CH 9 – Max

We argued, Lottie. You wanted a drink of water or rest just before we got to the mountain peak or ahead of the best wind. I wanted to push on. You wanted the bedroom window open at night in New England winters. I wanted the heat to 70. You wanted to cook for days for a houseful of Thanksgiving guests. I wanted turkey, mashed potatoes, and rest. You would walk the mountains, forest trails, passed the streams, rivers, and lakes to relax. I wanted the open sea horizons. You had no idea what an onion cost, never mind a dress; you never could pay off your credit card. I saved money and kept detailed expense records.

Adventures and purpose found me as one day turned to the next. You looked ahead, under every rock, for adventure and purpose. By the time we were 50, a lot of our differences melted away. Two months after the ER morphine catastrophe, we had a plan: to do together. But money. Suddenly, we had no income. There was high inflation, a petroleum crisis, and a stock market crash. Jimmy Carter was president.

We sold the house. Assessed our savings for the next forty years. There was enough to get by, if the economy held together, considering what we wanted to do. We made an agreement – I'd sail to ports where you would help refugees. We made our wills. Anything we had left would go to a Trust Fund for Dex, Muriel's son. It was good enough.

For a year, you worked at Wesleyan with Marguerite in Admissions. She had written grants to help the Vietnamese boat people: 130,000 in 1975 after the fall of Saigon. She helped you plan for the next flotilla.

I cut my teeth sailing, as delivery crew. This was sign-on-to-sail in any conditions, not to sip cocktails on deck. I learned to use satellite navigation (satnav). I learned the simple mechanics of celestial navigation. On a trip down the east coast to Bermuda, I learned how to be

hopelessly lost when satnav failed and we attempted sighting the horizon at noon, following instructions. Storms came; the sun returned. When Bermuda popped up just where she was supposed to be, we were all surprised. the next boat lift. It did come. You studied and progressed up to an EMT intermediate license.

Seated in the SUV that we'd soon sell, I turned into the grocery store and slammed my palms against the wheel. "What is this?! Go fast through a red light day?!" I glanced over at you, your lips tightened into a line. You'd long ceased commenting on my road rage. I could feel the truck floor roll underneath me every five minutes, as I was just back from the transport the day before.

"I can deliver a baby," you reported.

"Good job, honey."

"Step one: call for help, if a phone or person nearby can reach a doctor. Then get the mother comfortable, stay calm, support the mother to breath and relax, guide the baby out, first the head with one hand and the feet with the other, don't pull on the cord..."

"Ok..."

"I won't tell you not to cut a pulsating cord."

"Thank you."

"Deliver the placenta usually within two to ten minutes..."

"Oh, yuck. Don't..."

"Get to the hospital, if possible. That's the short version."

"Good job, honey," I said.

You were silent; stared at me.

“Marguerite and her husband kept their jobs and did refugee work in their spare time and as part of his professorship.”

“Hmm.” I parked.

“Are we throwing out the baby with the bath water?” you spoke as if you didn’t want to.

I put down my manual. “Half measures avail us nothing,” I said.

“I thought the saying is ‘half measures of ale are nothing’.”

“That used to be true,” I said.

We laughed. We got out and headed for the store.

I looked at you, touched your cheek with my fingers. “We’ll be together. I get to sail; you carry out your plan.”

Your shoulders lifted. “That’s what I think too,” you decided.

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It was 27,000 miles around the earth. I wanted to log that. For starters, I did 165 days, at intervals, at least 4 hours each day at the helm and took a written test to earn my first Coast Guard license. More hours got me a Masters designation. It was the experience I wanted, not the jobs. I heard from captains – an experienced sailor is one who has survived all his mistakes.

“For Christ’s sake, stay on the boat,” my first delivery captain said from the helm of his ancient Caliber 40 with worn sails, a weak engine, reluctant batteries, and more than a few leaks off Cape Fear, North Carolina. It was April.

