on his small rolled up mat, were some ashes. Giselle saw them and said quietly, "you were wise beyond your years. You now know the answer to that question that everyone wonders about." She looked over and saw that Weziwe had also noticed the ashes. Giselle touched the mat. She ran her fingers along the edge. Weziwe let out a loud sob. Giselle looked at the ashes and said, "you will forever be a Child of Africa. Ride the sweet air and let it take you places. You are my

Scatterling and I will always love you and cherish the memories that we shared.”

Giselle climbed into her rented car and as she drove away a lick of mist dropped down from the top of the escarpment. It twisted and turned in the crevices at times looking like some kind of ghostly apparition. Giselle looked back and saw that the family were huddled together soon to be swallowed by the dust and mist; they were all finally back in Thuto’s wet embrace.

## THE TOWN BIKE

**M**Y DAD OWNED A SMALL PUB on the Isle of Wight. It’s kind of a sad story but does have a happy ending. Mum used to run the counter but she got a little pally with one of the sailors that had come over for the annual Cowes Race Week, a big international regatta, and they ran off together. It was almost a year before I heard from her and it was a postcard from Antigua.

Dad was a salt of the earth kind of man, the kind that would give you the shirt off his back. OK too many cliches I know, but he was a good guy. Until one day when he screwed up, sort of. He loaned one of his customers money and not just a little money like the kind you keep under your bed for emergencies. Dad loaned him a sizable chunk of cash. The man was a regular at the pub, but after Dad loaned him money he never came in again.

Dad was actually a good sailor but he didn’t stick with it after Mum’s little tryst with the Australian. I was old enough to manage the pub and kept trying to get Dad to take some time off and go racing but he didn’t want to go back to his roots, because his roots had hurt him. The love of his life was gone; with a bloody Australian sailor no less.

Dad said to me, “I am thinking of selling the pub.” I was shocked. After Mum left I convinced him to take a short holiday in Florida to see his sister. He could have left me in charge but instead he told Muriel that she needed to run the place while he was away.

Muriel was nice, well nice enough, she was quite a bit older than Dad and as soon as he had his foot out the door she turned into a total, well I don't like to swear in my stories, but bitch is the only word that comes to mind.

Dad came back from Florida with a suntan and a smile on his face although it was not exactly a happy smile. I figured out later that it was the smile of a man who had got some leg-over with a complete stranger. I didn't want to think about it. Once you have imagined your parents having sex you can't un-imagine it.

A day after he got back Dad said to me, "Chester," he said, "I have given this a lot of thought. Muriel and I want to start a bed and breakfast. She has her eye on a place on the south side of the island." Now this came as a bit of a surprise to me. Mum and the Australian wanker I could see, but Dad and Muriel and whoever she was in Florida who had probably already forgotten his name I just couldn't see? Muriel was an old bag but I guessed that she smelled money, and it turns out I was right.

The pub was sold and I moved in with my friend Topher. His name was Christopher, but instead of going by Chris, he went by Topher. He was a good and patient man and listened to me griping about my parents every evening as I cried into my pint of bitter.

"You know the last that I heard from my Mum was a postcard from Antigua. That's it. I know that she is shagging the Australian and for all I know she may well be living in Australia by now." Topher sighed, "how many bloody times are you going to tell me this story?" he asked.

"I dunno, I'm sorry, but I think that something stinks with this whole situation."

Turns out that I was right. The Aussie wanker was not not really a sailor. He used his good looks and charm to get on the best

racing boats but could hardly find his way around a winch. Now it turns out that Mum, and I will love her forever, was not a saint. She did work the counter but she also had that, what do they call it, she had that proverbial twinkle in her eye?" Dad would stay up late but it was always Mum who would close up the pub. By the time she got to bed Dad was fast asleep.

I still liked sailing and Topher got me a berth on a boat called Scaramouch. It was a top boat from Florida and was in Cowes campaigning for the Admirals Cup. There was a young prick on the helm named Chris Dickson. Turns out he was actually bloody good and we won the first round of races.

The kid next to me, he could not have been more than 20, said, "so your Mum is Lia?" I looked at him and asked, "how did you know?" We were sitting on the windward rail at the time and he studied his shoes before he said. "Well she's the town bike, you know?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Everyone has ridden her."

I had no idea what he was talking about so I just watched the waves come across the foredeck. Then I got it. The town bike. The Aussie was not the first one.

Things went quiet for the winter. I did get another postcard from Mum. She didn't say where she was but the postmark was Bondi Beach, Australia, and there was an old photo of a bunch of surfers on the front. She did tell me that she loved me but it was as if she squished it in at the very end after she had already run out of space. The pub had sold quite quickly and Dad and Muriel opened their bed and breakfast which was doing quite well, or so Dad said. Muriel had gone into bitch mode and made it quite clear that there was 'no room in the inn' for me, so to speak, so I rented a small place above a big garage in Cowes. It was cramped

but the view was spectacular. I could watch the sun rise over the eastern part of the Solent and watch as the early risers went out on their boats to hack it against a foul tide.

Then one day I got a letter. I have no idea how the person got my address but there it was, in plain black and white.

“Chester,” it read. “I need to talk to you. There is a cave on the western end of the island overlooking the Needles. I have something to tell you.”

I knew the cave quite well. I am not ashamed to tell you that I had my first make-out session with a pretty redhead named Molly on the soft dirt near the back of the cave. Things had been going quite well until another couple stumbled into the cave, but I digress. Molly, by the way, married a solicitor and from what I heard was doing very well, but again I digress. Luckily Molly and I had finished making out so we left the other couple with a bit of privacy.

The letter read, “If you can meet me I will be at the cave at 15:00 Monday the 17th.” I presumed he meant August and of the same year. I decided to give it a go. How bad could it be?

From Cowes to the west end of the Isle of Wight is a beautiful drive. My car was a bit crap but the view over the Solent was stunning and I arrived at the cave early. I parked my car and walked cautiously toward the entrance hoping that the cave was not occupied. I really hadn't given it much thought until I got there. Well maybe that's a bit of a lie. Nothing else had been on my mind for a few weeks but as I got closer to the cave I started to wonder if the person, I wasn't sure if it was a male or a female, if the person might be a murderer or something worse, even though I couldn't think of anything worse than being murdered.

The cave was empty. I looked fondly at the patch of dirt where I had fondled Molly and sat for a bit looking out toward the north.

The Solent, that narrow strip of land between the Isle of Wight and mainland England, was sparkling and there were quite a few yachts out enjoying the late summer breeze. The Needles by the way, is a row of three stacks of chalk that rise about 30 metres out of the sea. They were the first thing that sailors of old would see when they returned from plying the seas and bringing home spices. When they saw the Needles they knew that they were almost home.

I sat for a while but after a couple of hours I got up to take a walk. I was just leaving the cave when I heard a voice. “Chester.” Just one word. I swung around and there was a tall man in a cowboy outfit and brim hat. He had a long droopy mustache and his voice was really low. “Chester,” he said, “I am glad that you came. Let's sit for a bit.” Now to be perfectly honest, and I have to be honest, this is my story after all, I was a tad intimidated. He looked reasonably harmless and his cowboy outfit was a bit off putting until I noticed that he had actually arrived by horseback. His horse, a beautiful Dale Pony, was tethered to a small branch munching on some grass.

“Chester let's sit for a bit,” the man said. “We don't need to go into the cave. It kind of stinks in there anyway.” I guess that I had forgotten the smell when I deflowered Molly. I sat with my back against a rock which was warm from the sun and waited while Mr. Cowboy lowered himself slowly against a rock a few feet from me.

“Well, I am glad that you agreed to meet me. Do you recognize me?” I looked at him and there was a hint of recognition. I shrugged. He said, “I used to come by your Dad's bar in Cowes. I went there every night for years.” I did recognize him but the cowboy outfit had thrown me off a little.

“Yes I remember you,” I said.

“It's OK,” he said. “I have changed a little. In fact maybe a lot,

but that's another story for another day." I looked over at his horse and said nothing. Cowboy sniffed. "OK," he said. "I will come to the point." He fussed around in his jacket and found a small silver hip flask. "You want a drink?" I took the hip flask and took a hit of whatever was in the flask and it burned all the way down.

"Jeeze what is that stuff?" I asked.

"I brew it myself. It's homemade gin. I mix a little vodka with juniper berries and a little lavender and let it sit for a month or so. Just enough to let the berries infuse. Sometimes I use cardamom but personally I like it pretty much just vodka and the berries. Pretty good huh?" I nodded.

"OK Chester," he said. "Here is the story. Your Dad loaned me some money a few years ago. I was a bit down on my luck if you know what I mean, or at least that's what I told him. Your Dad was very kind and didn't ask any questions, but I didn't have a chance to pay him back."

"OK."

"I have the money now and would like to pay him back."

"OK."

"You see," he said. "I invested the money on behalf of your Dad. He was a good guy, and well let me say, the investments went really well. I mean really, really well. But I am getting old and just want to hang with my horse and put my feet up and don't want to bother too much with monitoring the stock market anymore so I cashed out. I cashed my stocks as well as your Dads."

"OK."

"But you see I found out that your Dad had sold the pub and was living with Muriel. Now I am trying to be kind here. Muriel is not a very good person. Your Dad may like her but I may or

may not have had some doings with her, if you know what I mean?" I nodded and said, "I'm not a big fan of her either. How much money are we talking about?" Cowboy paused for a bit and then reached into his pocket for the flask. "Another hit?" I didn't really want one but I took the flask and this time it didn't burn too badly. Cowboy lit a smoke. "You don't mind if I smoke do you?" I shook my head. I hated cigarette smoke but his actually smelled quite good.

"OK Chester," he said. "It's a shitload of money. Around a quarter million pounds. I invested well. Now I want your Dad to have the money, but I don't want any of it to go to Muriel. She's definitely a bit shady that one. I was lucky to find you and here is what I suggest. I will wire you the money. All of it, and you figure out some way to get the money to your Dad without that woman getting her hands on any of it. And I mean, any of it."

I said, "Can I get another hit from your flask?" Cowboy handed me the flask. I could see way down on the Solent that the tide had turned. The yachts were heading for home. The pony started to get restless. Cowboy took one last drag on his cigarette and squashed it out on the ground. "Just get me your bank details and I will transfer the money."

Now I am not a fool and I don't just give my bank details to anyone dressed in a cowboy outfit that came on a pony, well a horse with no name since we had not been formally introduced, but I said that I would give him the details, against my better judgement I might add.

The money landed in my account the following morning. I got a call from the bank manager. He sounded concerned. "Chester," he said, "Chester, there seems to be some kind of a mistake with your account." He did that throat clearing thing that many bankers do when they are not sure what to say. I let him suffer for a bit and then said, "Oh good, my deposit has arrived. Good good. I

will make some arrangements and let you know.” I had a friend in Australia that I could trust. His name is Tim. He opened up a bank account for me. I instructed the bank to wire the money to the bank in Australia.

As I write this I am on Bondi Beach. They make a mean margarita in Australia. Mum is here with me tanning herself. The Aussie sailor is long gone but Mum seems happy and we have a quarter million to split between us. She may have been the town bike but she will always be my Mum.

## SKELLUM

**W**HE I WAS SMALL MY PARENTS and some of my friends called me Skellum, a word that describes a naughty, wayward child. I could just as easily have been called Troublemaker; I was most definitely all three, it was just my nature and in some ways I couldn't help it as I would find out once I got into my teenage years.

When I was five or thereabouts, Mum read me a book about a mythical Greek god by the name of Icarus. I saw a lot of myself in Icarus. He was always in trouble but at the same time he was innovative. In the book I remember that Icarus and his friend Dadelus were in prison and Icarus, being the smarter one of the two, decided to make some wings out of wax and feathers and use them to escape prison. His plan was ingenious and worked well until Icarus flew too close to the sun and the wax melted and Icarus fell to the ground. It was a good plan gone bad but I still admired him for trying. Me, being a skellum, decided that I had a better plan and jumped off the wall at my grandmother's house with an umbrella to help me float down, but instead I dropped just as Icarus had and broke my ankle. That was just the start of my troubled childhood, well that was until Dad bought a boat but that was in the future.

I healed quickly and my parents kept me well reeled in for the next couple of years. I managed to stay out of trouble except for the odd scrape. On my sixth birthday Mum and Dad presented me with a shiny new bike, well it was not quite new, we didn't



have that kind of money but it was in decent shape and Dad spent hours in the evenings after I had gone to bed fixing and polishing the bike until it glistened. I couldn't wait to get out and ride but my birthday falls in the middle of summer and we were experiencing a typical South African heatwave. By mid-morning Mum noticed small blisters on my shoulders. I had a heat rash and she hauled me inside and into a cool bath. "No more bike riding for you Skellum," she said, "until the sun is well down. Maybe after dinner you can go out for a while. For dinner we are going to have the chicken that your Dad won at his office raffle." I don't know how he did it but Dad almost always won the Friday office raffle and brought home a fresh Rainbow Chicken. It was my favorite meal, especially the way that Mum roasted it with potatoes and veggies. This time I hardly tasted it; I was anxious to get out there and take my new bike on a real spin around the neighborhood. The air had cooled and Mum said, "OK Skellum, but don't go too far." I was on the bike and up the street long before the table had been cleared of dishes.

