

Fresh Water

A short story by Chris Cleave

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[STARTS]

Danny Zeichner sat at the back of my navigation class, staring at a pair of nautical dividers. He opened up the brass arms to the span of his upturned right hand, placing one steel point on the ball of his thumb and the other on the pad of his little finger. The alignment, the equivalence – it seemed to please him. On his desk – on all of the desks – lay the Admiralty chart of the approaches to Le Touquet.

Our classroom was half of a community centre. It was windowless; a former store room, strip-lit and squeezed in beside the exercise hall. Through the wall you could hear a woman shouting over high-energy music. And one and two and *hips and tummy* and five and six and *work those thighs*. I liked the woman. Her name was Annabel. At 9 p.m. her class

would have lost weight and mine would have lost their bearings, and then we were going for a drink.

The bass line from next door rattled the pens in the tray of my whiteboard. Some of my class were struggling to concentrate. Not Danny Zeichner. He was staring at his dividers as if they spanned some greater truth.

I drew the class's attention to the vast flats of sand that stretched out to sea from the Baie d'Étaples, denying entry to Le Touquet. The only hope was the thin and convoluted channel scoured out by the winding Étaples river, but at most states of the tide even that channel would just be dry sand. So to get into Le Touquet, one would have to be patient. One would have to wait for high water.

Danny looked up from his dividers.

'I should be so leisurely,' he said.

The rest of the class twisted their heads to look back at him.

'What?' said Danny Zeichner. 'And you people have never been in a hurry?'

He raised his eyes and his palms to heaven, as if he alone saw through the polystyrene ceiling tiles of the community centre.

The class turned back and faced front. It was a good bunch, nine students, with the usual mix of ages between twenty and sixty. Quite bright enough for basic chart work. I reckoned I'd get all of them through their theory exam, even if I had to write the odd mnemonic on their shirt cuffs for them.

The students gripped their biros and watched me. The youngsters wore T-shirts and trainers, the seniors favoured corduroys and cardigans. If the tone was informal, then Danny Zeichner struck a descant note. In the back row he sat upright in a sober lounge suit, with his thick black beard groomed and shining. Fifty-five or sixty, slim, with a squash racket

protruding from the sports bag beside his feet. Half-moon spectacles perfectly aping the semilunar bags beneath his eyes. Gazing into infinity between the points of his dividers.

I stepped up to the whiteboard and ran the class through the tidal height calculation for Le Touquet. *Yvonne, how much does our yacht draw? That's right, two metres. Okay, good. So we need at least two metres' depth of water to keep our boat afloat. Now, Mark, what is the shallowest part of the channel into Le Touquet? 6.2 metres above the line? Yes, that's right, it's a drying height. That means it's just dry sand there at low water. So, Phillip, what is the minimum height of tide we need for our yacht to float over that shallowest point in the channel? Exactly. Well done. Two metres of keel plus 6.2 metres of sand gives a minimum tidal height of 8.2 metres. Let's imagine it's our own yacht and say 8.5 metres, to be on the safe side. So, Danny, will you look at the tidal curve and tell me how many hours before high water we can expect a tidal height of 8.5 metres. Danny?*

Danny Zeichner lifted his eyes from the dividers.

'Mmm?'

'When will we have eight and a half metres of tide on our side, Danny?'

'Why do you ask me that?'

'Excuse me. So you can sail your yacht safely into Le Touquet, without going aground.'

Danny shrugged.

'Why would I want to sail my yacht into Le Touquet?' he said.

'I don't know, Danny. The fine wines, perhaps? The air of faded elegance? They say it's quite a pleasant resort.'

Danny sighed.

‘I don’t drink wine and I have never visited a resort in my life,’ he said. ‘And this Le Touquet, it’s in France, isn’t it? I’m suspicious of the French. You know, the Dreyfus affair, Vichy, and so forth.’

Some of the others were muttering. This was a subsidised evening class, but it was still costing everyone seven pounds an hour. Danny ignored the comments. He stroked his beard and looked down at the chart on his desk. Thoughtfully, he stabbed one point of the dividers into downtown Le Touquet, and slowly described a circle on the chart – a circle with the radius set by the span of his hand – as if he was establishing a minimum safe distance. Just at a glance, I couldn’t help noting that if he was planning to stay that far offshore, he would be untroubled at any state of the tide.