A woman did go overboard that trip, her head bobbing in and out of sight as we tried the classic upwind of the victim maneuver to steer to a beam reach, hold course for the count of 20, come about, and point toward the person in the water. We couldn’t find her. My crew mate wanted to go into the water after her, but the captain growled, “No one else goes over!”

I was saying to myself, in deep focus, crisis mode, chewing on my tongue, “Do I keep doing this same thing over and over that’s not working?” I remembered my sailing friend said, “If there’s a question, there’s no question”. I jerked us around, motored downwind of the fast-disappearing bobbing head. She drifted to where two of us could reach over the side as far as we dared, grab her armpits, and pull her in. Just before she lost strength to tread water.

In June, I abandoned ship once with two others, before she went below water line. With a three-man crew, alone in the cockpit on watch in heavy weather, I laughed hard enough to split my sides while thinking, “Maybe we will die out here.” At least my final resting place would be the never-and-ever-changing sea. It’s best to step into a life raft rather than climb into one.

We had the Float Bag, with flares, signaling devices, beacons, handheld radio, a sat phone, GPS, fishing gear, first aid, desalinization kit, and rations. It’s almost better to be dead than cling to a life raft in 30-foot waves; the fear is so outrageous. But there is an uncontrollable instinct to survive. The leak was in the engine room. Luckily, we sank in shallow water 10 miles from Brittany, so the wreck was retrievable. A container ship picked us up.

If winds were north-northeast gusting to 40 knots, we would be steady at 30-35, speed 7 knots except down waves when we accelerated to 12. Thirty-five knots is a gale; 70 a hurricane. I wasn’t a slave to forecasts and didn’t adhere to fast rules or worship at the altar of pilot charts, often out of date due to climate change and pertaining mainly to shipping lanes. I didn’t even pay attention to weather forecasts. I could see breaking clouds while the device spit out dire warnings.

I sailed with all kinds of crew. One guy had an amazing ability to anticipate others’ needs. He’d hand me a reefing line or a hot coffee at the perfect moment. It was cold in the October Atlantic. I met the lifelong powerboater who quickly adapted to wind and waves and wondered

why he ever motored. Though he swore up and down, desperate not to hit a piling, yelling, “This is a joke of a sailboat motor that doesn’t like to go backward.” A 68-year-old stayed mostly in his bunk, and that I would never do, even if I was 80. One businessman left his messy life for an ocean crossing. Seasickness took away his coffee and any rich food, but he cooked for us, by default because he said he liked to – quiches, omelets, roasted potatoes, and sauteed dried chicken. He couldn’t eat most of it but preferred sea sickness to a business collar on his neck.

“You’re…,” you said to me as we sat together over dinner, talking about that trip, eating fresh, hot roasted chicken.

“Just average,” I said.

You were quiet, then said what you might have wanted to say for years.

“I don’t want to be average,” you said.

I put down my fork.

“What does it mean to be average?” you asked.

“Not having a chip on your shoulder.”

“That means not having any grudges or resentments or aggressive behavior. That’s not average, that’s the norm. There would be world peace if everyone was average, according to that definition,” you argued, always the lawyer.

“It takes work to be average,” I insisted. “You can’t tell other people how stupid they are. And you can’t tell them how smart you are. Whatever idiot-thing someone does, you make yourself say, ‘I do that sometimes too.’”

“But you get road rage. That’s expecting someone else to behave differently.”

“That’s when others bother me the most, I have to work at that. But on the positive side, it helps me anticipate.”

“How?”

“I think as I’m driving: is this No Stop on Red Day? Or is this Turn left into Traffic Day? I’m always watching. Then I don’t get caught off guard. It’s good practice for sailing. Is this Wind Shift to 30 Knots day? Or Mast Fails Day? Or Beneteau Doesn’t Know Right of Way Rules Day? I’m always ready.”

“You don’t expect boats to follow rules but expect drivers too?” you ask.

“Drivers are harder to deal for me. For some reason.”

“What about yourself? You used to say ‘not good enough’ all the time,” I wanted to know.

“I’ve learned to do the best with what I’ve got.”

“How do you get anywhere then? Achieve? Accomplish things?”

“It just happens. Being average.”