I absolutely loved the freedom that I got from having my own wheels and for the rest of the summer would meet up with some of the older kids from the area. We had cleared out a race course among the dirt and garbage at the end of our street where people dumped their trash, and we would hold our very own Grand Prix. I was the youngest and the smallest, but I had that one ingredient that you need to win a bike race; I had no fear. The sparkling, polished bicycle was soon dented and covered in mud, not unlike myself.

One Friday Dad came home from work. He had not won a chicken but had something better. Dirk Grobbelar from his office was moving away and couldn't take his dog to his new place. He asked my father if we would like a dog and Dad, without checking with Mum, said "yes." Butch was a springer spaniel and

for me it was love at first sight. I was an only child so to have a constant companion was just perfect. Mum said, "it's okay Bas. I was going to suggest we get a dog for Skellum but I thought that you would say no." Dad just shrugged and said, "we all need friends and think that these two are going to make a great team."

Butch seemed to take to his new family quite well. At first he was shy but after a couple of days he warmed up and would follow me around. He was a beautiful dog. His sad, dark brown eyes always made him look as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. His long floppy ears were soft, almost silky to touch, but I soon came to see that he too was a bit of a skellum. What I didn't anticipate, however, was how much Butch would love me and that I would feel the same about him.

School had just started when I was caught running naked along our street. Let me explain. It was not a busy street and ended where our bike course started. There was something in me that I didn't quite understand, but whatever it was convinced me to take my clothes off and go for a run. Butch stayed with Mum and Dad. Evenings were his time to give them some love. The evening runs became a habit and I loved the feeling of freedom and excitement I felt. I would wait until Mum and Dad had settled in for the night to listen to the radio and talk about the news or go to bed and then I would sneak out the kitchen door, walk in the shadows of a small orchard of fruit trees that lined the end of our garden, and once I was close to the road I would strip naked. At first my willy hid from fear because I was doing something really naughty, but after a month or so I noticed that it was starting to make an appearance and was a little stiff. All of this was strange, new territory for me. Then one night I got caught by Mr. Butler. He and his wife Matilda lived in a house at the very end of the street. Mr. Butler was out in front of his house grabbing a quick smoke when he saw me running naked. He watched me for a few nights

and then grabbed me. "I have been watching you boy," he said. "I see you run kaalgat past my house every night." He had me by the arm and I could smell that he had been drinking. The lights in the house were all out. Mr. Butler pulled me closer. "What's with running kaalgat every night?" he asked. I was frightened and stammered, "it's just for fun."

"Stand back and don't you dare run away. I know where you live and I will tell your parents what you do after they go to bed. I want to see you." He released my arm and I fought the temptation to run. He would never catch me and I would deny everything. I stood there feeling embarrassed in my nakedness while Mr. Butler examined me. After a few minutes I heard Matilda call out. "Bill, are you coming to bed?"

"You go now boy," he said, "but I want to see you back here at the same time tomorrow night. If you don't show up I will come by your house and talk to your Mum and Dad. They will believe me. I am an adult. Parents always believe an adult over a kid, now get going." The following night I walked to his house. I was fully clothed. The excitement of running naked had fizzled. Mr. Butler was out front smoking. He had been waiting for me. "I see that you have changed your mind about running kaalgat. What happened? You get scared?" I just looked down at the ground studying my bare feet in the milky light of a waning moon.

"I prefer you without clothes on so I say take them off." I hesitated. It didn't feel right but he insisted and I took everything off. Mr. Butler had me turn around. "I just want to get a good look at you boy," he said. "Bend over for me will you." Now if I am to be perfectly honest I found it all quite exciting and stood there until I heard Mrs. Butler call out, "are you coming to bed Bill?"

"You can go," Mr Butler said, "but do not, and I say again, do not tell anyone about this. It will only get you in trouble. Remember I am an adult and they always believe adults over children." His

voice was soft and sort of soothing and I showed up at his house almost every night for the better part of a year. He never did anything more than just look at me but one night after he thought that I had left I snuck around to the side of the house and peered through the rose bushes. Mr. Butler was on his stoep sitting in his rocking chair. I couldn't quite make out what he was doing until I noticed that his pants were on the ground and his hand was jerking back and forth. Matilda called again and Bill didn't answer. I heard him moaning and then he grunted, reached for his pants, and went into the house.

In those early years I crashed my bike many times. One time I ended up in the doctor's office with a broken wrist. Butch came with me and sat in silence while the doctor straightened things out (that hurt like a bastard) and apply the plaster-of-Paris cast. When we left the doctor's office Butch licked my hand. Mum said, "I don't think that there is anything that dog wouldn't do for you." Butch whimpered and wagged his tail. Wearing a cast made me feel important. I had all my friends at school sign it. Billy Mac wrote, 'it looks like someone gave you a slap on the wrist'. I thought it was funny; the other kids thought it lame but that was probably because they couldn't come up with anything better.

I had also been bitten by the same dog twice and one Sunday afternoon after a lunch of roast beef and yorkshire pudding at my grandmothers I ran into the side of her car, denting the door and cutting my forehead open. The same doctor who had straightened out my wrist and treated the dog bites used a black twine and nine stitches to close the gash. I heard Mum say, "what are we going to do with this child Basil?" Dad just shrugged.

I had stopped going by Mr. Butler's house and worried for a long while that he would come looking for me. I never saw him again and after a while I realized that he and Matilda had moved out of the neighborhood. This was about the time that I started to sneak

Mum's cigarettes. At first it was just one or sometimes two a day, but I started to develop a bit of a habit and one day I heard Mum complain to Dad. "Basil have you been stealing my cigarettes?" Dad just shrugged and said, "you know that I don't smoke." Mum shook her head. "It's probably the bloody maid again." I was OK letting our maid Constance take the blame for me but after a while I left the cigarettes and started on my parents' wine supply. That was easy. They drank a lot, Mum especially, and often had big dinner parties where Dad invited his office friends over. The house was always well stocked. I didn't like the taste of wine and beer but I liked the idea of doing something bad. I don't think that Mum and Dad figured it out; they both seemed genuinely surprised when I confessed a few years later.

I had started to notice something unusual about myself. There were times when I felt really, really happy like the world was all mine and just a beautiful place to be. On other days, and quite unexpectedly, I would feel down in the dumps as if I had the weight of the world on my shoulders. Perhaps this was the reason why I started to steal more wine and was drinking almost a bottle a day. The only person that seemed to know about this was Constance, and Butch of course but Butch wasn't saying anything. Constance made my bed and cleaned my room every day and found a half-empty bottle where I had hidden it. She never said anything, she knew that it was not her place to get involved, but she moved the wine to a small bedside table to make a point and when she saw me she shook her head and made some clicking noises but it didn't go further than that. She knew that I knew that she knew and that was enough for her.

Drinking wine made me lazy and I would prefer to sleep rather than ride my bike. Anyway my bike was getting too small for me. One day Dad woke me in the late afternoon and said, "come on Skellum, we're going for a ride." That was all he said but Mum

came along too and very shortly we were at Dr. Peckham's office. He took one look at me and said, "I will take some blood and run some tests but I already know what's going on." Mum looked at Dad and Dad looked at Mum and Dr. Peckham said, "he's drunk." My parents never said anything about it or punished me for it except Mum did ask about the cigarettes and I admitted to everything. I sat with my head down while Dad lectured me and Mum dapped her eyes with a tissue. "What are we going to do about this kid?" she asked again. Dad looked at me and then looked at Mum and in a low voice said, "I have a plan."

I found life without cigarettes and booze a bit boring but that all changed one Saturday afternoon when Dad left after lunch and came back with Mr. Tatham. Behind Mr. Tatham's old pickup truck was a dark blue boat. It must have been around 15 feet in length and had a white deck with a mast and boom strapped on top. "I know that it's not your birthday for a while Skellum," Dad said, "but you and me are going to learn how to sail." He reached through the front window of the truck and grabbed a book. "Here, take a look at this." It was a hard-cover book titled, 'Learn how to Sail'. It was written by a Mr. John Tidmarsh who I gather was a bit of an expert in all things to do with boats. Dad said, "pile in the truck. Mr Tatham is a member of the Point Yacht Club and we are going to use his space there for a while to keep the boat. He also organized us a temporary membership at the club so that we can go pee if we have to." We took off for the yacht club, the pickup barely running but I didn't care. We had a boat and a book and Dad and I would become sailors. As we drove away I looked back and saw Mum fumbling in her handbag looking for cigarettes. Butch was sitting beside her. He looked sad that he was being excluded from an adventure.

Dad was traveling the following week but left me the book to read. It all seemed quite straightforward, but I would not be the

skipper. Dad would be the man in charge. He confessed that he had only skimmed the book when he and I rigged the boat on Saturday morning. Dad had invited his friend Gordon to come along and help with the crewing. It was a sparkling day, a light wind blew gently in from the south and there were no clouds. On the far side of the harbor there was a flock of flamingos. They used to come in low and slow, landing with a kind of clumsy grace and then feed in the shallow water. Dad told me that they ate small shrimp, crabs, some krill and barnacles and I guess that on the far side of the harbor there were plenty. I was busy daydreaming when Dad called. "Come on Skellum, we are casting off in a couple of minutes." I knew enough to know that casting-off meant leaving the dock. Gordon was ready and with a push the three of us set sail.

It all went okay at first. The wind was light and there was no current in the bay and Dad spent a few minutes sorting the various lines that had been led back to the cockpit. Gordon helped. I lay on the side of the boat and dangled my fingers in the warm water. It was all pretty exciting stuff.

A slight wind picked up and Dad pulled on the big sail. He had some lines in one hand and the book in the other and the boat, which came with the name Sea Serpent, started to trickle through the water slowly picking up speed. "Hey Dad," I said. "You are a real captain. It looks like you are a natural sailor." As we got further from land and out of the lee of the tall apartments that lined the waterfront there was even more wind and Sea Serpent really started to scoot. It seemed so effortless. I was having a blast; Dad was trying to find the page in the book that described how to turn around. He and Gordon had both seen the fishermen at the same time. On the far side of the harbor there were a couple dozen fishermen casting for cod. By this point we had quite a head of steam going and were heading right for the fishermen, Dad

frantically trying to find what to do to turn the boat around safely. Gordon said, "Bas don't you think that we should turn around?" Dad didn't seem to hear him and suddenly we were heading right toward the side of the dock. The fishermen started yelling at us. We were going to get tangled in their lines. Dad was panicking and then we got caught up in some fishing lines and moments later thumped unceremoniously into the dock. The crowd on the dock were yelling while one of them used his foot to fend off the boat and sent it on a course that would have us tangled in more lines. The fishermen were furious; Dad was at a loss at what to do. He said, "Gordon you need to get out of the boat and run back to the club and get us some help." Luckily we were right by some iron stairs and Gordon leapt from the tangled mess and caught the stairs. He hung on for a few seconds and then slipped, dropping into the water. One of the fishermen climbed down the stairs and gave Gordon his hand. He was furious but also knew that leaving Gordon there to flounder in the water would only make matters worse. Dad and I kept skidding along the dock getting caught in more and more fishing lines. Dad had read that he needed to push the tiller away from him and let the mainsail, the big sail go, but each time he tried the back of the boat swung into the dock, Sea Serpent lurched forward, and we got caught in more fishing lines. Finally, after a lot of yelling and an exchange of bad words, the fishermen were able to untangle the boat, turn it around and shove us off, pointing us toward the yacht club. It was the first time I ever heard my Dad swear, but we were finally free and heading in the right direction.

It was three miles from the dock, around the north side of the harbor where someone driving a forklift yelled at Gordon. After that it was a straight path to the club. His bare feet hurt and there was blood from where he had stubbed a toe on his right foot. Dad meanwhile was able to keep the boat on a direct course

and we were just pulling into the jetty at the yacht club when Gordon arrived, sweating, puffing and bloodied. "I'm going home now" was all he said and climbed into his car and drove away. Dad and me were left with the mess to sort out. We got the sails down, Dad had me hold the boat while he went off to find our trailer and ten minutes later we were in our allotted space with the boat packed away. "That didn't go so well," Dad said. "Come on Skellum I will buy you a coke at the club." That seemed like a reasonable end to what I thought had been a very exciting day.

Dad sipped his Castle Lager and after a while said, "I'm sorry son, but I don't think that we are cut out for this sailing stuff." He looked a bit sorry for himself. It had been an embarrassing day and we left some pissed off fishermen in our wake, but I had really enjoyed myself. "Dad, let's give it another try. Maybe read the book this time." Dad smiled wryly and put his hand over mine. "I owe you that at least," he said.

We got the hang of it and by the end of summer we were managing the gusty winds that funneled between the apartment buildings bringing sudden gusts. Dad never looked comfortable as skipper and one day said to me, "hey Skellum why don't you take over the helm?" I couldn't believe it. Dad was asking me to be the skipper. We swapped positions. Dad tended the sails while I helmed and Sea Serpent took off. Later that evening I overheard Dad telling Mum how much of a natural I was. Mum smiled and said, "hey Bas that's good news. By the way did you see in the paper this morning about the arrest of Mr. Butler? You remember him?" Dad shook his head. "They lived in that house with a nice front stoep just down the road. They moved away a year or so ago." Dad took a long drag on his cigar and then asked, "what did they arrest him for?" Mum leaned over and found the morning's paper and flipped through to the page that had the story. "It says here that they took him in after multiple counts of child

molestation were reported. The bastard was a bloody pedophile living right among us and we never knew." I heard Dad grunt and ask, "would you like some more wine?" Mum held out her glass. Dad stood and I knew that he would be heading for the kitchen so I quickly scuttled to my bedroom. I had long since put Mr. Butler out of my mind but now that I had a name for it, I knew I had probably been lucky. He never touched me; just himself.