‘It’s just a hypothetical exercise, Danny,’ I said.

‘You say that now,’ said Danny, ‘but some of the most dangerous ideas in this life start out hypothetical. One morning scientists start measuring hands and noses, and that very same evening it’s *Kristallnacht*.’

Danny looked calmly at the faces turned towards him. No one spoke in the classroom. Next door, the exercise class seemed to get louder. And one and two and *change the subject* and five and six and *let’s move on*. I ran a hand through my hair.

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘Sally. Maybe you can pilot our hypothetical yacht into this nominal French haven.’

Sally was game, and she read the tidal curve correctly, and we established that one might safely enter Le Touquet on the rising tide one hour before high water, assuming of course that one was motivated to do so. I told the class I’d see them next week, and watched them shuffle out. I tidied the classroom and left it ready for flower arranging, or Reiki healing, or whatever the suburbs were mastering next.

Outside in the corridor, Danny Zeichner was waiting for me.

'I'm really sorry,' he said.

'Yeah,' I said, 'what was all that about?'

'I just got a little bored, I think. Sometimes I like to provoke.'

'Well, you did that.'

'I'm sorry.'

'No harm done.'

Danny smiled.

'Well,' he said. 'You are actually okay.'

A phalanx of overweight women burst into the corridor. Pink from exercise, they chattered as they pulled coats on over their jade, puce and leopard-print leotards. They giggled towards the car park, past a noticeboard labelled 'COMMUNITY'. Among the notices, there was a library that needed saving. A three-legged cat that was missing. A Phil Collins CD for sale.

Danny put his hand on my shoulder. I saw a flash of white shirt cuff, and the gleam of the fluorescent lights on his thin gold watch.

'You really can do navigation, can't you, sonny?'

'Yes, I really can.'

'You truly can find your way from anywhere to anywhere? Even when the satellite navigation breaks? Even in storms and crazy tides?'

'Of course, Danny. I can navigate coastal, ocean, astro. I can go anywhere.'

'Then don't you want to get out of *here*?'

Danny looked up and down the corridor, pulled me down to his level, and whispered the words in my ear. Looking over the top of his spectacles, he held my eyes for a moment, then turned and walked off. I stood there and thought about what he had said. I scuffed my toes on the grey linoleum floor until Annabel came out of the exercise room.

‘Hi!’ said Annabel.

She was holding a bulky portable stereo in one hand, and fifteen hula hoops in the crook of her other arm. I got the door for her.

‘Good class?’ I said.

Annabel slumped against the wall and blew a strand of hair out of her eyes. The hula hoops rattled.

‘Some days,’ she said, ‘I look at them and I think, *It’s nice you ladies are making an effort.* Other days I just think, *God, you fat bitches.*’

‘Bad day then?’

‘Futile, really. You?’

‘Weird. I think one of my class is a mental case.’

‘There’s one aboard every ship, sailor.’

‘I suppose so. What say I navigate us to a bar where we can drown all our troubles in rum?’

‘God,’ she said. ‘Is that your answer to everything, you old sea dog?’

‘Well,’ I said. ‘Old habits, you know.’

Annabel smiled.

‘You can take the sailor from the sea...’ she said.

‘I know, I know...’

Later, as we lay on my bed, I listened to the drone of the traffic on the A3. I couldn’t sleep. I got up and stepped onto my tiny balcony. There was some unopened mail out there – it always seemed like a good place to stow it. I toed the stack of envelopes. Something black from the council. Something red from the bank. Something silver from MasterCard – apparently I had been preapproved.

I lit one of Annabel's cigarettes and leaned on the balcony rail. Through the orange haze of the Greater London sky, no stars at all were visible. I felt a warm hand on the back of my neck.

'What's wrong?' said Annabel. 'Can't sleep?'

'Yeah,' I said. 'Can't stop thinking.'

'Anything in particular?'

'Just something someone said to me today.'

'The nutter?'

'Well, I'm wondering, now, whether he's so crazy after all.'

Annabel ruffled my hair and sighed.

'Maybe you'd be happier if you moved in with me,' she said.

'Maybe.'

'I mean, look at the way you live here. You've got no TV, no pictures on the walls, hardly any furniture. We always dial out for dinner, and when it comes you don't even have two plates that match. It's like you live here but your heart's not really in it, you know?'

