

COASTAL CRUISE

ONE

Right away, you'd peg Ken as a stand-up guy. Sniffs the wind and gauges the tides. Once he gets his bearings, come squall, gale, or storm he holds his course. Makes his waypoint nine times out of ten. You'd pick him for a skipper, any day of the week.

This was a Saturday. A fine windy one on the Sea of Cortez.

God has a way of mixing things up. Ken's wife Rachel couldn't chart a course up Route 1 from Big Sur to Half Moon Bay. The two of them would go at it like tomcats over a fish head. It always went her way right or wrong, but they had to tack and jibe to get there. The rest of us – me, Carli, Luis and Indira – busied ourselves swabbing deck and coiling line until they worked it out. Once under sail Rachel got off Ken's case.

Luis, he rears up to a fast start, and if you give him his head he'll dash straight into the ditch. Lucky the way things'd been mixed, Indira paired with him like a dray with a racehorse: she calmed him down.

Carli and I, we took things in stride.

She and Luis did know their way around a boat. They sweated the details on sail trim and weather helm. That left the heavy lifting to me and Indira. She was strong as a ploughhorse, twice as good looking and half as smart. Me, I don't know a halyard from a jibsheet, but I do my stints in the Reserves and keep myself in shape. So I ain't a total loss.

Weather-wise, that Saturday started out fine. As for the boat, not so much. She'd seen more foul weather than any thirty-year-old sloop should, and less maintenance than a yearling day cruiser.

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Fresh out of harbor, when we'd got the main halfway raised, our forestay snapped clean off. That's the wire that holds the mast to the bow, to keep it from bending backward under strain. Sounded like a cannon shot in a stainless drum. The mast leaned toward the rear of the ship. Before we could even react, Ken had her stern to the wind and was unreeling a spare halyard. Carli got Indira up in the bow, hooking the new line to a forward cleat. I took three turns on the winch and ground away, hauled the mast back to vertical.

Hell of a way to start a six-day cruise.

Ken made the only sensible decision, to head back to port and assess the situation. Whether to call things off, until this ship was up to the task.

Rachel stormed up from the saloon below decks. She got right in Ken's face. Carli and I backed off while they had it out. Luis balled his fists, a warning sign Indira'd seen before. She calmed him down and steered him off toward the rope locker. Indi and I jury-rigged the jib sail around our improvised forestay, so it'd stay fast from clew to masthead. That jib caught the wind and flared out before the mast.

By the time Ken announced we were going ahead with our trip -- Rachel had won, as usual -- we were ready to try again raising the main. This time, we got it up easy. With the jib trimmed and the main airfoiling, she picked up speed. Soon we were kicking up spray, heeling on a close reach, all of us leaning out to windward to balance the boat. It felt like a fresh start.

TWO

The thing about sailing is, you can know *how* to do stuff, like Carli does. But that doesn't mean you know *what* to do, or *when*. On this boat only Ken knew that. Which is why he was the skipper. Me, I'm clueless all around. Indira's not much better. Rachel's kind of in between: she's got a little experience, and a whole lot of attitude. Her M.O. is, kick up a stink over anybody else's choice.

Ken steered us out to open water. Then he said he needed a break. Nice breeze, dolphins at the bow, flying fish. Ceviche and avocado slices, good tequila. Ken a little unsteady climbing down the companionway. Rachel started bitching about dark water ahead, but we ignored her. We were already sick of her shit.

Luis bustled around coiling and cleaning. Carli had the helm. I did some calisthenics on the foredeck. Clouds, like vertical palm fronds, gradually spread across the sky in dappled checkerboard patterns. Like mackerel scales.

We heard all kinds of racket from the head. Ken appeared at the companionway. His face was a pretty ghastly green.

"Not feeling so good," he said.

Rachel was all over him.

"I told you to take that Dramamine," she said angrily. "You do this every time!" She gripped his arms and shoved him back down toward their berth. Last we saw of them for a while.

Meanwhile Luis had run out of steam. He spread out on the cockpit bench.

"Jib's luffing, Carli," he said. "Mind your trim." Lay back down, pulled his hat over his face.

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“I am! But the wind keeps veering west. We’re going to have to tack.”

“That’s a terrible idea!” said Rachel coming back up on deck, but we ignored her. We were sick of her shit.