You are silent for a few moments, and I pick up my fork.

“I think I’ll try being average.”

“It’s not something you try to do,” I suggested.

“Well how do you do it?”

“You just don’t try to be extraordinary.

A week later, I got a call to crew across the western Mediterranean in December. I’m just minding my business, being ordinary, and suddenly I’m sailing the Mistral, off the southern coast of France, which is a pain because that wind is either too strong or non-existent.

“I got it under control,” I yelled to my delivery mates one night as fog clung to my face like barnacles. Then came the KA BAM, like slamming into a freighter. I had just driven us onto a beach.

We went to Rome and back through the Balerica Islands and Sardina in a month. It took 19 days to go from a western Canary Island to Montserrat near Antigua, 22 days from Tenerife into St. Martens, and 16-18 days to cross from the east coast to the Azores. The Azores appeared on the tail of a northeast gale in Force 8 conditions, where we had a choice to tack due north into the rage or claw east, what we did, which was a mistake, the captain said. He lit a cigar and said, "I hate storms, but calm is boring."

The North Sea showed me Force 11 conditions, east of England. Gusts of 70 knots tore the covering we had rigged over the cockpit. It was piss-ass shrink wrap stapled to a wooden form and a lashed tarp over that with only a small slit for visibility. We were under bare poles as the mainsail was in tatters. The staysail was reefed to the size of a towel so small that I could see my bowline that held the halyard to the head.

Back home, between trips, it was February, almost a year after my Rotterdam total collapse.

We celebrated Valentine's Day with chocolate cupcakes dotted with pastel Sweethearts. Mine said, "You Shine." Yours said, "Be Mine."

"I could use a few weeks off sea duty," I said.

"Tell me about the gale off the Azores," you asked.

"There are three options in those conditions. The captain told me that if you listen to your boat, she talks, and then it's up to you to act. Heave to in a storm is a maneuver that holds you still in a position just off the wind, with the helm or tiller tied in place. Forereaching is preferred to heave to, as you steer close to the wind, just off, and pay attention that you don't back wind the sail which would result in blow down, or the sail hitting the water. Then you pray that she

pops back up. That's what we did, and no blow down. Running off is the third option, and I never did, but it involves hanging lines or even an anchor with a small parachute off the stern."

I almost dropped my cupcake because behind my eyes, 30-foot waves were coming up behind me.

"What are you and Marguerite doing with supply funding?" I changed the subject.

"I've sourced most things as donations through church charities, from cooking pots to feminine pads."

"Good job, honey."

"In Nicaragua, the girls can't go to school when they have their periods because they have no supplies."

"I'm glad I was born a man."

"The church ladies sew several layers of thick cotton together in an oblong with tabs and a strap. They can be removed and washed. We have hundreds of them."

"Uh...good to know."

"The Catholic schools provide uniforms, but the families have to buy black shoes for kids to wear. A family of four kids might have one pair of black shoes, so they take turns, each kid goes to school one of out of five days.

"Fucking Catholics and their black shoes."

"Men don't often come to the clinics, they tell us."

"Do you know what they need?" I asked.

"Clean white socks and anti-fungal medications for their feet. They work on the coffee plantations in the rain for weeks."

"I've been wet for days, and that's bad enough," I say. "Good job, honey."

Next, I was bound from Nova Scotia for Fort Lauderdale by way of Bermuda; slashing horizontal rain hit the deck and my face like warning shots of high seas to come. In the 100-mile-wide Gulf Stream, I tied in a third reef. Sailors say if you must second reef, you shouldn't go out. But when wind conditions come up offshore, a third reef comes in handy. After shortening sail, I realized my safety harness lanyard was not clipped. I could have washed over. That's the bald, unforgiving thin line between life and death. This made me laugh. I felt the same way in the shipping business. I could lose it all at any moment, and I eventually did. Life and death was all in my head or on computer files. Now I had winds, waves, sails, and power in my body as exhilaration. The trip that got me hours for the Master's license. I hadn't made a dime for nearly a year of training crew work. Only experienced captains and crew get paid.