I said mmm, and looked down from the balcony to where the endless cars were turning off the A3 onto the slip road. Their wipers worked against the thin drizzle. The exit was signposted New Malden, Kingston and Raynes Park. Everything was signposted round here.

*

'Hypothetically,' whispered Danny Zeichner, 'what if?'

I blinked. I looked around. My other students were bent over the exercise I'd set them. *Plan a passage from Portsmouth to Poole. The spring tide sets west at 0500, the wind is forecast southerly four to five rising six to gale eight by 1700, and one of your crew tends to get seasick.* Beneath the booming of the stereo from the exercise class next door, the only sound was pencils being chewed and lines being scratched on charts. I leaned down towards Danny, alone in the back row of desks.

'What if *what?*' I said.

'What if I bought a boat?' said Danny. 'A yacht? A pretty little yacht with two sails? Say blue. Say thirty feet long. Would that be about right?'

'For what?'

'For a long trip.'

'I don't know, Danny,' I said. 'Hypothetically speaking, that would be a short boat for a long trip.'

Danny nodded slowly. Fingered his beard. Looked up again.

'*Blue,*' he said.

He fixed me over the top of his spectacles, and waited.

'Blue is good,' I said.

'So let's imagine I'd already bought her,' said Danny. 'This morning on the internet. Let's imagine she was only ten years old. Let's suppose she was ready right now, in the marina in Marseilles. Let's say the only thing holding her back from the open ocean was two short pieces of rope. Hypothetically speaking, would an old man just have done a foolish thing?'

I shook my head.

‘I can’t tell you that, Danny,’ I said. ‘I can teach you how to navigate between any two points on this globe that are connected by at least two metres’ depth of water. I can’t tell you whether you *should*.’

Danny nodded.

‘Actually I wasn’t thinking *I* should,’ he said.

‘No?’

‘No. I was thinking *we* should.’

‘Should what?’

‘Should go on a boat trip. From Marseilles to, you know, Tel Aviv.’

‘*Uh?*’

‘Hey, don’t look at me like I’m crazy,’ said Danny. ‘There is two metres’ depth of water all the way. I checked. It’s called the Mediterranean Sea.’

I stood. From next door, the stereo boomed. And one and two and *oh my god* and five and six and *I just might*. I leaned back down to Danny.

‘Why me?’ I said.

‘Because you are a sailor, sonny. You are the only sailor I know. Why do you suppose I come to this class?’

‘So I can teach *you* to be a sailor.’

Danny chuckled.

‘What, you think I have time to learn all this? All this tidal vector and juju eyeball and I-don’t-know-what? I’m an old man! All these memories I have in my head, you think I have space for your fancy mathematics? Are you nuts?’

I smiled.

‘Listen,’ I said. ‘I’m flattered you asked. But I can’t come on a long trip with you. I have two of these classes a week. I have a, you know, a sort of a girlfriend.’

‘I’ll pay you, of course,’ said Danny. ‘Cash per diem, more than you make here, plus your flight into Marseilles and your flight back from Tel Aviv.’

‘It’s not the money,’ I said. ‘And it’s nothing personal. I don’t do that sort of trip any more. I can’t just take off, these days. I’m trying to settle down. On land, I mean.’

Danny’s head drooped. He stared down at the chart of the Western Solent that we were using for the passage-planning exercise. I couldn’t help noticing that the stubborn pencil line he’d drawn for his course would drive him straight onto the breaking sands of the Bramble Bank. In his groomed beard and lounge suit. In the driving rain of a rising southerly gale. Danny looked back up at me and made a small, sad gesture at the flat, clean chart.

‘Is this all the sea is to you now then?’ he said. ‘Just a paper sheet to draw lines on?’

I sighed.

Thirty-six hours later we were walking along a marina pontoon in the dazzling white sunshine of Marseilles. Danny skipped ahead, intoxicated with joy, wildly excited. He seemed dressed for golf as much as for sailing. Lime green canvas shorts, black and white checked shirt, gold watch and a brand new pair of red leather deck shoes. He jumped over cleats and leapfrogged bollards. I followed more carefully, pushing our kitbags in a big wheeled caddy. It was late spring and the mistral was blowing, screaming in the rigging of the yachts in the marina, sending halyards clanking against five thousand masts, whipping up a fine spray over the pontoon deck.