“OK guys,” said Carli to me and Indira. “Here’s your chance to show what kind of sailors you can be!”

We jumped up, game though clueless. Carli talked us through the maneuver. I would pull in the mainsail as we turned into the wind, then let it out on the other side. Piece of cake. Indi meanwhile was to untie the jib sheet, a rope which held the tail of the front sail on this side. After the turn, she’d tighten up the sheet on the other side.

“Ready to tack!” Carli sang out, and yanked the wheel over. The sails started flapping like mad hens cornered by a pack of foxes. A light rain fell.

“What the fuck?” shouted Luis, sitting up all groggy.

I lost my footing when the wet deck reeled over. It went from leaning one way to leaning the other. The rope I was holding pulled off its winch. If I hadn’t let go it would’ve taken my hand with it. The boom, that heavy beam that holds the bottom of the main sail, whipped across the boat like a baseball bat slamming a homer -- straight into Luis’s temple.

The man didn’t make a sound. He just crumpled to the deck like a blowup doll punctured.

Rachel dashed to Luis’s side. She was the only one with any medical background. Indi and I stood, paralyzed.

Carli shouted, “Pull in the sails! Catch me some wind so I can steer!”

We scrambled for any bit of rope and began yanking like marionettes. Ken poked his head out of the companionway with the first aid kit. He guerped up a big load of green puke on

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Luis's legs. Rachel glared at him and he sank back into the cabin. She bandaged the gash on Luis's forehead while Carli wrestled the boat back under control.

The breeze had worked itself into a gale. Sheets of water pummeled the deck.

"He's out cold!" Rachel shouted into the now-howling wind. She pulled up Luis's eyelids. His pupils were huge. Drool seeped from his mouth.

"We have to reef the sails, before we capsize!" said Carli.

Rachel looked at her in disbelief.

"No way!" she said. "These two clowns couldn't reef this boat in a dead calm, much less in a storm. And I have to look after Luis!" Who was sliding down the steeply leaning deck in the greasy slick of Ken's vomit.

Carli ignored her. She pointed me down into the cabin to the deck locker with the emergency kit. I yanked out life vests and passed them around. Ken had collapsed at the foot of the companionway. I manhandled him into a bright orange jacket, hoisted him up onto the settee.

With everyone suited up, we shuffled unconscious Luis down into the cabin and laid him on the opposite bench. Rachel stayed down to care for him. Indi and I climbed up to Carli's side, clutching whatever handholds we could find. The deck listed so heavily, anything not tied down slid right off the deck.

Carli shouted instructions over the howling wind. As far as I could gather, Indi was to lower the sail halfway. I was supposed to slip a rope through a hole in the sail and tie it back to the boom.

We were partway there when Rachel charged up and pushed me out of the way.

"You idiot!" she yelled at Carli. "It's way too late to reef! Get this sail all the way down. Now!"

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She began yanking on the sail as Indi lowered it. I tied clumsy knots to hold it to the boom, which swayed so wild it nearly threw me overboard. The deck listed side to side, heaved front to back. Our prow dug into the waves with every swell. Heavy objects crashed around in the cabin. I hoped Luis and Ken were okay.

Once the main was down, we dropped the jib. Tried to rouse Ken for advice, but he was passed out. We were running out of options. No way we could float around loose in this storm.

Carli and Rachel weren't expert chart readers, but they thought it was shallow enough the anchor would catch. We heaved that sucker into the deep and watched its chain play out. It stopped, went slack, then pulled tight. We didn't seem to be moving. It was the best we could do.

We couldn't tell just when the sun went down, the clouds were so black. Crawled down to the cabin and took stock. Hot. Stuffy. Hatches battened down to keep out the rain and sea. Ken and Luis motionless on the benches.

THREE

We lit the mooring beacon. That bright white masthead light was supposed to be visible in all directions. It barely showed through the thick mist and thudding rain.

“Are you happy now?” Rachel asked of no one in particular. “Didn’t any of you think to check the weather report?”

“I counted on Ken for that,” I said evenly.

She glared at me. “You *bastard!*” she hissed. “My husband is unconscious with food poisoning, and you have the nerve to lay blame on him!”

“I’m not laying blame on anyone. I’m trying to figure out what’s coming next.”