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After all that in a year, I was ready to buy our boat.

I spent half our savings from the house. We called her U-Turn, an Island Packet 35. She sat in a parking lot outside of New York for two years. When I first saw her, she was coated in dust, soot, smog, bird shit, and a layer of green mold. The teak accents were pale and pitted, or rotten; the bright work was dull and corroded; the canvas, threadbare or torn; but her fiberglass hull was in good shape.

When I had her towed to the shipyard near home, we power-washed and scrubbed her for hours with pail and sponge. Then stripped her: the fittings, boom, anchor chain, lines, bunk cushions, the battery, the mast. There was a bird's nest at the mast base.

Wires went from the battery to the engine and a breaker switch which pushed them to the running mast, stern, interior lights, and all instruments. I didn't wire the breaker switch right. When I flipped it on,I smelled melting plastic within a few minutes. I used our fire extinguisher,

grabbed five other extinguishers from neighboring boats. We'd cool down the wires with foam, but they'd heat up again. The smoke billowed into the shipyard, acrid and poisonous. I started to smell the fiberglass hull. We were seconds from the whole thing going up in flames when the fire department came. They clipped the wire that controlled the circuit arc. They sprayed foam all over the inside. And left.

We lay in bed that night, your hand in my hand over my heart. We vacuumed and scrubbed for days. There were three inches of powder on all level surfaces. Then I wired it again.

"Good job, honey," you said when I flipped the switch from the battery and the cabin lights came on. "You are amazing."

"Just ordinary," I replied. And not good enough, I added to myself, reluctantly. But I had to be. The new wiring worked.

The mast had a hinge that failed, twice. On one of the first big trips out of harbor, a gust weakened the hinge until the mast looked like a child's broken arm.

"Take the helm," I commanded. You moved swiftly into position. I went on deck to rig the uphaul as a forestay to support the hinge.

"What have you gotten me into," you muttered.

We held on for 17 miles, back to the shipyard. A machine shop rebuilt the mast – without a hinge. And we constructed a gin pole to raise and lower the mast ourselves.

I tore a rotted plywood arch from the inside of the cabin. We liked the open space. But a boat blog I read online, by chance, said the arch supported the mast against the cabin top. Without the arch, the mast could punch a hole in the deck. Oops. I built and installed an arch from marine plywood, painted it coral pink. Things were going great.

We got to the dinghy dock one morning. U-Turn was listing, rolling like a drunk on her

mooring. Barely floating. I rowed out, climbed in. I was in a panic, up to my knees in water. Cushions, pots and pans, everything floated in the cabin. Luckily, the battery was dry, and the engine started. I ploughed through water, barely floating, to get her to dock. We bailed for hours.

It must have been the sink drain that I fixed that went to a through-hull pipe.

We stared at the ceiling together that night, exhausted from disasters.

"Tell me a story," you said.

"Pick a state."

"Colorado."

When we were discouraged and down, I'd tell you stories from my hitchhiking, motorcycling, and hiking days from the 70s.

"I was headed east from Colorado with my thumb out on I-40, an exit ramp outside Albuquerque. I'd been standing there an hour, not that long, with cars passing me by. A U-Haul truck came along. I tried to look friendly and not threatening, put out a good vibe. it pulled over. I jogged up to the driver's side window. It rolled down and I looked in. Damn. It was a kid, maybe fifteen, at the wheel. He could barely reach the gas pedal. A girl, younger by a few years, was in the passenger seat.

"Get in," said the boy.

"Where?" I asked. Obviously there was no room.

"In the back," he pointed over his shoulder.

I jogged toward the back of the truck with my pack, pulled the lever to unlock the sliding door and raised it up. Damn. The back of the truck was full of younger kids, four of them, sitting on about 100 cases of Coors cans of beer. Eight eyes peered at me like little raccoons in a nest."

“The Coors Truck Kids,” you said. You loved this story. You’d heard all my stories many times but seemed never to get tired of them.

“Yup.”

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And finally, the day came to leave port. All the problems were over; all the mistakes had been made. So we thought.