It was hard work pushing the caddy – one of the tyres was flat, and the thing was overloaded with Danny’s seafaring essentials. I thought his bottles of Scotch were a good idea. I was less keen on the antique brass telescopes he’d found on Portobello Road. The caddy’s flat tyre groaned, and I looked forward to the moment when Danny would stop and show me his boat. When he finally did, and I saw what he’d stopped next to, I wished he’d carried on.

Danny's yacht was a twenty-eight-foot fibreglass sloop. The hull was royal blue under the bow and transom where the overhang had offered it some protection. Everywhere else, the boat was bleached by the sun to a streaky azure. Barnacles clung along the length of the waterline. I watched a school of fat grey mullet cruising through the clear green water between the fronds of weed that trailed from the hull. Above deck, three of the saloon windows were crazed and cracked, and the fourth was boarded over. The standing rigging was rusted, the deck was streaked with seagull shit, and the steering compass had been removed from the binnacle and replaced with a drinks holder. In the well of the cockpit there were empty beer cans and cigarette packets, a desiccated seabird, and an open tin of antifouling paint over which a thick crust had formed. The tiller was cracked, and reinforced with a child's beach cricket bat. The bat was lashed to the tiller with orange nylon fishing line. On the boat's bow was the name *ALLEGRO*. The letters were formed in the block style from black electrical tape. The sailing vessel *Allegro*, as we found it, was listing on its mooring at an angle of maybe fifteen degrees. It leaned like an old man's dream, ironically italicised.

Danny spread his hands and beamed.

'Isn't she a beauty?' he said.

I removed my sunglasses and looked the boat over from the waterline to the masthead while Danny hopped from foot to foot and watched my face.

'What do you think?' he said.

I looked down at our kitbags.

'I think we won't be needing these just yet,' I said.

We checked into the *Mercure Grand* on rue Beauvau. We stayed there while the mistral blew itself out and Danny blew six thousand euros. I had his boat lifted and high-pressure hosed to get rid of the barnacles and the weed. I painted the hull with a new coat of antifouling. It took one whole afternoon, applying the new blue paint over the grey undercoat.

With each stroke of the roller, I felt the weather improving. Close to the end of the job, I looked up past the blue hull into the ultramarine sky streaked with jets of white cirrus, and I breathed in the smell of fresh paint and salt air, and somewhere off in the boatyard a radio played Georges Brassens, and I realised I was humming along.

I had the boat's engine thoroughly overhauled. I hired three tanned marseillais in blue overalls to replace all the standing rigging, and I fitted new running rigging myself. I removed everything soft from below decks, and burned it. I persuaded a sign writer to remove the electrical tape and paint 'Allegro' on the bow in cursive, in exchange for a bottle of Scotch. I sent Danny off to buy a compass, and I sent him back again when he returned the first time with an instrument for drawing circles.

Early one calm morning, with dew on the deck, I unfurled the genoa. The sailcloth was grey and ragged, and there was a hole in the centre of the sail through which I could see the Baie de Marseille, stretching in indigo flatness from the Iles de Frioul to Méjean. For a minute I stood transfixed. Then I measured up the boat for new sails, sat in a café in the vieux port to drink an espresso in the warm morning sun, and realised I was happy. A text came from Annabel: SEE YOU TONIGHT? I realised I had told no one I was leaving.

We returned the boat to the water, and it no longer floated at an angle. New sails came, and we screwed up our eyes against their perfect whiteness. I set Danny to loading the stores, distributing the weight of the tinned food and the dried rice evenly between the lockers, while I filled the boat's drinking-water tanks. I was there for half an hour while the hose ran on and on. That boat had a voracious thirst for fresh water.

Danny stood there, frowning at the hosepipe and the scrubbed deck and the glittering metal rails.

'Look,' I said. 'Aren't you enjoying yourself? Is all this preparation getting you down? Because for me this is all part of it. For me this feels like a fresh start already.'

Danny shook his head.

‘Maybe I’m suspicious of fresh starts,’ he said. ‘You know, I went up to the top of the Basilica this morning and looked south. It is a big ocean, sonny, wouldn’t you say? One little coat of antifouling is not going to subdue it. One little New Testament does not cancel out, you know, Leviticus.’

‘But isn’t that what this trip’s all about for you?’ I said. ‘A new start in the promised land?’