Spring came early and we launched Sea Serpent. Dad and I had lovingly spent much of our spare time over the winter sanding the bottom of the boat. Butch helped by watching us closely. I brought his bed out to the garage where we were working on the boat and he lay there for hours taking in everything. Occasionally I slipped him a treat. By spring Sea Serpent looked almost new.

I had read in a sailing magazine that a smooth bottom made the boat go faster. All the while I was sanding away I could not help thinking about a smooth bottom. Dad and I went out into the harbor and sailed close to the flamingos. Dad said, "they like the warmer water especially at this time of year." He then said something surprising. "I have entered us in some races this spring. The yacht club calls it their Spring Series. I think that we, well you, are good enough to compete." I could not have been happier and we readied the boat for the first race.

Dad had sprung for new sails. "These are an early birthday present," he told me, "so don't expect too much on the big day." Mum had been sworn to secrecy and I wish that she could have been there to see my face. She admitted that time on the boat was good for me and Dad and that on weekends she enjoyed some 'alone time' as she called it. Turned out that her alone time involved a few bottles of cheap white wine.

I was nervous as we headed out to the start. The Point Yacht Club had a fleet of 15 or so identical boats which Dad informed me were called Sprogs and one of the Class rules was that the

name of each sprog had to start with the letter 'S'. For the first race in the Spring Series all of them were heading to the start area. The wind was gusty. I had noticed that when a gust came between the buildings it changed the direction of the overall wind pattern. The latest book on sailing that I had taken out of the library explained how best to use the small increase in wind and the subtle shifts in wind direction to an advantage, so I took note of what was happening. It was easy to see the gusts coming our way. There were dark patches on the water where there was more wind. Suddenly there was a loud horn blasting from the committee boat. Dad said, "that's your warning signal that there is ten minutes to go 'till the start." With five minutes to go there was another horn. Dad said, "I have synchronized my watch with the race committee so that we will know precisely how much time we have." My heart was pounding. Dad turned back to look at me.

"Just relax Skellum. You know what you are doing. You are very tense." It was easy for him to say. I was the skipper and how we did in the race rested squarely on my small shoulders.

"There is one minute to go to the start. 45 seconds. 30 seconds." Dad was counting down and I was starting to relax. I was well positioned for a good start and when the gun fired we were only a few yards back from the line and moving with some speed. Now I have to admit it was more luck than any skill, but less than a minute after the start gun had fired I saw a dark patch on the water coming our way. I knew that we were well positioned to take advantage of it and as soon as the new wind hit us, I tacked the boat. The first mark of the course was in the same direction that the wind was coming from and the only way to get there was to sail in a zig-zag pattern, hopefully taking advantage of the small changes in wind direction with each puff. It paid off and we crossed in front of most of the fleet. Only Mr Giles and Mr. Haggerty were ahead of us. By the way I was the only kid

skipping the boat with their father as crew. On all the other boats it was the other way around. When I became a good sailor I realized that the distribution of weight on our boat played to our advantage when it came to boat speed. There was nothing in the rules about it but it definitely gave us a small speed advantage especially in light winds when Dad's weight forward lifted the stern slightly out of the water and reduced drag.

We finished the race in 5th place. I had messed up a few times, but Dad was thrilled. "We done Skellum," he said, "I can't wait to tell your mother." When we got home Mum was fast asleep on her bed with a strong pall of cigarettes and cheap booze hanging over her. The Spring Series lasted three days. It was purposely held over a long weekend so that we could get in a bunch of races and the race committee managed to get in nine races, three each day. Sunday afternoon was a bit touch and go as there was very little wind, but it picked up just in time for the race start. We were allowed to discard our worst race and after my discard Dad and I ended up 3rd overall. Mr. Giles won a handsome trophy. We won a duffel bag with the yacht club burgee embroidered on the side. Mum was thrilled, but our great weekend was overshadowed a little by Mum slurring her words.

I was just 10 when I realized that there was something wrong with Mum. Dad was starting to travel overnight and when he was away Mum started drinking early and finishing late. At first I was unaware that Mum was drinking so much and when Dad was away I got to share her bed sleeping on my fathers side.

One night I was fast asleep when I heard a loud crash. Mum had been staggering to bed when she bumped into the table and it threw her off balance. She grabbed at what she could to steady herself and ended up on the floor with a pile of dishes on her. Constance usually set the table for breakfast the night before and Mum had pulled the lot on top of herself. At first I had no idea

what I was looking at. There was just a mess on the floor, then I noticed a foot sticking out and screamed. "Mum, Mum are you OK?" Mum waved me off as she tried to sit up. Then she started to laugh. "Don't worry about anything Skellum. It was just an accident and look, my cigarette didn't even go out." I helped Mum to bed and stayed with her all night but didn't sleep. I was worried that she might die. The next day at school my teacher asked if I was OK. "You don't look too good Jack," she said. My teachers used my real name and not my nickname. "Do you want me to call your mother to see if she can pick you up and take you home?" I just shook my head. When I had left earlier in the day to ride my bike to school Mum was still asleep. I dreaded seeing her, but when I got home she was in good spirits and never mentioned what had happened. From that night on I slept in my own bed when Dad was gone, but would usually just lie there trying to force myself asleep all the while listening to see if Mum made it to bed okay. She was good for a couple of months, and by good I mean she made it to bed by herself but one night, Dad was on an overnight in a small town called Ladysmith, Mum crashed again, only this time she had a long and quite deep gash on her forehead. Mum made up some story when Dad got back and I went along with it. I knew that all was not well, but didn't tell anyone, least of all Dad who told me later that he had no idea how bad her condition was. It had become obvious to my father that Mum had a problem but he still needed to travel for work and I spent many sleepless nights listening and waiting for a crash. On weekends Dad and I went sailing. It was a way to put my thoughts out of my mind and concentrate on the wind and waves. It was also a way for me to try and manage the deep funk that I found myself in. Sometimes a sadness crept in for no reason and I was powerless to do anything about it.

Mum's condition got worse and my sailing skills got better. I won

the National Championships held on Vaal Dam near Pretoria. The conditions were tricky but with Dad as crew we were unbeatable. We camped in a small campground on the edge of the dam and both of us put our worries about Mum aside and concentrated on the sailing. At the prizegiving the Commodore of the Vaal Dam Yacht Club noted that I was one of the most talented and gifted sailors to race their waters and added, "this young man is going to go places. One day I could see him as world champion." Dad was there alongside me to accept the prize and after the ceremony we started the long drive back home. Almost overnight I had shaken the funk and replaced it with euphoria.

We would have to pull an all-nighter to get back home. Dad said that he still planned on going to work on Monday morning. He had been trying to reach Mum on the phone but she wasn't answering. We both wanted to tell her about the races but we both kept getting the answering machine.

Dad drove as fast as he could while pulling Sea Serpent behind and it was just getting light when we pulled into our driveway. The house was quiet but Dad noticed that many of the lights were still on. "Untie the boat and stow the gear in the garage," Dad said. "I will be right back." What Dad stumbled into was nothing short of a scene from a Greek tragedy. While we were away our home had been robbed. There was mess strewn everywhere but no sign of Mum. Dad noticed the yellow light on the answering machine blinking and saw that none of his messages had been listened to. "Skellum," Dad yelled. "I need you right away." I could tell by his voice that something had happened and felt like throwing up when I saw the mess. There was no sign of Mum, just some blood on the floor outside their bedroom. There was also a lot of mess on the floor from Butch who had obviously not been let out to go in a few days. Dad called the police who were usually very unresponsive, but they were there in less than

10 minutes. The corporal in charge was a short, stocky Afrikaans man with tightly cropped hair and a very strong accent. He came right to the point. "Your house was burgled. Your wife is in the hospital. She is not doing too good. We waited for you to come home before taking our investigation any further." He pulled Dad aside and said in a low voice. "Two things of importance that you should know. Your wife was raped, we presume by the burglars. She's not able to talk much and has very little memory of what happened. She has little memory because she was passed-out drunk when we found her. The tests taken at the hospital show that she had enough alcohol in her system to put an elephant to sleep. She may talk to you, but at some point we are going to need a statement from her especially if we are ever going to catch the buggers who did this." All the while Butch sat in silence watching us and occasionally whimpering.

I joined Dad and we drove over to the hospital. The matron on duty let us in right away. Mum was asleep when we got to her bedside so we sat and waited. She was bandaged in so many places that it was hard to even recognize her. Dad had a cup of stale coffee from the pot at the end of the ward. The matron said, "she will wake up but I need to warn you that she's not making much sense. It's hard to piece together what she is trying to say. She has been sedated and that might be part of the reason, but I think that there may also be something more." Dad nodded. "Thank you." The matron left and came back with two plates of food. It didn't look great but I was so hungry that I woofed it down. Dad just picked at his plate nibbling on a piece of bacon and the soft center of his toast.

Around lunchtime Mum seemed to be struggling to wake. A couple of hours earlier a cop had been by to get a statement from Dad and he also asked me a few questions. Neither of us had much to say. We both had more questions than answers. Mum

was able to focus one eye and saw that we were there. "Ugh Bas," she said, "I'm sorry. This was all my fault." She then went back to sleep. Dad and I were at a loss. The nurse came in, "we have her sedated," she said. "The effects should wear off around dinner time and she might be more lucid then." Mum was more lucid around dinner. She told Dad that she opened the door late at night thinking that it might be us home early. She didn't mention that she had been drinking heavily and anyway Dad had a key so there would have been no need for her to open the door. It was a sad time for our little family; I had been on a high after winning the Nationals but I felt myself slipping when Mum was in hospital and struggled to stay positive.

By now I knew that there was really something wrong with me. The bouts of depression followed by heights of euphoria were becoming more and more obvious. I started stealing booze from the liquor cabinet again even though I knew that it had nearly killed Mum. The alcohol numbed things and kept my emotions on a more even keel. While Mum was in hospital I struggled with my schoolwork so much that my teacher, Howie Backhouse noticed, and he brought in the school guidance counselor who suggested that we both go and meet with the school nurse. I told Mr. Backhouse that I wasn't feeling well but didn't elaborate because I didn't really know how to, but nurse Jennifer had her suspicions and called my father. They agreed that I should see a specialist. I had no choice in the matter. Dad was concerned because I seem to have lost all interest in sailing and he insisted. Neither of us told Mum who seemed to be getting better but still had a long way to go before she would be able to come home.

The specialist spent a few sessions with me and had me do some tests. At the end he asked for a meeting with Dad. "Jack here," he said, "is bi-polar. It accounts for his mood swings and feelings of euphoria and also his bouts of depression. If he was



only depressed that would be one thing but the extreme up and down of his moods is classic bi-polar.” Neither Dad nor I had any clue what he was talking about but he gave us some reading material to take home and I actually read it. For the first time things started to make sense. Dad read it too and was worried. “Is this really the way you feel?”

I nodded.

Since Mum had been in the hospital my drinking had increased a lot. It was easy. Constance usually took the afternoon off and retired to her quarters so I was pretty much alone and could drink without fear of getting caught. For the days that Dad was away on business Aunt Beth stayed over and she had no clue that I was a budding alcoholic. Luckily, for me anyway, the liquor locker was always stocked and Dad never suspected that I was back drinking again so he didn’t look too closely. I would get a clean glass from the kitchen and take it to my bedroom where I filled it with wine. Butch knew that things were not right with my world and sat by my side gazing at me with his sad brown eyes. I rumbled his ears and said, “it’s okay boy. This makes me feel better. I hope in my next life I come back as a dog.” Butch licked my fingers.

One afternoon I was riding my bike home when I noticed a bunch of my classmates huddled on the side of the road. I stopped. “Hey you guys what’s up?” There was some shuffling around and some guilty faces. “Fuck off,” said Chris Beavitt. “This is none of your business.”

“I know that you guys smoke dagga. Either you let me have some or I might just tell Mr. Backhouse.” I was well outnumbered and on shaky ground and knew it, but Beavitt said, “give him a joint and see what happens. This could be fun to watch.” That was when I tried my first illegal drug and to be perfectly honest, I loved it. The chemicals hit my brain and the anxiety and stress that I had been feeling just melted away. Smoking pot would

become a habit that only grew over the next few years.

Mum was finally released from hospital. They had done a lot of work fixing her on the outside. Her broken leg was as good as new. Same with her wrist and they glued and screwed other bits to help. They had also tried to fix her inside but in that department I only gave them a C-. Mum had tried to explain what happened that night but she was not making much sense. The house had been burgled, a few things stolen and two (she thought) of the men had raped her. Then they beat her up and left her for dead. I could see Dad’s knuckles got white when Mum mentioned the rape. He was holding onto the bedpost trying to hold his composure. “Don’t worry. The police are on this and we will catch those bastards and make them pay for what they did.