I looked at them all.

“How long until we move out of here?”

That’s when she blew up at me. “Move out? Move OUT??” Veins bulged on her forehead. She puffed and turned away. “What a fucking moron.”

I nearly popped her one right there, but Indira restrained me with a stern look.

“She has a point, you know. It’s not safe to set sail in weather like this.” Carli said, nervously glancing at Rachel. “We should maybe just ride it out at anchor.”

“I’m not so sure,” Indi chimed in. “We’ve got at least one seriously injured person on board. Don’t we owe it to Luis to get him out to a hospital as soon as possible?”

“We owe it to *ourselves*,” said Rachel icily, “to keep *ourselves* safe. You don’t risk five lives to help one, who’s not all that bad off.”

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A sudden motion caught the corner of my eye. We all looked over at Luis. His limbs twitched. Eyes wide open, his jaw ground back and forth. His teeth emitted an eerie, screeching sound in the hot, claustrophobic cabin.

“He’s having a seizure!” said Carli.

“Don’t be so dramatic,” said Rachel condescendingly. It’s just a nightmare.” She saw none of us were convinced.

“Come on guys, I used to be a lifeguard!” she said. “I’ve seen people in lots worse shape than this. What we need to do is hang tight. Ken will be up in the morning. He’ll get us out of this.”

A terrific gust hit the boat. Its entire frame shook as if in an earthquake. The bow dipped downward. A scraping sound of metal on rock reverberated through the timbers.

Carli went pale.

“I know that sound. That’s the anchor dragging on a rocky bottom.”

“You mean we don’t have purchase?” asked Indira.

“Exactly! Even with the sails down, the wind and the current are moving us around! This is really bad.”

“What’s the difference?” Rachel asked. “We didn’t know where we were when we first dropped the anchor.”

Even I knew this was bullshit. I blew up.

“It doesn’t matter where we are! What matters is, we’re floating around loose. Anything near us, we could crash into. We crash, the boat starts to leak. The boat leaks, it fills with water. It fills with water, it sinks. It sinks, we *die!*” I lunged over to the VHF radio and fiddled with the dials. “Now let’s stop talking and call for help.”

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I thumbed the mike. “Mayday, Mayday, Mayday.” Imminent danger, require urgent assistance.

Waited. Nothing.

Repeated the call. Nothing.

“Strong electronic discharges in the atmosphere can disrupt radio signals,” Carli ventured.

“That would include all these bolts of lightning, right?” Indi asked pointedly.

I nodded.

For the first time in an hour Ken moved. He leaned over the edge of the settee and heaved, a long series of agonized retches which produced a small stream of acrid bile. Rachel grabbed his shoulders and shook him, but he sank back without ever waking.

Indira stood up. “We’ve got to get these men to a hospital,” she said. “Even if we’ve never sailed at night before, we have some charts, and a good strong forward light...”

Rachel interrupted her right there.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!” she said. “Don’t you hear that wind?”

We listened. In fact, the wind had dialed down a notch. The cabin was rocking less. Still, no island of serenity.

I looked at Carli.

“What do you think?” I asked. “You’re the most experienced sailor now.”

Shy at the best of times, she wilted before Rachel’s glare.

“I... I really don’t know,” she said helplessly. “I might be able to get us to a safe harbor. But I’ve never done anything like this on my own. Maybe we *should* lay low for a while.”

The boat lurched again with that sick grinding sound.

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“Ken just might wake up soon, and give us some guidance,” I said. “But I’ve never seen anyone *this* sick from food poisoning.”

“Of course he will,” sang Rachel triumphant. She set her chin and crossed her arms. A sudden lurch of the deck marred the effect, throwing her sideways. She narrowly caught herself on the corner of the table.

“I don’t think we can count on that,” said Indira. “And Luis is our biggest worry. I’ve read that if you don’t treat a concussion, it can lead to really bad strokes, and even death.”

“Oh, please,” Rachel said condescendingly. “It’s a knock on the head, all right? He’ll be up in the morning with a goose bump on his temple and a headache.”

Carli screwed up her courage and said, “That’s not technically true, you know?” She took a deep breath. “My brothers played football, and their coaches insisted they see a doctor about any possible concussion.”

“And those seizures are really scary,” Indira added.