Danny sighed.

‘This is what I thought,’ he said, ‘but now I’m not so sure. I’m getting a bad feeling about this trip. Jews on boats? See, I don’t know. Usually when God wants us to cross a sea he fixes it so we can walk.’

‘Right. Look, are you anxious about setting off?’

Danny pushed his spectacles up to the bridge of his nose, and looked straight at me with no expression on his face.

‘Anxious?’ he said. ‘Sure. Aren’t you?’

‘I’m scared of *not* setting off,’ I said. ‘I feel like if I stay here too long, my life will find me – it will find some reason to call me back – and then I’ll never get away. Don’t you get that feeling too?’

Danny shrugged.

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘Who doesn’t?’

‘So what do you want us to do? You’re the client. It’s your boat.’

A quick squall of breeze whipped through the marina, darkening the face of the water.

‘Let’s get ready, *as if* we were going,’ said Danny Zeichner. ‘I really can’t decide yet.’

We loaded gas tanks, diesel oil, batteries, engine spares, distress flares. We loaded our own kit last. We sweated through the hot part of the day while the group on the next-door

yacht sat under their cockpit awning, drinking pastis, smoking and watching us over their playing cards.

When the day cooled I showed Danny how to strip down the deck winches. He was good at it. He eased the winch drums off their spindles, carefully removed all the gears and bearings, cleaned off the old grease in a biscuit tin of mineral oil, and reassembled each winch with a care and precision I hadn't guessed he possessed.

'Danny,' I said, 'what do you do for a living?'

'I'm retired,' he said.

'Since when?'

'Since ten days ago.'

'So what did you do, before you retired?'

Danny sniffed.

'Nice sunset,' he said.

The sky was carmine shot through with gold. Starlings boiled over the rooftops of the vieux port. I started the boat's engine, to hear how it sounded, and we lay back in the cockpit and opened beers. Little wavelets slapped against the hull.

'So how do you like retirement?' I said.

Danny shrugged.

'Maybe I'll like it better when we're moving.'

The sun blazed scarlet on the lenses of his half-moon spectacles. I stood and looked out over the brooding roofs of Marseilles. Aloft in the higher darkness, the first stars were unfurling. I turned back to Danny.

'Now would be a good time,' I said.

'What?' said Danny.

‘You can cast off the mooring lines, if you like. You can just untie them and bring them on board.’

Danny stepped down onto the pontoon and held the stern line in his hand.

‘Now?’ he said. ‘Really? Just like that?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘You do still want to go to Israel, don’t you?’

Danny looked down at the rope in his hands and then he looked back up at me.

‘What kind of a question is that, to ask a Jew?’

‘A navigational one,’ I said. ‘Yes or no?’

‘It’s a very complex issue,’ said Danny.

‘It’s a very simple rope.’

Danny’s hands on the rope shone white in the gathering darkness, and I listened to his breathing, fast and nervous, for a full two minutes. Then I watched the way his hands shook as he cast off the lines.

We slipped between the harbour walls, and set about coiling the ropes and stowing the fenders. It kept us so busy that when we finally looked back, the lights of Marseilles were already small and sinking behind us. When we had enough sea room to clear the Iles de Frioul, I pointed the bow south-east, and the deck beneath our feet began to move with the swell. The engine note lifted and fell with each wave, and the sea received us into its vastness.

I cut the engine and we got up some sail – half of the genoa and the mainsail with a reef in it. I thought we should just take it easy till Danny got the feel of things. I gave Danny the boat and laughed at the way he gripped the tiller and stared forward into the blackness, with eyes as huge and wide as a squid’s. I opened him a beer.

‘Relax,’ I said, ‘you’ll get used to it.’

It would have seemed elemental and fearsome to him, that first night on black salt water. The hiss and surge as we lifted to the waves. The boat suddenly lying to an unheralded

gust, then coming up again. The beams of unseen lights sweeping the cloud base to the north, the lighthouses themselves long sunk beneath our horizon. The dipping white of fishermen's working lights. The red, white and green navigation lights of container ships, seeming motionless at first and then looming past with silent and frightening velocity. Sometimes a spray of salt across the deck. Sometimes an inexplicable scent of land: turnips, or sewage, or pine trees. A crackling from the hull. Below deck, the red light glowing above the chart table, preserving our night vision. The pair of us moving through dim crimson and drinking more beer and laughing when we clung to the backstay and pissed in the ocean and a bright outrage of phosphorescence rose from the deep to meet the hot stream.