While Mum was confined to her hospital bed she had no choice but to endure another rehab. Her withdrawal symptoms had been terrible despite the medications that the hospital gave her. Her main doctor was a young Afrikaans man who had graduated a couple of years earlier. He knew that the medications were only masking a much deeper set of issues and pulled in a variety of psychiatrists to try and figure out the reason why she drank so much. They tried to pin it as a genetic predisposition citing my grandmother who died young of liver failure, but Mum knew that they were grasping at straws. She drank because she was lonely and bored; it was as simple as that. It started, and this was a bit of news to me, after she had a miscarriage after I was born and the doctors told her that she would not be able to have any more children. Mum went along with the psychiatrists but she also knew at a deeper level that as soon as she got released from hospital she would pour herself a drink and that it would be the start of yet another decline.

The police had been by a few times and told Dad that they had no luck finding the men (Mum thought that they were all

men) who beat her up. They had not stolen much and Mum had confessed to letting them in. The police had a weak case and after a while they gave up. Butch had sat silently by my side listening to the police draw their conclusion and when they left, he just whimpered.

“You are a good boy,” I said to him. Butch wagged his tail and tilted his head slightly. He looked uncomfortable at my compliment even though I told him most days that he was a good boy. To be truthful Butch was helping me through the depressing days by just being by my side with a look of understanding on his sweet face.

I was back sailing but not with the same enthusiasm. The dagga helped me get out the door and to the boat, but it dulled my senses and I no longer saw the wind shifts on the water like I used to. Dad was worried about both me and Mum and avoided things by traveling more. I was away at a regatta in East London when Dad came home and found Mum dead. She had overdosed on pills. She had also finished a fifth of cheap Bols Brandy and two bottles of wine. A third was in her hand when Dad stumbled on her in their bed. An ambulance came and took Mum to the hospital, but it was clear to everyone that she was gone. I guess they needed someone of authority to make the formal pronouncement. Dad told me when I got home and I tried to cry but nothing happened. I was numb to the world. Our little family was shrinking. Now it was just me and Dad. We buried Mum in a plot in the main graveyard in town. She was laid to rest in a simple plywood coffin. Dad said, “I am not being cheap. Your Mum was a simple person. This is what she would have wanted. I already miss her so much.” I missed her too and tanked the regatta finishing in the middle of the fleet and that pretty much did it for my sailing ambitions. There had been a time when I fancied myself representing South Africa in the Olympics, but it was not going to be.

Dad was traveling more than ever and when he did Aunt Beth came over to keep an eye on things. One day I got back from school a little earlier than usual and Dad came scuttling from his bedroom looking very guilty. I didn't say anything, I was disappointed that he was home which meant getting a drink would be harder with him there, but I had managed to get a few joints of Dagga and was sitting under the jacaranda tree in the front yard when I saw Beth leave. I had not noticed her arrive; then I did the math and realized what had happened. Mum was barely cold and buried when Dad found comfort in Aunt Beth's arms. I took a long pull of the joint and in a bit of a fug found my bed and slept through dinner waking in the morning just in time to grab my bike and speed off to school.

I managed to muddle my way through the first part of High School. The boat sat on the side of our house. Sea Serpent looked more like a tired old snake that had been hit with a rake than the fast racing yacht it had once been. I tried cross country running at school and that seemed to help with my depression. Dr. Peckham had increased my drugs to help combat the depression as well as mitigate some of the effects of bi-polar. Turned out I was a really good runner and I started to win races. I have to admit, and I can because this is my story, that I was high, well very high at the start of each race and felt little pain. I could go out fast and then grunt my way through the second half of the race. In typical bi-polar fashion I took to cross country running and imagined that one day I might compete on the world stage. The depression was quickly replaced by a sense of euphoria and I got stuck in, training most afternoons. My teachers and in particular the PE instructor Mr. Rhodes were impressed at the change that they saw in me, but I knew that much of my success on the race course was fueled in part by the two constants in my life; wine and a strong strain of dagga. Still I was winning races and held the record for

the fastest cross country time at the school since they started keeping track of those things and Mr. Rhodes suggested that I train for the Provincial Championships.

Dad was traveling a lot. He told me that he had quit his job working as an engineer for the government and had joined a new start-up that specialized in railroad sidings. They won a lot of contracts. On Dad's last day at his government job he won his last chicken. Constance roasted it for us and Dad and I tucked into a 'meal fit for champions', or so Dad said. "I wrote a check and signed a form stating that it was okay for you to go to Pretoria to compete in the races. I'm proud of you son. In fact I feel a little like celebrating leaving my old job and starting a new one and your success as a runner. I have invited my old secretary, Judy Jones over to join me for a drink later. You remember her don't you?" I nodded. I wasn't too happy about it. I wanted Mum back and I didn't want Judy Jones to try and replace her, but my wants didn't matter. Later that night long after I had gone to bed I needed a pee and slipped out my bedroom heading for the bathroom at the end of the hall. Dad's bedroom was on the other side of the house but it was still hard to not hear the grunting and moaning. In the morning Mrs. Jones had left and I started to feel the first tickle of depression getting under my skin again.

I lost my focus and my grades and running suffered. Dad carried on not knowing that I knew, if you know what I mean, but I did know and I could not get the image of my father and Mrs. Jones naked in Mum's bed while Mum lay asleep in her cheap pine coffin. The tickle of depression increased and I tried to get out of going to Pretoria but Mr. Rhodes insisted. "You are our star runner," he said. "You can win this, you know?"

I had stashed a fair amount of alcohol in my duffel bag, the same one that I had won at the sailing regatta a few years earlier. I had also stowed more than enough joints. What I hadn't counted on

was everything being searched as soon as we arrived in Pretoria. Of course they found my stash and confiscated it. Without those props I knew that I would be useless on the race course, and I was. Despite Mr. Rhodes insisted that I could win the championship, I ended up well back in the pack. Without the pot to ease me into the race I was useless. I think that some of my poor performance was my imagination in overdrive. I had only ever won a race as high as a kite. Knowing that I didn't have any pot played with my mind and convinced me that I would lose. I knew that I had let everyone down and the depression started to feel like a physical pain that sat in my neck and the back of my head. The bus ride back to Durban was excruciating. We arrived just before midnight and I rode my bike home. Dad and Mrs. Jones were going at it. They didn't know that I was home and were making all sorts of noise. I found a joint and took a bottle of brandy from the liquor cabinet and in an hour or so I was passed out. I had only tried brandy once and it was really strong. Constance tried to wake me for school, but I was a mess. She just clicked her teeth in disapproval and let me sleep it off.

Then something good happened. Much against my will my friend dragged me to a disco that was being held at the Presbyterian Church. The noise was deafening and the fluorescent lights combined with a ball hanging from the ceiling made from small mirrors had my head spinning. That was where I met Cheryl. She was petite, had closely cropped blond hair and was wearing a tight skirt and an open blouse. I still don't know how I got up the courage, but I asked her to dance and she agreed. For the first time I wished that I wasn't high. I simply could not control where my feet were supposed to be but it made Cheryl laugh and that made me happy.

We became boyfriend and girlfriend and it was a sweet, innocent love. I was smitten and when I was with her my depression was

replaced by some kind of happiness. It had been so long since I had felt really happy that I hardly knew what happiness was. I just knew that I didn't feel quite as bad. Cheryl and I would go to the movies and one time we went to an Albert Hammond concert. We sat in the front row and Albert Hammond pointed Cheryl out saying what a beautiful girl she was. Cheryl blushed. Then he started to play one of his most well known songs, "to all the girls I've loved before." He was looking directly at Cheryl when he sang the song and I felt a bit jealous, but when he looked away I leaned over and whispered in Cheryl's ear, "I think that I love you." She just blushed even more but didn't say anything.

After three months of going 'steady' we were at her parents house. I fumbled with her blouse and somehow, more luck than anything, I found the clip that held her bra in place. I squeezed it and her breasts sprung free. She didn't resist, in fact she arched her back a little and kissed me. I guess that you could say that we made love that late afternoon. It was more of a fumble and then a sticky mess but my depression once again gave way to euphoria. When I got home I had a strong brandy with ice and rolled a thick wad of dagga to celebrate and passed out with a smile on my face.

Cheryl and I managed to get the hang of sex. The only problem was finding a place to do it without parents lurking with one eye and one ear open in case there was some monkey business going on. Dad was OK. I think that he suspected that something was happening between us. Cheryl's parents were staunch Catholics and kept her reeled in tight. I didn't care. I was in love and even though Cheryl had not said those three magical words to me, I felt that she loved me. Turns out that I may have been wrong on that one but at the time I was so smitten I wasn't paying close enough attention.

Things conspired all at once and that's why I am writing this from a mental facility. I have not been here long; my stint in the

hospital where they glued and screwed my broken bones back together had taken more than a few months and the bits and pieces that had been damaged by the fall had healed okay. I guess that it's good to be young and strong.

Anyway I digress. I came home one day and Mrs. Jones and my Dad were there enjoying lunch. "You not working today?" I asked avoiding looking at Mrs. Jones.

"No, I took a sick day. Come and sit. We have some news to tell you." I was really looking forward to getting to my bedroom where I could enjoy a drink and a smoke, but reluctantly pulled up a chair. Dad asked, "did you eat?" I nodded. "I ate at school," I lied. "What's the news?" I purposely sulked. I had a suspicion what the news might be and it was the last thing I wanted to hear. It didn't help how Dad phrased it.

"You are going to have a new mother." I was right about the news. I had a strong suspicion. "What do you think Skellum?" I didn't say anything. I know that they would not like what I was thinking. Mum had been dead for a year but she was still my mother. Mrs. Jones may have big boobs but that didn't make her my mother. I pushed back my chair and left the table. I heard Dad say in a low voice, "well that didn't go too well."

I drank a lot that afternoon. I was supposed to return to school around 4 to run some cross-country but by mid afternoon I was stoned and drunk and I could feel my depression coming on like a truck. Dad left me alone. Constance stopped by my room and asked if I wanted dinner. She said that Dad had gone out and would not be having dinner. I just waved her away. She clicked and huffed and left the room. Butch sat by my side and I was happy for his friendship. He knew that I was hurting and every now and then he would lick my hand and whimper.

Now in hindsight I know that this was a stupid thing to do but I

needed to tell someone, so I rode my bike over to Cheryl's house. She came to the door and invited me in. She didn't know that I was a wreck about to crash. I walked into the beautiful living room and then had a horrible feeling. I looked back and saw that the mud on my shoes had splattered everywhere. That was when Cheryl's Dad showed up. The first thing that he saw was the mud and then he saw that I was drunk. "You need to get out of here," he said to me in a low menacing voice. "Cheryl is not interested in you." Cheryl looked at me with pleading eyes that said, "just do as he asks." I left and rode home and drank some more brandy and slept until morning.

Mr. Rhodes called me into his office. "I am not sure what's going on with you. You used to be a star runner but now you can hardly make it twice around the track. You never showed for practice yesterday. I am dropping you from the team." I was devastated. I had once fancied myself as a world class runner. I left school and rode home and was barely in the door when the phone rang. It was Dad. He was upset that I had walked out of school and had received a phone call from my teacher. "What's going on with you Skellum?" he asked, and then added rather spitefully as payback for my lack of interest in his upcoming nuptials. "By the way, I have a buyer for the Sea Serpent. He is coming tomorrow to take the boat."

I lay on my back on the floor. I didn't feel like drinking. My depression was severe. It was my fault. Every time I started to feel better I stopped taking the medication that Dr. Peckham had prescribed. I hadn't taken any anti-depressants in over a week and the pain in my brain was building. Constance found me there. She clicked and huffed and then said, "did you father tell you that I was leaving. Today is my last day. I have come to say goodbye." She had been with our family since I was a small child and had cooked and cleaned and nursed me through some strange and

difficult times. I didn't know what to say so I didn't say anything. Instead I rolled onto my tummy, put my hands over my face and tried to cry but nothing happened. I was void of feeling. Late in the afternoon Cheryl came by. I heard knocking on the door but ignored it. She let herself in and found me on the floor. "I came to break up with you," she said. "I didn't think that it would be fair to just phone you." I stared at her blankly and stammered, "I can get the carpet cleaned." Cheryl tried to force a smile but it didn't happen. "It's not about the carpet. I'm not in love with you. You are always drunk or high or both and you aren't fun anymore." Her words stung. I looked at her and saw that she was not as pretty as I had remembered and then I pleaded, well more to the point, I begged. It did little to change her mind.

"I have started seeing someone else," Cheryl said. "He does smoke a little but seems to have it all under control." I could feel a physical pain in my head that was almost crippling. "Who is it?"

"I have to go," Cheryl said. "You take care of yourself Jack." I struggled to get to my feet and grabbed her by the arm. "Who is it?" Cheryl shook herself free but I chased after her and grabbed her again. "Who is it?"

"Let my arm go. You are hurting me."