Down the east coast, we had sunsets and sunrises. Days of peace; hours of excitement, in the wind. Time with arms around each other. No airless offices or contracts to worry about. You danced on a dune, behind harbor in Cape May. You floated, naked, in gem-water, reflected by sun-fire off Cape Fear. To be with the sea, not on it, is wild magic. Our lost selves disappeared, and the guest from within came back home. The sail billowed and curved against the sky.

Of course, we landed in Cuba, accompanying flotillas to Miami. I always thought it would be me and the sea, head-to-head, in companionship or at battle for my life. Often, there were other crew members, but they had their own schemes and programs. We cared about each other only because each of us was an arm or a leg to make the body of the sailboat get where it was going.

Now, with Lottie’s plans, a tributary of humanity travelled the currents with us. Or we lived with them as refugees. We sailed in Corinto, to help finish a health clinic, converted from a restaurant that was going out of business. Clinic volunteers picked us up in a Jeep, loaded with medical supplies under a brown tarp, to make the 25-mile trip inland. We passed through communities of shacks, corrugated metal roofs, dirt floors, no running water, and outhouses. A well in the village supplied water that residents fetched in plastic buckets and had to boil to avoid parasitic infection, our friends told us.

Young girls wore brightly colored skirts, and the boys were in jeans and trucker hats. They all wore T-shirts donated from churches or agencies in the U.S. Coca Cola Classic - Can't Beat the Feeling, was on a boy's back, walking on the road. Delta Dental, Wellsense and the Glen House Hotel.

We got to the clinic to find a flurry of activity as a young pregnant woman was arriving, driven by her husband on a motorcycle. Having just come over bumpy, dusty roads in a Jeep, I don't know how a pregnant woman could endure such a journey. The clinic nurse, a Nicaraguan, brought her inside. The patient lay on a hard table, draped with a clean blue sheet, with a wash basin next to it. The nurse asked questions in rapid Spanish,

From the other side of a curtain, I recognized the word la sangradura, "bleeding".

The local nurse measured the woman's girth and listened to the baby's heartbeat.

"She needs an ultrasound in the city, Chinandega," the nurse told us.

I stepped outside, went to the Jeep, pulled off the brown tarp, and unloaded the supplies, stacking boxes under an overhang.

More people were arriving, mostly woman and children, but a few men, limping. I saw one of the men sit and draw off his cracked shoes. He was muscular, strong, not tall but trim. His baseball cap said, "Cincinnati Reds". I saw his puffy, scaly, cracked, and whitened feet. The nails were blackened or gone. I looked away, and thought, "What can I do here? Why am I here?"

"Max, can you drive this woman and her husband to Chinandega?" you asked from the doorway, your arm around her, her husband's hopeful face behind you. Your face, always a combination of hope, determination, and a little bit of fear only I would recognize. A little fear is healthy. It keeps you on your toes.

My father had been a Navy medic. My mother had been a nurse. But I couldn't look at a bruise without feeling faint. What if the woman started bleeding? What would I do?

"What have you gotten me into?" I thought as I looked at your concerned, determined face with the concern leaking through.

"I'll see these men from the coffee plantation coming in with fungal infections. I can do that," you said. "The nurses here are seeing others. I guess this clinic is open."

The worst health issues I'd been through in 30 years was Lottie, throwing up for days from a migraine. Finally, it was a weekend trip to the ER. They gave her a shot that she said sent her floating above her gurney and feeling light and happy as a balloon. They hooked her up for IV fluids.

I broke my hand on Thanksgiving Day, but the ER doctor was more concerned because Lottie was dizzy and crying. "Can I have some pain meds?" I said as the doctor helped Lottie sit down.

"How can you be so brave with others, an advanced EMT, when you crumpled at my broken my hand?" I asked her just last week.

"You. I don't expect you to be vulnerable," she said. "And seeing you hurt hurts worse than if I was hurt. Or anyone in the world was hurt," you said.