Danny wore a yellow fisherman's oilskin top with the hood pulled tight around his spectacles and beard. He crawled along the windward rail to the bow, hung on to the forestay and looked forward into the blackness as the foredeck lifted and fell. He turned, and laughed, and shouted.

'This is the life, eh sonny?' yelled Danny.

'This is the life,' I shouted back.

Exhausted by wonders, Danny fell asleep in his oilskins in the well of the cockpit. I smiled down at him, and reckoned the hours till dawn.

It occurred to me that I should call Annabel and explain things, but when I looked at my phone there was no signal. I set the auto-helm to steer the boat for a few minutes while I went below deck to look at the chart. According to my reading of it, there was going to be no signal for the next two thousand nautical miles, give or take. It occurred to me that I should have got things straight with Annabel before we left Marseilles. I had a long night to think about it.

The sun rose out of the sea on our port bow. The wind was coming from the north, a nice breeze, maybe fifteen knots. I shook the reef out of the mainsail and unfurled the rest of

the genoa. The boat picked up speed. Danny woke up, stood and scanned the horizon through 360 degrees. Then he shaded his eyes with his hand, and tried again. Finally, he said, ‘Okay, where is it?’

‘Where’s what?’

‘The land, sonny.’

‘Back there over the horizon. Next land we see will be the north of Corsica, in a couple of days if this wind keeps up. Then we’ll turn right, down the coast of Italy.’

Danny nodded, stood with his legs wide apart and gave a nonchalant shrug.

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘Turn right after Corsica. No problemo.’

I watched the empty horizon dance over the glass of his spectacles. Then I held the spectacles for him while he vomited, again and again, over the leeward rail.

When Danny was recovered, I slept through the morning while he took the watch. I told him to wake me if there was anything he wasn’t sure about. He woke me once for a cloud he said was funny-looking, and once to ask me if I believed in God.

The wind stayed in the north. We fell into a routine: four hours on and four hours off. We sneaked between Corsica and Elba under a huge saffron moon that gilded the wave tops and bronzed our white sails. Then the wind died and we took a week just ghosting down the Italian coast. We used the thermal winds, hugging the coastline, using the land breeze at nights and the sea breeze in the afternoons. Some nights we went in so close you could hear the kids screaming down the promenades on their Vespas. Through the long windless mornings we drifted in the hot blue sea, flat and oily as ice, and watched green-fringed jellyfish going about their silent purposes.

‘We’re sailing through our history here, you know that?’

Danny stood on the rail in his Y-fronts and peered into the water, watching the golden ropes of sunlight coiling into the cobalt deep.

‘Just look at it,’ he said. ‘This is the same Mediterranean the Romans rowed their galleys through. The same one Odysseus got lost in. It’s like we could close our eyes and open them again and there would be Jason and the Argonauts, right in front of our eyes, because they are in their time and we are in our time, but there is always two metres’ depth of water to navigate between us. Did you ever think about that?’

‘No I hadn’t, Danny. I like it.’

Danny beamed.

‘So! Finally, sonny, the old man is teaching *you* something!’

At dusk the wind blew up from the west. We bowled down the coast with the spray sluicing across the deck and the sheets twanging like guitar strings. The boat was heeled down to its rails. We did seventy miles in the night, and when the dawn broke the deck was strewn with crash-landed flying fish and there was an ugly crack in the mast. We reefed the sails right down, fried the flying fish for breakfast and put in to Salerno for repairs.

After a fortnight at sea, Italy was pungent and brash. When we stepped up onto the concrete dockside, it rose and fell beneath our feet. To get out of the noise and heat of the city we took a bus to the ruins at Pompeii. The regular streets, the ashen greyness, the careful signage – it all reminded me of the suburbs. I pulled out my phone. I was getting a good signal. There was a text from Annabel. TAKE ALL TIME YOU NEED, it said. LOVE YOU. HERE FOR YOU WHEN YOU GET BACK. I read the message and then I read it again, and then I stood for a long time looking at a pair of calcified figures, entwined in the ash. I tried to think what to text back.