"Who are you seeing?" I squeezed her arm and I knew that it would hurt. "It's Chris Beavitt," she said. "We have been having sex for almost a month now." I raised my arm to hit her but she wasn't drunk, I was, and she hit me first. I tried to take a swing at her but she ran for the door. I chased and when we got out to the front yard I saw her father in their car waiting for her. "Cheryl get in," he said and then added. "It's over boy. It's over. You will get over it. Just give it time." I regret what I said next. "You know that she's screwing Chris Beavitt don't you?" He lunged for me but this time I was quick and ran into our house. He dared not follow, well he followed me as far as the front door before storming out.

“I am going to call your father and tell him that you tried to hit my daughter.”

I didn't care. I walked through the house. It no longer had the love and warmth that was there when Mum was alive and Constance would wake me up with a cup of tea in the morning. Dad was going to be distracted with Mrs. Jones. Cheryl was screwing that fat kid Beavitt and I had been dropped from the running team. The walls were not only cold but they seemed to be laughing at me. I missed Mum. She would help me but I knew that wasn't true. She could barely help herself. I lay on my bed and started to sob. “Fuck I can't even cry properly,” I said out loud. “I'm fucking useless in everything that I do.”

That was when I noticed that Butch was no longer by my side. “And the dog doesn't even like me,” I wailed. Just then I heard a loud bang. I ignored it but after a few minutes I heard a knock on the front door. I dragged myself to answer it. What I saw was more than I could manage. There was a man standing there with Butch in his arms. “Is this your dog?” he asked. I looked at Butch. His body was limp and there was blood on his sweet face. “He came out of nowhere,” the man said. “I was driving past your house when all of a sudden your dog was in the road. I'm sorry but I hit him. I'm really, really sorry. It was an accident but I'm sure that he may be dead.” I took Butch from him without saying anything and the man left.

Butch was bloodied, his eyes open but lifeless. Butch was dead. Then I remembered that I had let the front door open when Cheryl's father was after me. Butch must have slipped out. He was not an outside dog except when me or Dad took him for a walk and he was on a leash. I placed Butch on the kitchen counter and sat with my hands over my eyes. I tried to cry again but nothing happened. I went to my bedroom and ripped the top sheet off my bed. I also grabbed the brandy bottle and took a long hit.

I wrapped Butch in the sheet. I would ask Dad what to do when he got home but lately he was coming in really late. I knew that he was screwing Mrs. Jones. I left Butch on the counter and sat on the floor in my bedroom. I poured a heavy hand of brandy and drank it in two large gulps. “I'm fucking useless and my world is fucking falling apart.” I could feel a sharp pain in my neck and back of my head and knew that I was in for a long depression. There was very little that I could do about it. I found my pills and took a few in the hope that it would ward off the worst of it, but even as I swallowed them I knew that they would have no effect.

It was getting dark out. I heard thunder and knew that we would get a storm soon. They usually came in the late afternoon but sometimes would delay until the evening. I saw the first flash of lightning and heard a low rumble of thunder far in the distance to the west of the town. “I'm fucking useless. I don't deserve to live.” I could swear that I heard my mothers voice and she was saying, “come and join me Skellum. It's peaceful and pleasant where I am.” I poured another hand of brandy. The storm was getting closer and the thunder louder. I had no idea where Dad was but I figured, as one would do through the fug of alcohol and pot, that he was at that moment on top of Mrs. Jones humping away. I also had a clear image of Chris Beavitt screwing Cheryl.

Suddenly there was a loud crack of thunder right above our house and moments later the rain came bucketing down. There was a little hail mixed in with it and the sound it made on our tin roof was deafening. More lightning and thunder so close that the whole house shook. The rain had started to come down sideways from a strong wind. I heard Mum say again, “come and see me Skellum. There are nice people here and everything is soft and cozy. Oh look Butch has just arrived. He can tell me what happened to him.”

I drank the rest of the brandy straight out of the bottle. My head throbbed from the pain of my depression now combined with the slurry of wine, brandy and pot that I had been taking for most of the day. "Fuck you Cheryl," I said. "I don't drink and Beavitt smokes. And you are not as pretty as you once were when we were going out. In fact you look ugly." The thunder had moved on and the rumble was low and menacing, but it was no longer any problem for us. Without warning the rain stopped. There was a sudden stillness in the air. It hung heavy and wet and had a strange smell. Then the flying ants came out. They always came out after a summer storm. They swarmed the street lights collectively looking like some ghostly apparition.

I stared at them and knew at that moment what I was going to do.

I was unsteady on my feet from everything I had taken and the searing pain in my neck and head was almost debilitating. I wanted to lie down. I was tired but I also wanted to see Mum again. I managed to get the bike and better yet, I managed to get on the bike and started pedaling. The swarms of flying ants were thick and everywhere and a couple of blocks over I heard a dog barking. I kept pedaling. I was the only one on the road. At the bottom I took a right. I felt winded. I knew that what I was doing was wrong but I wanted to do something for myself and for Mum and kept on going. It didn't take long and I was at the bottom of the bridge over the Tugela River. A sliver of light from a hazy cresting moon lit the river which I could see was running swiftly from the recent rain. I looked up for a moment and then without much hesitation I left my bike at the bottom of the bridge and started to stagger slowly to the highest point. I often wonder what would have happened had someone driven by and asked if they could help, but the road was empty.

I stopped halfway. That was when the tears started to flow. I could not help it. It was the first time that I had cried since I was a child. I carried on stumbling upwards trying to focus on each step. The pain in my head seemed to be getting worse and the salt from my tears blurred my vision. It took me fifteen or so minutes to get to the high point of the bridge. My body was shaking from sobbing and my head pounding from, well everything. I hesitated for perhaps 30 seconds and then climbed over the railing. I knew that there was a little concrete landing that ran the length of the bridge and I lowered myself onto it. I looked up one last time. I was sure that I could see Mum's sweet face. I looked down. Far below I could hear the river gurgling, and then I jumped.

Very few people survive a suicide attempt and some have tried to explain things by saying that they saw their life flash before their eyes. I saw nothing. I didn't see the water coming up at me and I really didn't feel anything as I hit the surface which from that height felt like concrete, or so I was told. That was it. I hit the surface and it knocked me unconscious. I must have been picked up by the river and washed downstream. I have never been religious but somehow it felt as if there was some kind of hand guiding me and I washed up on a low bank. I don't remember any of it. I guess that I have formed a kind of memory since I was found but a lot of it has come from what people, the police and doctors especially, told me what might have happened.

On the east side of the river the local ladies used that bank as a place to wash their clothes. They came that morning and found a crumpled and bloodied mess. I was still alive, but barely. I know now that one of the ladies ran to the road and flagged down a car and the driver came over and saw me. "There is fokall I can do for him," he said. "He's dead and I don't want to be late for my

meeting. He got back into his car and drove away but a prick on his conscience made him turn into the first driveway. A lady came to the door and he explained what he had seen. The lady called the police who came with an ambulance and they somehow got me into the back, strapped me down and inserted a drip in my arm.

My recovery took almost a year, mainly because I had severed my spine and had lost all feeling and movement in my left leg. I was paralyzed, in fact when they finally revived me the doctors thought that I was paralyzed from the neck down but after some intense work they restored feeling and movement to my whole body with the exception of my left leg from the knee down.

Dad came by almost every day. Mrs. Jones was out of the picture; her choice. She told Dad that she didn't want to live with paraplegic in the house and that was that. She packed her bags and left.

When I first got to the hospital they had me on life support in the intensive care unit and sometimes Mum came to visit. "I was so looking forward to seeing you again Skellum, but I can wait. I guess that I was being selfish. You were prepared to die just to see me." She said the same thing each time she came to visit and day by day, as my body healed, her visits came less often.

After 11 months of painful physiotherapy I was able to leave the hospital, but not to go home. The doctors had suggested to Dad that I be placed in a mental institution for at least a few months. "There is something not right about a child who is an alcoholic, drug addict and a suicide survivor." I was all of the above and while I would have preferred to go straight home, I was okay with the mental place. I was seen by a bunch of doctors and they all told me that I was making great progress. Then one day a young

doctor suggested that as part of my therapy that I write my story, so there you have it. This is the first draft as I remember it. I feel that my future is going to be okay. I did hear that Cheryl and Beavitt had long since broken up and that she was dating some guy from her parents church. It's a funny world that we live in isn't it? Life hey.



## THE SOUTH OF FRANCE



**F**OR A FEW MONTHS I had a job in France, Villefranche to be exact, on the northern Mediterranean coast, to be even more exact. Between Nice and Monte Carlo, you know, the place where they have that Monaco Grand Prix, where they race Formula One cars around town at breakneck speeds trying to not kill anyone. Actually, I was there with my new French girlfriend Clarisse and we stood on the hills overlooking the racecourse. The cheap seats if you will. Well to be honest, the seats were free. We just had to climb over a razor wire fence and we were in. The cars were all lined up and the engines started, but nothing was happening. Just a lot of flag waving and people running around and a lot of girls in very short skirts and if I may say this without getting into too much trouble, very tight tops. Now I fully understand why people love Formula One.

Clarisse had packed a hamper full of delicious food. There is a place, a small deli or épicerie fine if you want the proper French name for it, just up the lane from where the boat was docked in the marina. I can't remember the name. Oh yes, I remember it now. Les Faguettes, how could I forget? Clarisse had bought some cheese, salami and some blood sausage. She had also bought a jar of olives, our favorite anchovy spread, and a big can of frogs legs.

I was just getting used to living in France and enjoying the food and most especially the wine. There was a little creperie near the boatyard where I was working as a deckhand on an old schooner.

The skipper didn't mind if Clarisse slept over. Actually, funnily enough, the boat had been built near my home in Massachusetts, but the old girl needed some TLC (not Clarisse - she needed a lot of TLC) and the new owner, who was an Italian living in Paris, was making it his mission to restore her to her former beauty. A bit like his fifth wife.

But frogs legs? In some kind of brine? Is that even legal? The thing about all of this is that Clarisse is stunningly beautiful, and if I am to be perfectly honest, she bats way above my pay grade, but somehow she found something in me that lets me lift her skirt and drop her panties. So frogs legs it was.

"We need some foie gras and a baguette with this meal," Clarisse said, well more than said, she ordered. "You go to that place near the harbor, you know the bakery?" I knew the bakery. We shopped there every morning. Clarisse said, "right behind the bakery, if you go down that little alleyway, there is a small shop, it's down a narrow flight of stairs, it's behind a blue door with the peeling paint. They sell foie gras. And snails. Get some snails too. Not many people know about it because, even in France they are starting to turn against foie gras."

I looked at her. She was so darn bloody beautiful. Then I made the mistake of asking, "pourquoi ont-ils un problème avec le foie gras?" Clarisse gave me a look and I could see the level of red coming up her face. She turned and said, a little louder than I thought necessary, "You are just a stupid American. You don't understand us French people. We eat the balls off bulls right in front of them and they are delicious so anyone that has a problem with foie gras can go and screw themselves. We like our steak raw with a raw quail egg on top. I am talking about steak tartare you American." She used the word 'American' as an insult.

I am not sure what offended me more. Being called dumb, or being called an American. I'm actually from New Zealand but

Clarisse insisted that I must be American because I spoke English and I went along with it. I knew where my bread was buttered.

I found the door and got more than enough foie gras to feed the French Foreign Legion. Yea damn right I did, and on the way out I stopped in and bought a baguette from the store that was acting as a cover for the mysterious business taking place in their basement.

At this point I didn't really understand the French people. I am sure that I was not the only one. Clarisse was lounging on the rug that we had brought for the picnic. She stopped to light a cigarette. That was the only thing about her that I didn't like. "You see Mister Jimmy," she said. "In France we eat and we enjoy and we don't care that they force feed ducks each and every day." I knew that I was in trouble when she called me Mister Jimmy. On those warm summer nights when the temperature in my cabin was just perfect, she called me James.

Now don't get me wrong. I have eaten foie gras many times and it is one of the most delicious foods, unlike frogs legs as I later found out much to my chagrin because there was no bathroom where we were sitting waiting for the Formula One race to start. I told Clarisse that I needed to stretch my legs and very luckily, found a tall bush and got rid of the frog's legs from both exits. When I got back to our picnic area the race was just starting. The noise from the cars was almost overwhelming. I could smell the gas and feel the throb of the crowds which almost beat out the throb of the engines.

Clarisse said, "would you like another frog leg?" I just said, "is it OK with you if I just stick to the cheese and foie gras for now?" We sat and watched for a while until Clarisse said, "this is getting boring." I knew what she meant; we had run out of wine. She said, "we should go back to the boat and put on some Jacques Brel or maybe some Françoise Hardy, nice and low." I knew what

she was thinking. I had seen that look in her eyes before. We went back to the boat.

We put on Françoise Hardy. She was singing *Mon Amie La Rose*. I poured Clarisse a full glass of white and shook myself a martini and we sat on the aft deck looking at the stars shimmer in the still water. Then Clarisse said, "OK it's time." I knew what she meant.

Now I am not one to boast, but I think that it was the throbbing of all those engines that had me on my A-game and as we fell asleep, I could still hear the race going on. On second thoughts it might have been the martini.

The next morning the marina had been washed clean by an overnight storm. The boatyard had a string of things that they needed to do on the boat. Clarisse was sitting in the cockpit with a strong black coffee and a cigarette. She liked unfiltered Gauloises the best.