“So it’s decided. We set off, storm or no storm, and get these guys to the nearest hospital. At least if we go down, we go down fighting, and not cooped up belowdecks too scared to move.”

FOUR

I climbed back on deck with Indira and Carli. Rebecca sulked below with the two unconscious men.

We got the engine going. It charged the batteries so we could afford to shine the forward headlight. Carli took the helm. Indi turned on the nav lights. There was something reassuring about that red on the port side, green on starboard, and bright white to the stern.

Not that we could see much. The beam danced wildly to the boat's rocking motion. All it showed was rain blown horizontal in the howling wind, and billowing clouds at water level. The storm was back in full blast.

Carli eased the ship forward. As the chain slacked I reeled in the anchor. Once I'd stowed and shackled it, she swung the boat in a wide arc. Halfway through the turn a granite outcrop loomed dead ahead. So she slammed the engine into reverse.

For a second the bow scraped on something below waterline, then we pulled back.

"Which way is out?" shouted Indira. She gripped Carli's shoulders, standing behind her at the helm.

"No idea! I assume we're in some kind of cove, there must be a channel somewhere..."

We did a mechanical search pattern, backing up, turning twenty degrees to starboard, then inching forward until the next set of jagged rocks loomed close enough to show through the barely penetrable fog. Back again, turn, and forward, until we were too dizzy to know which way we faced. Finally managed a course out of the cove. Then we motored ahead, agonizingly slow.

I kept calling "Mayday" on the VHF. You should always get a response to a Mayday call on Channel 16, the one reserved for emergencies. Every vessel is required to monitor that

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channel continuously, and render assistance if needed. But our unit didn't seem to transmit in this weather.

The charts showed Baja California on our left, running northwest to southeast. Problem was, with so many bays and islands on the coast, we couldn't pinpoint our location. Hardly any life on shore; just a desolate rocky landscape. Our only hope was to find other boats riding out the weather in sheltered inlets. Most of them would shine an anchorage light. If the storm lessened and we kept a keen lookout, we just might spot one and find help.

FIVE

We chugged along dead slow. Peered into the fog. Still raining but the wind died back. Every five minutes we sounded the foghorn, one long blast to announce our location. Not like anyone was listening.

Indira went below to check on the wounded. Rachel slept alongside Ken. Luis sprawled on the opposite bench, his limbs twisted unnaturally. None of that worried Indi. What did was the squelching under her feet.

Every boat has a certain amount of bilge water at its lowest point. But the floor you walk on, the sole, is raised above the lower hull. Pumps on permanent alert switch on when the bilge beneath reaches a certain level, to dump the water overboard. If water rises into the cabin, you're in some trouble. When it rises in a very stormy night, with no visibility, two very sick crew members, and no clue where to find a safe harbor, you're in bad trouble.

Indira woke Rachel. Carli stayed at the helm. I got working with a manual pump, to suck out as much water as possible from the cabin belowdecks.

They pulled the floorboards and sure enough, the bilge was flooded. They knew what to do. Rachel held a light while Indi climbed down and felt around. Normally leaks happen at through-hull fittings, where a hose brings liquids into or out of the boat. She was looking for stop cocks which shut off flow at those junctures.

What she found was, a small jagged hole in the front compartment. The rocks must have burst our hull when we scraped the bottom, back in the cove.

“Holy shit!” said Rachel. Water gushed in through the gash in the hull. Indira ripped off her shirt and tried to stuff it into the hole. The water flowed too fast for it to stay wedged.

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“I can’t stanch it!” she cried.

My pumping slowed the water’s rise, but not near enough to make up for the inflow.

“We have to seal it from the outside,” Indi said.

For once, Rachel didn’t object. She ransacked the storage lockers while I pumped away.

Came up with a big sheet of canvas: a spare sail.

No idea what they meant. I kept on pumping and watched the water level rise.

Carli shut off the engine. They hauled the canvas up on deck. Mercifully the wind had died back. The rain slowed as well.

“We’ll send *him* down, right?” Carli said, looking at Rachel.

“Down where?” I asked.

“He wouldn’t know what to do with it,” said Rachel.

“With what?” I asked.

“Well, I’m not strong enough.” Carli.

“I’m strong! Just tell me what to do,” I cried.

“So it’s me then,” said Indira.