With the mast repaired, we refilled the fresh-water tanks, paid our marina fees and cast off at dusk. The wind was in the north, unsteady, sending little growling squalls that slammed into us, surged us forward, then left us in near calm. A big fish took the lure we trawled behind the boat, but it broke the line before we could haul it aboard. And that was thick, orange fishing line you could have held the weight of the anchor on. We saw one huge, gut-

churning flash of moonlight on silver skin, but the monster never broke the surface. All night we watched a column of dull red sparks rising out of the sea far ahead, and as dawn broke the sparks dimmed and a colossal plume of smoke took their place, boiling up into an angry black anvil of cloud that reached into the stratosphere. As we drew closer later that day, the purple cone of Stromboli rose above the horizon to claim the base of the smoke.

Danny never once took his eyes off the volcano until it sank into our wake that night, in a sullen ruby glow of flame that lit up the underside of the low black rain clouds amassing on the horizon.

‘So,’ he said finally. ‘This was a thing you might go through your life imagining was not in our world.’

*

At night, with no moon, emerging out of the boiling currents and sluicing whirlpools of the Straits of Messina, we hit a fishing net. It snagged the rudder and the boat stalled in the water. The drag of the net held the stern up into the strengthening wind. The waves thudded against the transom, the tiller swung unstopably from side to side, and the rudder post squealed as it ground against the hull fitting. I had to go into the water and cut the net away, immediately, before it ripped the rudder out of the boat.

I tied a line around my chest, under my arms, and gave the other end to Danny. I said I needed him to hold on tight. I told him this had finished being hypothetical. I watched his knuckles whitening around the rope as I slid off the stern ladder into the black water.

I felt with my feet for the net. The boat’s stern slammed up and down in the rising waves. I lost my grip on the stern ladder. I felt the mesh of the net on my leg, and I grabbed it

and pulled myself along on it, under the water to the rudder. While the boat bucked and crashed down on me, I cut away the net with a bread knife. It fell away from the boat, but I was clumsy and a part of the net got wrapped around my leg. The net took me down with it. I saw a flash of torchlight on Danny's petrified face, and then there was salt and darkness. I saw myself drowning. I saw the faces of the Italian fishermen as they hauled my swollen green body aboard. As they dumped me out in the catch amidst the iridescent fury of sardines. I saw their interested faces, taking in my Reebok swimming shorts and my cropped blond hair: *Inglese?*

Then the line came tight around my chest. Danny Zeichner hauled me back into life. I stared at him for a long time, after he had pulled me back on board. Somehow, in the open sea, and terrified, the old man had worked out how to get my lifeline around a winch.

'I feel like Jonah,' I said.

'Actually I think Jonah was better-looking,' said Danny.

We drank Scotch.

The wind rose. I took three reefs in on the main, furled the genoa and ran up a storm jib. The boat lifted to waves as high as a bus, then sank sickeningly into each trough. The rudder post hammered against the hull fitting, and I worried it had been damaged. The wind screamed in the rigging. I took down all sail. I put on a survival suit and sent Danny down below deck to be safe. I put the boards over the companionway hatch, to keep out the spray and the breaking seas. I clipped my harness lines to both rails and tried by feeling alone to keep the boat afloat as each monstrous wave rolled onto us in the darkness.

The pale sun rose over a sea that was driven to a pure white fury. The spray came horizontal. I could see nothing. I held on, half frozen. Night came again. I dozed, exhausted, dehydrated. I hallucinated pop songs in the noise of the wind in the rigging. I thought the

bucking deck was a flight simulator, and then a rollercoaster. I kept asking if the ride was nearly finished. In the darkness, I heard Annabel laughing.

By dawn, the wind had died to nothing. I woke to a ragged sky, circling seabirds and a long, confused swell that the boat was lying side-on to. I unclipped my harness, checked the boat topsides for damage, then went below. Danny sat on the saloon bunk, ashen, covered with bruises from the canned stores that had burst out of their lockers in the storm and now lay in dented chaos on the floor.

‘Is it over?’ said Danny.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Are you all right?’

Danny stared blindly towards the light that came from the companionway hatch. His spectacles were lost or smashed.

‘I thought God had decided to finish me,’ he said.

I waited, but he said nothing more.

‘Why would God do that?’ I said.

‘You asked me what I did before I retired. I was ashamed to tell you. I haven’t lived a good life.’