"You were good last night," was all she said. I said nothing. The coffee and smoke kicked in after a while and she said, "I think that I need some time to myself. Just for today. I have noticed a beach over near Saint Jean Cap Ferrat, you know the one. We had been in and out of the harbor many times and I had noticed the beach, but I hadn't looked that closely at it."

"OK." I said, "finish your coffee and we still have some food left over from last night. I can run you over there and you can suntan and just enjoy yourself. I have to work but that should be fun for you." Clarisse leaned in and kissed me, only this time it was not on the lips, but on both cheeks like the French like to do when they are either saying hello or goodbye. At the time I wasn't worried, or even gave it thought, but it turns out it was goodbye.

Clarisse got her bikini on. She looked amazing. She had a small bag of food, a towel, some sunscreen and a little bit of attitude. I launched the dinghy and we motored slowly out of the harbor.

They frown on people that create a wake but as soon as we left the harbor I gunned the engine and the dinghy took off. I found the beach. Actually it was easy to find and it was beautiful and, best of all, it was deserted. I dropped Clarisse off. "Mon Amie," I said. "I will come back for you at five. Have a fun day." She didn't answer. She jumped off the boat and didn't look back. I looked forward. She did have an amazing arse and legs that went way north of the north pole. As I backed out I could see that she was laying down her towel and getting ready to toast herself. It was already getting hot and I knew that the day on the boat would involve some sweat.

Our captain, a man by the name of Terry who went by the name Captain Tits, called us together. He said, "OK, so this is off the books and not a word can be said. I got an offer from a company in Paris. They want to shoot a commercial for some kind of shampoo. On a boat. I have talked with the yard owner and he is willing to go along with it, for a slice if you know what I mean and I am not talking about pizza. The thing is that the owner of this yacht can't know about it." I nodded. What could possibly go wrong? Actually if I am to be honest I had already received the call from the shampoo people. I knew one of the executives that worked there and gave him Terry's number. I had also become quite good friends with the owner of the boat and while I thought that we should probably ask his permission, I knew that suggestion would not be very well received by the rest of the crew.

We left the dock. There were at least a dozen models that had flown in from Paris. Now Clarisse is beautiful and some of these models were not quite as beautiful, but they were more sensual. I think that it was in the way they walked. We motored slowly out of the harbor with the director barking orders and three cameramen getting their gear ready. Now here is how I know that

I was born under a lucky star. I was down below servicing the generator when the area was turned into an impromptu changing area. I could have finished the generator issue quite quickly, but every five minutes or so some stunning model would come down the companionway and take her clothes off to change.

I took my time servicing the generator.

I had almost forgotten about Clarisse. It was just after five when we got back to the dock. The dinghy was on another dock so I took it and gunned the engine. In about ten minutes I was at the beach. I saw Clarisse and waved, but ominously, she didn't wave back. I beached the dinghy and she got in.

"How was your day?" I asked. She just gave me a stare that meant trouble. I motored slowly hoping to buy some time. We were nearly at the dock when she said, "that was nudist beach for gay men. And you left me there the whole day. Fuck you and besides I can't ever, ever, ever be with someone that get the shits from eating frogs legs."

That was the last I ever saw of her, but the memory is still sweet. Then a week later things took a turn. I got a call from the Italian owner. He said, "I was watching TV last night. Could that possibly have been my boat I saw in that shampoo commercial?"

## MID OCEAN ADVENTURES

**T**HE SUN SET SPLUTTERING AND SIZZLING as it hit the water to end our first day at sea. Funny story. I was with a priest who had just bought a yacht and he wanted to sail across the Atlantic, so he hired me to help him. I'm an atheist, by the way, not that it matters, but I think that I might have been an odd choice. We set off from Newport, Rhode Island on a sultry Sunday afternoon. My girlfriend at the time was crying, bless her.

The first night was not in the brochure. It was supposed to be a fairly easy jaunt to get into the swing of things, if you know what I mean, but a nasty little low pressure system had started to brew up just to the south of us and the wind came in like my ex mother-in-law who was surprised that we were having sex in her bedroom. We were, and she loved her first granddaughter. Such is life, but we were still dealing with some strong wind and a ripped headsail.

Art, my co-skipper, was seasick to the point of chucking up all over the deck because he couldn't make it to the leeward rail in time to puke into the ocean, but I didn't blame him. I was feeling a little off myself and regretting the five rum and cokes that I had enjoyed the night before. Actually if I am to be perfectly honest it was four rum and cokes but at the time I thought that it might be a good idea to finish the evening off with a Kialoa (named after a famous boat). That was Mount Gay rum, Kahlua and milk. I think that I just had two of those, but it might have been three.

The next morning that same sun came up looking as saintly

as the Virgin Mary and covered the ocean with a slightly pink hue that meant that the day was going to be great. And it was. The wind had died, and luckily enough Art hadn't died, although there was a moment there when I thought that he might. Sea sickness can be brutal.

We flopped around in an empty sea with a leftover slop, a gift from that low pressure system. I said, "hey Art why don't you get into the bunk. I can handle this." He just raised a hand and flopped down below. I turned the auto-pilot on and looked for my book. It was a good one by a new author named Brian Hancock. Well there you go, life is life.

Now Art had recently graduated from the Harvard Divinity School in Boston, but luckily his parents had left him a pile of cash before they hit a bridge in Los Angeles. The car and the parents were both totaled. Not so lucky for them but Art became a millionaire overnight.

Art came up after a long while and said, "I'm OK for a few hours. Why don't you get some rest?" I wasn't too sure but there was not much that we could do out in the middle of the ocean, so I hit my bunk, grabbed the sleeping bag and held it up to my neck and slept the sleep of a man that had lost his trust in God two decades earlier.

The wind from the west finally kicked in and we had a few days of perfect sailing. Art was a great cook and liked to serve boiled potatoes and herring; for breakfast. I loved them. He also brewed a mean cup of coffee. Strong and black; like my first wife. In the evening, just as the sun was getting ready to splutter and sizzle, he would open a bottle of Geneva gin. Now with this gin you are supposed to put your hands behind your back, bend down and take the gin shot in your teeth, tip your head backwards and drop the fiery mix down your throat in one gulp, and is often the case, down your shirt. I never actually got that one. Seems to me that

taking a sip would be a much better idea. Thankfully, because that boat was a bit wobbly, we just sipped our gin and watched as day turned to night.

I did notice that Saturn was low in the sky and pointed it out to Art, but he just grunted and said, "I will do the dishes."

The boat, named oddly enough 'Spirit of the Wind Gods', was doing OK until on day four a low front came in low and slow. At first. Then it came in hot and heavy, not unlike my second wife. The autopilot was struggling a bit so we took it in turns to helm but I could see that Art was not having as much fun as he thought he might have when he signed up for this gig. Actually he was back to feeding the fish. And they were eating well.

"Mate, take a breather. Get some more rest," I said. Art crawled to the companionway and I heard a crash as he hit the floor. I put my feet up. Sometimes people have to learn their own way.

The next few days were OK. Not perfect, and definitely not what was advertised in the brochure, but the boat was sailing well and Art rallied and took full control of things. Remember, it was just the two of us on board. Art ordered me, "I need some toast and some herrings and if you look under the starboard bunk there, if you look in the corner, there might be some caviar." I knew then that his seasickness was over. I found the caviar, dipped my left pinky into the salty goodness of those tiny eggs and enjoyed life on the high seas. The sun was out for the first time since we had left Newport.

"Hey Art," I said. "This not so bad is it?" Art just grunted. "Not bad unless you are the one paying the bills on a priests salary." By the way I did know about his inheritance so I knew that he was just whining.

"You are living the dream," I said. "Living it large like the fat lady that never actually sings." Art watched as the setting sun

kissed the horizon. He sipped on his gin and said, "I guess that we both are."

I smiled, "at least I am getting paid for this gig." Art chuckled his gin down and said, "then you are on watch."

The wind picked up and we switched watches around midnight. The night was going good; until it wasn't. Art was on deck. I was half asleep trying to get some rest. I heard him going up and down the companionway stairs, and then I heard him yell out loud, "Fuck."

I rolled over. It was his turn at the helm after all. But he came down and poked me. "Are you awake?" I grunted, then farted. He left but in probably less than two minutes he came back down again and said, "I dropped the cap of the carburetor overboard." That got my attention. Well, somewhat. Then somehow, through the muddle of my mind, I shot straight up in from my bunk.

"You mean that you dropped the cap off the carburetor overboard?"

"Well, I slipped," he said. And when I was grabbing at the lifelines and it fell right out of my hand."

"So," I replied, out of very sleepy eyes and a quite fuzzy brain, "no carburetor means no engine. Right?" He did reply quite sheepishly. "Yes I'm afraid so."

"No engine means no alternator right? So no way to keep the lights on?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

"You mean that the food in the freezer might thaw and then go off?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so, but I have a plan. Do you remember where we stacked the superglue?" I rolled over and thought to myself, "For fuck's sake." Turns out that I did know where the superglue was stored. It was right under my bunk where five minutes earlier

I had been fast asleep. I rolled out of my sleeping bag and opened the lid under my bunk. After some scrounging I found it. Art said, "I have a plan." I groaned and lay back down on my bunk. I was officially still off-watch.

I heard Art digging around in the tool box and I heard him trying to start the engine. We needed the engine to run the alternator that would power the boat, freezer and all. That plus the autopilot, plus, well everything, but after a couple of hours I heard the engine starting to struggle and then there was nothing. He had worn the battery down. We were pretty much screwed.

We were pretty much screwed, as in well and truly screwed. We were in the middle of the Atlantic with no power to power anything. The fridge was down, the freezer was down and so was, well worst of all, the autopilot was down. Now I can eat raw spaghetti, but no autopilot; that's trouble.

Then things got a lot worse. I was bending down to take a line that was wrapped the wrong way around a winch when I felt my back snap. You know how that goes, right? At first there is a slight pull then a sharp pain and you are man (or lady down), and by down I mean; down. I hit the deck like a seagull that had lost its way, not unlike Johnathan Livingston Seagull but only a lot bigger. I was totally screwed but somehow made my way to my bunk. It took more than an hour but my mate, the priest, was really helpful. He helped me get into my bunk and then said, "I have to go, this boat won't steer itself. I will pray for you." We had been going in circles for an hour.

I was in the bunk for four days while my Art ate raw spaghetti and helmed, 24/7. Poor bugger. I felt bad but suddenly after four days my back felt better. We were still in trouble but I took the helm and Art went down below to find his bunk. He hit it like a brick left out in the middle of winter on a cold Alaska night. That

was our routine for two weeks. Four hours on, four hours off. We had fixed the carburetor but had no batteries.

One late afternoon I was helming when I saw a ship coming our way. We had not used the VHF radio saving it for just such an occasion. It was the only thing fully charged on the boat, well except for me. I had been fully charged since I was 10. I was later diagnosed with ADHD, but I digress. We called the ship. Turns out it was the Tropical Topaz out of China. They understood that we needed a jump start. Jump start must be an important word in China. The captain said that he could help.

There were squalls in the area; a lot of them. Art said, "Okay, we need to launch the dingy. The captain had said that they have a battery that they can loan us to get our engine started. You need to get into the dinghy and motor over there and get the battery." I was the one getting paid so I said, "Okay."

The dinghy was on davits on the stern of the boat. We dropped the mainsail, rolled away the headsail and launched the dinghy. I jumped in. The ship was just a half mile from us, but the problem was that there was a gnarly squall coming in from the east. Luckily the engine started on the first pull. I gunned it mostly out of panic rather than desperation. I was close to the ship when the rain started. It came down hot and heavy, not unlike my third wife. But as quickly as it came, it left to bother some other boat. I pulled up close to the ship. They had slowed but they hadn't stopped and I was trying to pull up alongside.

Now let's just put this into perspective. We were about 1,500 miles from land. I was in a small dinghy. The owner of the boat didn't really know how to sail, truthfully, and I was trying to keep up with a Chinese ship. Then there was another squall and I was drenched but when it cleared I saw a half dozen Chinese men hanging over the rail. They had a huge battery on a rope and they were going to try and drop it into my small little rubber dinghy.

I gunned the engine and scooted out the stern of the ship. That thing would have gone through my dinghy floor like a butt plug out of a French whore on a good summer day after a really hot curry. (sorry for that reference but that did happen once. I was there.)

The massive propeller was still spinning slowly. I was so close that I was almost caught up in the wash but instead I kept going and there was another really black squall coming our way. In less than a minute I had lost sight of the ship and my boat and I was adrift in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. That was when the outboard engine decided to crap out.

This dark cloud came in strong with more than a little wind. I was there pulling on the motor when two things happened at once. The engine (miraculously) started, and the rain stopped. I could see in the far distance that the ship had pulled up alongside the boat, and I could just make out Dave trying to hang fenders off the side, you know, those puffed up thing designed to help you get into St Tropez without scratching one of the other yachts. They were not designed to fend off a ship.

I gunned the engine praying that there was still enough gas in the tank and when I pulled up I saw that the ship was firmly attached to the boat. I also saw that a rope ladder had been deployed and I also saw more than a few Chinese men climbing down the rope ladder with a huge battery. By the time I got back on board they had the engine started.