I looked at you standing with the Nicaraguan couple. A light from the clinic came on behind you three as the dusk fell around all of us. I didn't look for situations to be handled, like you did. Situations came to me, based on who I was with or where I chose to go; those decisions I did make. I would do what needed to be done.

I opened up the rear door of the Jeep, set the seat back. I walked over to Lottie and took the blanket from over her arm and laid it in over the seat.

“Mi esposo, Max, will take you to the City,” said Lottie.

The man stepped forward to shake my hand, all smiles. He took his wife from Lottie’s arm and helped her into the truck. She gave me a weak smile as she passed and reached out to touch my arm lightly and whispered, “Muchas gracias.”

That ride at night was over unlit gravel mountain roads, twice washed out into gullies. I downshifted two gears to buck over stones and small tree trunks, before we climbed the pitch on the other side. Not a groan came from the woman in the back seat. Her husband held her head in his lap and his arm on her shoulder. And they whispered quietly, occasionally. I, alone in the front seat, felt like an actor. If it was a movie, I would have worn an Oysterman hat and had a Lancero cigar stuck between my teeth as I ground the gears through another gulch. Life is good, as long as you are living it. I’d be damned if this couple’s baby wouldn’t get that chance.

In 20 years, there were eight flotillas. After the Mariel Boat Lift, we assisted people in Nicaragua and helped them flee to Costa Rica. Humanity moved out of Morocco, Mauritania, Libya, the Balkans, and Sri Lanka. They came over land to port, fleeing from their own country or Sudan, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Masses moved into the Philippines from Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

Your dream sky filled with stars, ones for each refugee. Alejandro is one of them, a bright light in a new place. We had letters from Texas. That little monkey was a pain to keep track of but always made me laugh. He has cojones. Lottie says he reminds her of me, a kid who has no idea he’s lost and out to take the world by the balls.

“You’re amazing,” you’d say.

“Just ordinary,” I’d reply. I’m no different than the millions who have crossed, tried to cross, are crossing now, or who will keep trying. My dream sky changed with the hemispheres.

“Keep an eye on those clouds, it might turn into something,” you’d say.

“I need to be with you and away at sea,” I’d say.

“A good bottom is hard to find,” I’d joke while anchoring one night, as grass, rock, or clay are terrible holds while mud, pebbles, or sand are a find.

“My hard bottom is good to find,” you’d joke back.

“Pounding to weather against rising seas,” you’d forecast for a day that turns into a week.

“I’m booking a hotel,” you’d yell after our mast was destroyed by a freak waterspout and I screamed and yelled, choked back tears in frustration.

I’m not religious, but I pray to the ocean gods.

Greek Poseidon.

Roman Neptune.

Viking Aegir.

Maori Tangaroa.

Egyptian Yamm.

Celtic Lir.

They say ocean sailing is 90% boring and 10% life and death. Easy breezes and refreshing swims from the boat. Cool drinks on deck. Peaceful nights when the anchor doesn’t drag. And then come times when you fight wind and waves to save your life. Those are the times you tell stories about. You gotta love both.

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On deck, I roar.

You are below making peanut butter and jam sandwiches. We did a few months of work out of Algiers. Then we sailed the Straits of Gibraltar, up along the Spanish and French coasts,

over to the Baltic, and into the Gulf of Finland. We had no work projects in mind. I wanted to sail the Finnish Lake District, most easily accessible from nearby Vyborg, a port city in Russia.

I feel the boat ramp tilt 80 degrees leeward in a sudden gale. I'm not worried; it was like any other that we'd weathered, though I know the motor isn't working. We are headed to port to fix the fuel line.

You secure the food in plastic bins, so the bucking boat won't make a mess of everything. You had seen flying peanut buttered bread slices, flung by a squalled wave, stuck on bunk cushions and portholes.

When you pop out the hatch, I see you grimace as a sheet of rain and wind hits your face, flung from a black cloud over my shoulder. The sea is deep grey angry. White horse wave crests gallop to catch us. Raindrops cut like needles. Sea swells, whipped to 20 feet in minutes, march toward the stern like tall buildings about to fall on our heads. Instead, they lift us to roll high atop the crest and pitch us down the other side. Fleetingly, I wonder if the buoyancy principle had a limit as this storm was bigger than any I'd seen.