‘Well,’ I said. ‘It looks like God is giving you another chance.’

Danny smiled then, and I smiled too. I was thinking of land. Of places where fresh water sparkled in glasses, quietly on tables. Of calm suburban evenings where the sea was a sheet to draw lines on. Of Annabel, bedecked with hula hoops. It seemed incredible that I had never seen the beauty of it all until now. The sea smelled clean and new, and the sun streaming down through the ragged clouds was the warm golden colour of honey, and the tea we made was hot and sweet and good. I closed my eyes and reckoned the days till our landfall.

It was Danny who noticed the water rising around our feet. Quickly it rose above our ankles, sluicing from side to side in the swell. It lifted the floorboards and rose so quickly – as high as our calves now – that it was obvious nothing could be done about it. No pump, no relay of buckets could get water out of that boat as fast as it was coming in.

Danny gripped the edge of the chart table and rocked back and forward, moaning. I made him put on a life jacket and I grabbed one too. I cast my mind around in panic to all of the places water can get into a yacht. I splashed through the rising flood to check all the stopcocks, and ripped out the companionway stairs to check the engine's water intake. Nothing. Then, with dread, I understood where the water was coming from. The rudder post, weakened by the fishing net, must have cracked in the storm and broken off in this swell. The jagged end had burst through the hull fitting, and now the sea was raging in through the rent. We were two hundred miles offshore, the hull must have a hole in it the size of a football, and we were sinking fast. The life raft had broken loose in the storm. We didn't even have bunk cushions to use as floats. I'd burned them in the dockyard in Marseilles.

Danny stopped moaning. He stared at the rising water while I explained the situation to him. His face was expressionless. He stood there blinking while I took the radio handset and made a hopeless Mayday call into the howling ocean static.

Then, standing in the cabin with water up to our knees, Danny nodded, and patted me on the shoulder, and said it was time to pray.

I had no words but I knelt with him in that rising water, feeling ourselves sinking into history. Two metres' depth of history, and under that, plenty of spare.

I realised I was weeping. Danny was cupping the flooding water in his hands, letting it run through his fingers. He nodded. He seemed to accept it. He even raised his cupped palm to his mouth, and tasted the approach of silence.

I watched his eyes go wide in surprise. Then he tasted the water again. For a long moment, he looked desperately confused. Then he smiled. The smile broke over his face like sunrise, and he began to laugh. I realised he had cracked. I felt the terror of madness entering into the place of our death.

‘What?’ I said. ‘What is it?’

‘The water!’ said Danny. ‘Taste it! It’s sweet!’

I felt an overwhelming pity for the man.

‘That’s impossible, Danny,’ I said quietly. ‘This is the middle of the Mediterranean. It’s all salt water here.’

‘Taste it!’ said Danny.

And I did. And the water was sweet.

When I realised what had happened, I began laughing too. I lay back in the cool, fresh water and let it wash all around me. I jumped up, and Danny stood too, and we kicked the fresh water up at one another and laughed and shouted and screamed for joy into each other’s faces until our voices were gone and the world was changed and the future rose back into sight and breathed hugely, like a whale surfacing after sounding very deep.

The boat’s drinking-water tanks, weakened by the storm, had shattered. The fresh water had flooded the boat, but once the tanks were empty, the water stopped rising. We collected as much of it as we could in bottles and jerrycans, and pumped the rest overboard. We saved enough fresh water to last us nearly until Crete, but by the time we sailed into Heraklion, bearded and wild, we were frankly down to Scotch.

It speaks its own language, the sea. It fades like a dream, and much of the sense of it is forgotten when your feet touch land. I sometimes try to explain to Annabel what I understood, that morning after the storm, as we hoisted the mainsail and unfurled the genoa and set out

into the blue east with the quicksilver wake bubbling up behind us. I have tried, and Danny has tried, but both of us agree that a part of it is forgotten out there.

I remember that we laughed a lot, that morning. I remember we felt in awe of a world that was new and unfamiliar. With absolute certainty we knew that our position was 34 degrees and 47 minutes North, 17 degrees and 38 minutes East, but that no longer seemed sufficient to describe how far we had come.

From the rack beside the chart table, Danny Zeichner took the pair of brass nautical dividers. He opened them up to the span of his hand, and looked lovingly down at them, and smiled.

[ENDS]

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