"Thank you, thank you," Art said. For the first time in two weeks we had power, which was good except that all our food had gone bad and we had thrown it overboard a couple of weeks earlier. That was when I noticed that the ship had dropped off two huge bags of fresh food for us.

We were just getting close to the Azores Islands when the engine

died again. Art, as I have said before, graduated from Harvard Divinity School and was a priest. He went below and fiddled with things. The engine started right away. I said, “what did you do?” He just smiled. “I have a direct line to God when I need him.”

I said, “you could you have called him back when the dropped to the carburetor cap slipped out of your hand fell overboard.

“That’s not how it works,” was all he said.

We made it into the small town of Horta one the island of Faial and I took the first flight out. My mid-ocean adventures were over and as the flight banked over the Azores I thought, one day you should write a book. No one will ever believe that this all happened.

## SMOKY BAR

I AM NOT A FAN OF CIGARETTES but I am a fan of smoky bars, especially if there is a little jazz playing. It was my first time I had visited a jazz bar since moving to New York a year earlier. I was in a little place called Club Havana. They mixed jazz with a little Cubano and, as part of the entrance fee, they gave you a cigar, a cheap one for sure, but a cigar no less. Oh, and a free mojito. Kind of corny but free is free and it did set the atmosphere.

There was a throb, and I don’t use that word lightly since it had been a long time since I last throbbed. I ordered an ‘Al Presidente’ having no clue what it was but the name sounded great. Turns out, for what it’s worth, the drink lived up to my expectations. It was named in honor of a former Cuban President Gerardo Machado who was elected back in 1925, the year that my Dad was born. It’s a mix of black vermouth, white rum, a dash of grenadine, ice chips, and served in a glass with cherries and orange peel. Who knew that there were so many rules? That and a cheap cigar and that mojito were all making my night just right.

Until Althea came along. By the way, Althea means ‘truth’ but as I was to find out, she was a little less than truthful.

She came up close and a little tight but I didn’t mind it. The El President was speaking to me. She said, “I am working tonight but not tomorrow night.”

She slipped a phone number into my hand.

I called Althea the next afternoon. I don’t think that she actually



remembered who I was but it didn't matter, I remembered her. We agreed to meet at a small Greek place in lower Manhattan. She picked the place.

She was sauced up to the nines when I met her by the front door. Sauced up as in a very tight red dress and not much else. "We can go in the side door," was all she said so I followed her. "I know the chef here." Then she took me by the hand and, even today I'm not sure if she did this on purpose, she wiggled her arse in a way that works and that was what got me into a whole lot of trouble.

We were sitting at a corner table eating some kind of stuff smothered in feta cheese. I have no clue what it was but it was quite good when she looked me in the eye and said. "You look like a strong man. I need you to help me move some bodies." I took a long, hard swallow on my cheap Ouzo, and excused myself. "I have to pee," I said, which was quite pathetic. Althea said, "me too."

We had another drink before she brought it up again. "I need some help. My brother is not a good man and there are some bodies." She let that hang in the air like a wet fart on a hot summer night.

"Do you think that you can help?" She was rubbing her foot against my leg and I was about to explode out of my seat, but I, very lamely, said, "I have a bad back."

Turns out there were three dead bodies. They were in a shed under a canvas tarp. The brother showed up but he was no use to anyone. The poor bloke could hardly remember his own name, or that's the way it seemed to me. It might have been that he was a little stressed but I can't be sure.

"I'll take the legs if you take the neck, well arms," he said. "Between us we can get him into the back of your car."

Second mistake.

I grabbed him by the arms, but as you might know; dead bodies are heavy. At some point my back was starting to give in. Althea said, "just drag him but don't leave any evidence."

We got all three bodies into my car. Althea said, "Just drive, I will tell you where to go," so we drove out past Central Park. I checked my gas gauge and we were running low and I was not sure how much credit I had left on my credit card.

We ran out of gas. Just me, Althea and her brother and three dead bodies under a tarp in the back of the car.

I managed to pull over onto the shoulder and it didn't take long before the blue lights came on. A stiff legged cop walked up to the driver's side.

"What seems to be the problem?" I almost choked on my own spit. The cop was trying to be a cop when he recognized the brother. "Hey buddy, how are you doing? We have missed you on the force. What's going on?"

The brother, who by the way went by the name Bruno said, "this dipshit. He has run out of gas." The cop was obviously tired and ready to go home. He just nodded, "I will have someone come by in five or ten. Just hang on. I will leave my lights on so that you don't get into any trouble. Cars like to speed on this stretch of road."

In less than five minutes a tow truck pulled up. "Hey buddy, you guys need some gas?" I nodded. I also needed to get rid of the dead bodies in my trunk, but I didn't mention them. Althea kept her mouth shut. The cop was a typical New Yorker but more friendly. I was nervous, but he left after topping us off, well to be more explicit, he was filling the bottom of a gas tank that was under three dead bodies.

Bruno said, "I know this place in Central Park. It's right near where the New York marathon ends. Let's just go back and ditch

them there.” Althea nodded so I swung around and headed back into town. Bruno was muttering to himself then said, “Althea where did you find this clown? He’s such a bad driver that he is going to get us in trouble.” Althea lit a cigarette, opened the window a little, and blew the smoke out, although most of it blew right back in. That’s how it works. She took a long hard drag and then said, “I have a better place.” I could hear Bruno inhale, but he didn’t say anything.

We turned in by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and then took a right. It was, strangely enough, quite peaceful, except for the dead bodies in the trunk under the tarp although when we dragged them into the car, they also looked quite peaceful. Althea was getting agitated. She was puffing hard on her Camel. “Pull over here,” she said. “I know this area. I used to have a boyfriend who lived on the lower east side and we came here sometimes on Sunday mornings when I had my period and, well, that stuff was out of the question so we would go for a walk instead.”

I pulled over. There was a fairly deep ditch. Bruno said, “let’s just get this over with. It was dusk and there were a couple of joggers out. None of them looked very happy. Bruno said, “we have no time to waste. Let’s get Pedro first.” I looked to the sky and thought, “how did I ever get myself into this mess?” We grabbed Pedro and did the ‘one, two, three’ thing and chucked him into the ditch. He landed with a soft thud. Next we got Jose. At one time he might have been a good looking man, but in death, well, how does one put this delicately, no one looks that great when they are dead. Jose landed alongside Pedro. Roommates forever I thought, but I still had no idea why I was there chucking bodies into a ditch.

Althea leaned out of the car, closely followed by a billow of smoke. “Can you two buffoons just hurry it up?” There was a car coming our way so Bruno and me, we made like we were

just having a smoke and chatting about the upcoming football season. The car went by without noticing. Then we got Giuseppe. I learned later that he was the boss. We chucked him in the ditch as well.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here,” Althea said. “The good thing about ditching bodies in Central Park is that there are no cameras.” Turns out, she was wrong.

We went back to the Greek place. I wasn’t that hungry; who is after chucking a few dead people into a ditch? By the way we did cover them with leaves and some brush. It seemed that Bruno got more of his appetite after ditching three dead people and ordered most of the menu. He didn’t say much, well he couldn’t. His mouth was stuffed with moussaka and some kind of chicken dish and a massive salad and a side of garlic bread. Althea just smoked one after the next until her friend, the chef came out and asked her to cut back. “We have a no smoking policy in this restaurant.” Althea gave him a look and lit another one.

I stayed over at her place that night but was not interested in what most men are always interested in. All I could think of was the sound the bodies made when they hit the dirt. I was restless and got up early. When I got back to my apartment my neighbor said, “did you know that the police were here earlier?” I shrugged and said “so what?”

The police came back later that day and arrested me. They were not that pleasant about it, and that’s putting it mildly. “We have your car license plate on camera right where we found those bodies,” the tall skinny one said. “Yea we found those three bodies. It was a dog walker that noticed them. They saw a foot sticking out.”

It’s always a flipping dog walker that finds the dead bodies.

They took me in and stuck me in a small windowless room. I

was there for about three hours, maybe four, before the good cop came in. He was slight and looked a little like Tom Hanks.

“So, how are things?” I grunted, scratched in the downstairs area if you know what I mean, and said. “It was all good this time last week, but now, not so great.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t mean anything, except that I am in a tiny room without any windows.” That was when the bad cop came in. He was a little like Danny Devito, except only shorter.

“So this is the guy?” was all he said. He pulled up a chair. I could tell that his cup of coffee was stale by the smell on his breath. He leaned in closer. “So you are the guy then?” I was not smart enough to say that I needed an attorney, so I said, “I have no clue what you are talking about.” My Mom used to say, “if you don’t know what to say, just deny everything.”

Truthfully, I didn’t know what to say. I really had no idea why I was there in the brightly lit tiny room with Danny Devito and Tom Hanks, well I sort of did, but I denied everything. Clearly that strategy wasn’t going to work after the good cop dug around in his files and produced a somewhat grainy photograph. The photo might have been grainy but the area around the numberplate had been enhanced. It was most definitely my car. There was no denying that piece of evidence. “You recognize this car?” Danny Devito asked. I made a show by trying to look hard at the photo but I wasn’t fooling either of them. I finally said, “yes that’s my car, so what?”

Tall cop Tom Hanks put his hand on my arm. “It’s ok,” he said, “there is no need to get defensive. That was just a simple question and you correctly identified your car. Now do you want to tell us who you were with?” I looked at him directly and said, “I dunno.” Devito said, “don’t bullshit us man. We have you and two others

in the car. You ran out of gas on your way to Central Park, didn’t you?” I shrugged, he continued. “Let me refresh your memory. You ran out of gas on the west side on 9th Avenue. Sargeant Simmonds came to your rescue and had some gas sent over. We spoke to the Sergeant and he confirmed that the passenger in the back seat of the car was a Mr. Bruno Garcia. We have spoken to Mr. Garcia and taken him into custody. He squawked a bit and fingered his sister as the third person in the car. We have also taken Althea Martinez into custody and now we are going to take you into custody. If you can’t afford a lawyer the court will appoint one to defend you.” He then added almost as an afterthought, “Not that you are going to need defending. This is an open and shut case.” I was starting to wish that I hadn’t stopped by that smoky bar.

I opted for a court appointed lawyer. His name was Hank Rubenstein and he came by my cell in an ill fitting brown suit. Let’s just say that he didn’t instill much confidence but he did come right to the point. “Mr. Bassett, I have taken the liberty of speaking with Mr. Garcia and Ms. Martinez. They spoke with their lawyer there so as to keep the client lawyer privilege intact which allowed them to speak freely without any of it showing up in court.” He paused for a moment and shuffled his papers. “Ms. Martinez was accommodating and stated that you had no idea about anything that went on that night except that you were involved with helping dispose of the bodies. Do I have that correct?”

“If she said so.”

“She said that she had just met you in Club Havana a few hours earlier. Does this sound correct?”

“If she said so.”

“Your answers are not very helpful Mr. Bassett. I am here to

defend you. If you could be a little forthcoming that would really help.” I shrugged. “I shouldn’t be here. I had nothing to do with anything, well I guess that I did help get rid of some bodies but I was mostly looking to get Althea, err Ms. Martinez between the sheets if you know what I mean.”

“Yes I know what you mean.”

ALTHEA AND HER BROTHER Bruno ran a check cashing business. Bruno had been on the New York police force but was dishonorably discharged because of some embezzling incident. The check cashing operation was mostly Bruno’s but he had pulled Althea in to help. It was an easy way to make some good money and Bruno had a deep affection for muscle cars which cost money; a lot of money. He claimed that each car that he bought was an investment. Turns out they were an investment in his ego and not so much in his checking account. Let’s just say that Bruno was not the hottest empanada in the batch when it came to money, which was one of the reasons why he had asked Althea to join him. She was as smart as a switchblade and between the two of them they cornered the market between Harlem and The Bronx. If you needed a check cashed they were to ones to see and most of their customers were weekly wage earners who had no clue how to budget their money and would always run out before their next paycheck.

For a few years things ran smoothly and the money came in. Bruno spent his on cars. Althea sent most of her paycheck to Haiti. Their parents were not doing well, especially her father who fought alongside Castro during the revolution. Okay, alongside may be a bit of an exaggeration. He was there and he got wounded and he received very little treatment from the new Castro government and ‘the chickens were coming home to roost,’ as they say. He ended up stuck in a wheelchair without

any way to make money so the monthly Western Union transfer from Althea was a godsend.

The success with their check cashing business soon caught the eye of a small but increasingly powerful gang headquartered in Upper Manhattan. They wanted in and they didn’t want to pay much, if anything for the business. The first sign that there was trouble brewing was when Bruno woke up to slashed tires on his ‘72 Camaro and a hastily written note left on the windshield. “We are coming for your business.” That was it and nothing further happened until Althea got a frantic call from her mother. She yelled in Creole so I will translate for you, but the gist of it was that she and Althea’s Dad were being held at knifepoint. They were crudely lashed together. The demand was that they convince Althea and Bruno to turn their check cashing business over to them. The thugs had broken down the front door to enter and they left the same way.

Althea was shaken and she called Bruno to tell him what had happened and Bruno called his friends in Port-au-Prince who dropped everything and went over to untie the elderly couple. “There is something going on here and it’s not good,” Bruno said.

“No shit but what are we going to do about it?”