"Pull in the jib," I'm curt and anxious.

You clamor down to the low rail, loosen the jib sheet from the cleat, and go for the winch to pull in the furler.

The squall intensifies, the whipped sea becomes a dozen arms that punch and pull at us.

"Secure the jib! Adjust the traveler!" I yell, though you barely hear me. Although the stay tethers you on board and you had re-cleated the jib, your hands are under water as the boat was nearly vertical. You climb up to midship to move the traveler to the leeward side.

I lean at the wheel to accommodate the yaw; each foot braced on either boat edge to stay upright.

I chew my tongue.

“Oh, God. MAX!” you yell.

We are at the edge of survival and sanity once again. I’d gotten us there many times in our 50 years together. Your silky grey and brown hair flies, and my shaven, mostly bald head has grey stubbles. Your face and mine are taut with focus, your brown, my blue eyes show worry.

“Oh, God. MAX!” you yell again. That day of the squall, or ever, you didn’t doubt a good outcome. You wanted a wild, fast ride as much as I did. Life complications missed us like white intermittent passing lanes from a speeding car.

You cling to the boat high rail lines, a spider in a flying web while the cleated jib sheet held. I turn the boat a millimeter to this side and that. Sails keep us just off the wind for steerage but a hair’s breadth from blown down.

SNAP! The boom flies across the deck, mainsail flaps wildly. I see a severed bolt skitter across the deck and go overboard, into sea foam. A bolt that I had put in, tuning our rig, a month ago. I lose steerage, and we toss, plunge into each wave trough, only wave momentum to pull us back up.

MAYDAY! MAYDAY! I yell coordinates into the VHF Marine Radio, no translation of that term needed by the Russians on the other end.

“A tow boat is on the way,” I hear in broken English.

“Secure the sail!” I bellow and gesture you to windward. As I take the lee side, both of us hooked into harness lines, we grab at the lashing sail cloth. Each manages to tuck it into folds and wrap half-hitch knots made in dock line. We work side by side, moving toward the bow, which bobs in and out of view, obliterated by crashing waves. My stomach heaves with the seas, from motion and fear on this carnival ride for our lives, tossed and upended. Our feet leave the

deck for milliseconds at wave crest. Only the harness prevents a headlong pitch into the sea. I see the tugboat ahead, ready to toss a tow line to the bow.

"Go below! And stay there!" I yell. "I'll secure the tow," which I had done before in my sailing career.

I see figures on the bow of the tug, ready to throw us a line.

A wave crashes over the stern and leaves you thigh deep in water. You know to obey me and crouch below through the hatch, into the cabin. I know you will tie yourself down in a berth, to avoid a broken bone from being tossed around the cabin with any possession that isn't nailed down.

An adrenaline dump leaves me weak and nauseous. Everything goes black.

I see myself from above. I'm on deck. I seem to be floating above my body. In the violent roll, the pitch rises and falls with waves, towering over the suddenly tiny boat. They throw the line to me in the bow. I miss it three times, and I try again. The wind lifts me off the deck; with each wave crest, I grip the mast. One more time, for the last toss, the one that I catch, I step far into the bow pulpit. I have the line, the size of my arm, and secure it to the anchor cleat. I heave a huge sigh.

A rogue wave, twice the size of the others, is under me. I'm thrown off the boat, in a twist, hung upside down by the harness. No, no, no, we are safe now. The tow line is secure. My mind spins. With the next wave, I'm pummeled into the boat. The safety release is tangled.

"Lottie, I want to keep you safe. Be happy for both of us. We have not failed each other. That's good enough."

My captains told me, "Keep your knife on you. Be prepared to use it upside down, in the dark, in a storm."

I cut that line, held by a perfect bowline, to free myself from one certain death to face another, the foaming sea beneath, where I wash away immediately, beyond sight. I see Lottie smiling at me, her hair drifting in the wave.