“I dunno. Let’s just wait and see what happens.” They didn’t have to wait long. Two days later they got a visit from two men. One introduced himself as Pedro and the other as Jose. At first they seemed reasonable. That was until they informed Bruno that he was to hand over the business and as they so poetically put it, he was to ‘get the fuck out.’ Bruno was not going quietly and put on a brave face until a small glock was placed on the table. “Sign the papers over to us and get out.” Bruno got the message and was just leaving when Jose said, “so glad that you got new tires on the Camaro. It needed them, now hand over the title to the car as well.”

In a nutshell Bruno and Althea were screwed with very little recourse. To be honest, and I have to be honest since this is my story, Bruno had done more than his fair share of shady deals in his past and he didn't want cops sniffing around.

This story could have ended here but Bruno was not one to go down quietly. He was down but not out, as they like to say in the classics. Without a day job he had plenty of time to stew and think and plan and he came up with an almost perfect idea. He had murder on his mind.

Althea is generally quite mild-mannered. She had taken a job waiting tables at a pancake joint on 127th street. Phil's flip 'em and eat 'em was the name of the place but she wasn't making much money. Breakfast food is cheap and the tabs rarely got above \$30 and with tips based on the tab amount she barely had enough to exist let alone send money to Haiti. Bruno had hinted at his plan for recovering the business, the one that involved murder, but she wanted nothing to do with it. That was until her Dad died and she had to borrow money from a friend for the air ticket to Port-au-Prince. As she watched her father being lowered into a grave at the main cemetery in town, her heart broke and she knew what she had to do. Her Mom was still alive and needed her more than ever.

As it turned out the murders were easier than she thought they would be. Greed and gullibility, but mostly greed can snag even the most slippery of rats. They opened a new check cashing business in the same area as the old one. Bruno had to sell one of his cars to pay for things, but soon they had attracted some of their old customers. They advertised in the Harlem Community News, a free weekly that many residents of the area read as much as they read their bibles. It wasn't long before business started booming and it wasn't long before the thugs heard about things and decided to do something about it, and that something was

their usual way of dealing with things only this time they too had murder on their minds. They wanted to get rid of the competition as quickly as possible, but not before they owned their business and the keys to another car.

This time Althea and Bruno were ready for them and sure enough a day later Pablo and Jose presented themselves. Pablo said, "I can't believe that you both are this stupid. You had to know that we would come for the business." Pablo was acting quite pleasant; Jose, on the other hand, came in with full guns blazing, not literally. That would happen later.

"You dumb fuckers. How dare you open a business in our territory? The boss has told us to get rid of you both permanently. You know what that means?" Bruno was starting to worry. What if their plan did not go according to what they had sketched out? He looked over at Althea and she was shaken, but Bruno persisted.

"We thought that you fuckers might be interested in our little business. I already talked to my partner," he said, gesturing at Althea. "We have had enough of this stupid business and the risks we are taking. You can have the whole thing and shove it up your ass as far as we are concerned but you will have to come back later. The paperwork is at my friend's house. I will get it and you both come by at 8 this evening. Meanwhile, so that you can see that we are acting in good faith, I will sign the title of my corvette over to you. I have that paperwork right here."

Pedro looked at Jose and Jose looked at Pedro and after a pause that seemed to last a long time, Pedro said, "Give me the car and we will come back at 8 with our boss Guiseppe. Just so that you know, he doesn't take any shit and will kill you if he has to." Bruno was trying to keep it together. Althea was struggling which was obvious from the sweat dripping onto her desk. Bruno reached into his file cabinet and pulled out the title

for the corvette. He scribbled the name and date and handed it over along with the keys. "The car is in the lot behind. You fuckers are bad news," he said. "One day this is all going to catch up with you." The two men left without a word.

Bruno exhaled and realized that he had been holding his breath for the past five minutes.

"Okay, now the fun part starts."

Althea said, "I am not sure that I can go through with this." Bruno just looked at her. "We don't have an option. The guns are in the safe. We have talked about this but let's go over things one last time. Those two motherfuckers will be back at 8. They will come with a swagger and probably with their boss. He won't be too pleased that they didn't already close the deal. They will be aiming to kill us just as soon as the paperwork is signed so we will have to be calm and move fast when the time comes." Althea said, "I don't think that I can do this. You want me to shoot and kill them?"

Bruno was sympathetic. It was not his first time killing someone and he knew that it would be hard on Althea. "I don't think that they will suspect anything. They are not very smart. Their boss Guiseppe might be smart so we need to be careful. I will be behind the filing cabinet right by the door. I will have no problem shooting all three of them in the back. If they walk into our trap you probably won't have to shoot anyone. You just stay under the desk and only stick your head up when you hear me yell your name. They will definitely have guns but don't worry, I won't let you be in any danger. Do you want a whiskey?"

"Make it a very large one. They had closed and locked the doors after the two thugs left. Althea downed her whiskey in one gulp and stuck out her hand. "I think that I need to be drunk to do this."

Althea was drunk and on station under the desk at 7:45. Bruno was pacing. He had gone through multiple scenarios in his head. He realized that killing them was probably a bit drastic, but they had stolen his business and Bruno was in no mood to forgive them despite the fact that he attended church on a regular basis and forgiveness was preached most Sundays.

They arrived precisely at 8, Guiseppe in tow. The door was open and the lights on but there didn't appear to be anyone there. It took three shots at close range and that was that. Later Bruno would joke that killing them was easier than bobbing for apples. Althea was still under the desk when Bruno called her name. She poked her head up, looked at the carnage and quickly ran to the door to hang the CLOSED sign lock it. She also turned off the lights except for one in the storage closet. "Bruno get in here with me. If anyone heard the shots they will come and investigate so we had better make ourselves scarce."

Bruno said, "I vote that we lock this place up and go and get a drink. We can come back before dawn when it's quiet and get the bodies First one thing." He rolled Pedro over and dug in his jacket pocket. "Got it," he said, holding the title to his corvette. "It was worth killing the fucker just to get my car back."

The coast was clear when left the building after making sure that it was tightly locked up. They walked to 'Al's Place' a couple of blocks away. Althea ordered a double Scotch and Bruno downed a beer before either of them spoke. They found a booth and kept their voices low. "So now we've got three dead bodies in our shop. They won't fit into the corvette and I sold my car to send money to Haiti. How are we going to get those fuckers out of there? And if we get them out of there, then what?"

"Have faith little sister," Bruno said. "My neighbor loaned me his truck for the night. I thought that we might need it. Unfortunately we can only use it tonight. He's going on vacation tomorrow."

This is about where I come into the story. How I got myself tangled in that mess is beyond me, but here I was in a bright white, windowless interrogation room knowing for sure that I was in deep trouble.

The judge was a very large black man. I could tell straight up that he would take no shit. Elthea and Bruno came in after me. They were also in orange garb and handcuffed. The cop leading them in was a scrawny Asian. The judge said, well we were all in the courtroom before the judge came in. The clerk said “all rise”.

The judge sat down and shuffled his papers, just like most judges do and after a while said, “next up Mr. Hancock.” I got up stiffly. I used to run marathons, but my three weeks in jail had not been good for me. I shuffled toward the judge with Hank Rubenstein, my court appointed lawyer. The clerk read me my rights. “Put your hands on your heart and recite after me. I am telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help me God.” I mumbled my lines. I’m an atheist so I am not fond of holding my hand over my heart and praying to flags and a god that I didn’t believe in. I heard someone behind me and knew that it was Bruno shuffling in his seat. We entered a plea of “not guilty your honor.” So did Althea and Bruno. Althea and I were released on bail, Bruno not. Despite the seriousness of the charges it was a first offense for us. Turns out Bruno had quite a rap sheet and so he was going nowhere. To be honest I couldn’t believe that I could go home.

Instead I went to a small Vietnamese restaurant and ordered a bowl of Pho. It was a whole lot better than prison food. I had a bail bondsman post the bail and I knew that he would be keeping a close eye on me. My friend Xuan came over. “Food good right?” I nodded. “The food here is always excellent.”

“Where you been?” I looked at the dregs in my Pho bowl and said, “can I get some spring rolls and please bring me extra hot

sauce.” I needed to feel some pain. To be honest I was not sure how I got myself into this mess and I was not sure how to get out of it.

Xuan came back with the spring rolls and said, “That hot sauce is really hot so be careful.” I put more on than I should have and that was when my nose and eyes became clear for the first time in a long time. The shit was really hot.

Xuan said, “you need to talk about something don’t you?” Now I have known Xuan for over 10 years and he always had a way of sensing things. He once told me that Vietnamese people all have a way with it. “You are in some trouble, aren’t you?” I didn’t say anything at first, but Xuan insisted. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, “I have connections.” I knew what he meant.

It took nothing to get into Canada. Xuan had a fake passport made by one of his friends who was a specialist, but we didn’t need it to get into Canada. We took one of the country roads that slip over the border into Canada without a huge Customs and Immigration building and people asking awkward questions.

Xuan set me up with some of his friends in Toronto. He said, “you need to lay low for a while and then I will get you to Vietnam.” Right now I am writing this from a small cafe in Ho Chi Min City. A week after I arrived in Vietnam I met a girl. Her name is Lee Lee and I think that things might work out just fine. Xuan let me know that there was a warrant out for my arrest and that Bruno and Althea both got 20 years.

OKAY, I NEED TO COME CLEAN. None of this really happened. I had entered an essay writing competition and decided to draw on an experience that I once had. I would use the experience to craft a story. I did meet Althea at Club Havana and I was a little smitten. I was also drunk and hoping for a little tumble between

the covers. That was when she told me that she had a body that she needed to dispose of. It wasn't Pedro or Jose; it was her dog. She wanted the poor pooch laid to rest in Central Park but it's against the law to bury pets on Government property so she needed some help. I took it as a good sign. If I helped her, she might help me scratch my itch, if you know what I mean. We did run out of gas on 9th Avenue and we did bury her yellow Lab in a shallow grave. It's about here where the story goes its own way. Althea did say, "The good thing about ditching bodies in Central Park is that there are no cameras." She was right. There are no cameras in Central Park.

## BOOKS BY BRIAN HANCOCK

---

all titles available at [www.greatcirclepress.com](http://www.greatcirclepress.com)

### MEMOIRS

Two Bricks and a Tickey High - Adventures on Land and Sea  
Lapping the Planet - A Memoir of Inspiration, Perspiration and Betrayal

### NOVELS

Cinnamon Girl  
Brooks  
Murder at your Convenience

### SHORT STORIES

Twisted Tales - Short Stories from Scattered Parts of the Planet  
More Twisted Tales - Short Stories from Scattered Parts of the Planet

### CHILDRENS STORIES

Fat Cat - Young and Restless  
Fat Cat and his Magic Carpet  
Fat Cat - International Cat of Mystery  
Fat Cat and the two Naughty Chickens

### TECHNICAL

Maximise Your Sail Power - The Complete Guide to Sails, Sailmaking and Sail Performance

### POETRY

A Skinny Book of Sketchy Poetry

### COFFEE TABLE

Winning Spirit - The Global Challenge 2004/2005  
Chasing the Dawn - (with Nick Moloney)  
Living Life - The Ocean Globe Race story (coming December 2025)





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**B**RIAN HANCOCK is an acclaimed author, adventurer, and expert in the world of offshore sailing. His extensive experience on the open seas and deep understanding of the intricacies of sailing have made him a respected figure in both the maritime community and literary circles.

Born in South Africa, Hancock's fascination with the ocean began at a young age, leading him to a life that would be defined by exploration, challenge, and a relentless pursuit of adventure. Hancock's sailing career spans several decades, during which he has accumulated over 300,000 sea miles including three Whitbread Round the World Races which is considered one of the most grueling and prestigious sailing competitions in the world.

His first-hand experience with the trials and triumphs of ocean racing lends a palpable authenticity to his writing, allowing readers to feel the wind, waves, and raw emotion that come with a life spent on the high seas. As a writer, Hancock has a unique ability to translate the complexities of sailing into

compelling narratives that resonate with both seasoned sailors and avid readers alike.

Brian is the author of 12 books including two memoirs (Two Bricks and a Tickey High and Lapping the Planet), a murder mystery (Murder at your Convenience), two novels (Cinnamon Girl and Brooks), two books of short stories (Twisted Tales and More Twisted Tales) and four children's books in the Adventures of Fat Cat series. He also authored the definitive guide to all things sails and sailmaking (Maximize your Sail Power). In addition Brian has written for numerous magazines around the world and is a heralded public speaker.

Brian lives in Marblehead, Massachusetts with his wife Sally and their cat Ziggy and a dog Maisy. Their five children and a grandson stop by every now and then for a free meal and a warm bed.





From the underbelly of Thailand to life on the open ocean, More True Tales is a collection of short stories based loosely on Brian Hancock's life. It's a rollicking romp through some of the strangest twists and turns of a life lived to its fullest. It's a must read for anyone with a little adventure in their hearts.

**"Truth is sometimes stranger than fiction."**

--- Gerry Nunes - *The News at 6*

**"More fun stories told by someone who has seen life from many different angles. A fast and fun read."**

--- Christian Downton - *People*

**GREAT CIRCLE  
PRESS**

A DIVISION OF GREAT CIRCLE ENTERPRISES



USA \$16.95 Canada \$22.95