“You? *What?*” I asked in alarm. The three women finally noticed me.

“Obviously, she’s going to take that sail under the boat and bring it up the other side, so it covers the hole in the keel,” said Rachel. “*You idiot,*” she added under her breath.

“But that’s crazy!”

“Shut up.”

Then to my dismay, Indira yanked off her life vest.

“Can’t go under wearing this.” She grabbed the rope Carli had tied to the edge of the canvas.

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“Wish me luck,” she said.

Indi jumped into the greasy black waves. The sail trailed behind her.

To a non-sailor, when things speed up on board everything turns into a blur. People dash around doing incomprehensible things. If you try to help they shout at you to get out of the way, so that’s what I did.

The canvas played out, pulled under the surface. Carli took me by the shoulders and turned me around. I finally got it. I’d be Indi’s welcoming party, when she emerged on the other side of the boat.

I ran across the deck and looked down.

Rachel shone her light into the water. A ghostly shimmer of sailcloth emerged from under the hull. But I didn’t see Indira! Watched paralyzed until Rachel slapped me, hard, in the back.

“Dive, you moron! She’s drowning!”

I jumped in feet first and felt fingers clutching my ankle. The life vest kept me afloat. I tore at its straps. They ripped off and the jacket blew free. I dove, grabbed a wrist, and yanked. After an agonizing moment something gave. Indira rose to the surface choking. She wrapped my fingers around the rope holding the sailcloth. Then she grabbed the life preserver Rachel had tossed down.

Carli threw me a line and motioned to tie it to the end of the sail rope. I fumbled granny knots until it seemed secure. She hauled it tight, plastering the canvas to the side of the boat.

“That’s it,” shouted Rachel. “Now get your asses back on board!”

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Indi had caught her breath. She led me, clinging to the life preserver, toward the back of the boat. Carli lowered the swim ladder. Buffeted by the swell, we hauled ourselves up on deck. For one minute we looked at each other, then the spell broke.

“Get back over there and pump!” Rachel shouted at me. She led Carli forward, back to the helm. They started the engine.

What I saw climbing down the companionway I will never forget. The water was at waist level. Luis floated, which seemed miraculous... he was still unconscious. What held him up?

SIX

We lifted Luis to the deck as gently as we could, laid him out on the cockpit bench. Tried to get Rachel to tend to him, but she couldn't take any more. Crouched in the cockpit's corner, face to the coaming, she moaned, a soft, keening wail.

The engine chugged on, coughing occasionally. Still so dark we couldn't make out the shoreline. Carli steered by the compass.

The storm passed. I pumped away at the bilge. Barely kept up with the water in the cabin, which weighed the ship down to half speed. Indira leaned forward against the bow pulpit. She strained her eyes to pierce the shroud of night. We hoped she could spot any rocks or debris before the ship ploughed into them.

Rescue was our only, slim, hope. The radio'd died underwater in the cabin. Our mast-mounted electric distress light flashed out its SOS signal, but who would be out on the sea to see it on a night like this?

The engine began to splutter, missed a beat, then caught its rhythm back. Indira came to my side.

“We're running out of gas.”

We called out to Rachel, but she wouldn't look up. Indi made to climb down into the cabin for spare fuel, but I stopped her. She looked at me questioningly. I just shook my head and set her on the bilge pump. Braced myself and dropped down the companionway, careful not to turn my flashlight on the horror right in front of me.

Held my breath and sank into the bilgewater. Dived to reach under benches and stairs. Craned into cramped storage lockers. Rummaged around with the waterproof torch in one hand.

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A heavy green fuel can half floated in a forward compartment so I lugged it up onto the heaving deck.

In one of those eerie breaks of a coastal squall, the wind had died to nothing. I barely felt the rain. The engine had died while I was below. We were becalmed in a rough sea.

Carli unscrewed the fuel feeder deck plate. I poured all five gallons into the tank and the engine burped back to life. We took up our positions: Carli at the helm, Indi spotting up front, and me at the bilge pump. Rachel inconsolate by Luis insensate in the cockpit.

Faint light glimmered in the east. The seas calmed. Our emergency beacon pulsed out its SOS. The bilge pump now kept up with what water seeped in, through the hole in the keel and past our improvised sail plug. We dared to hope for rescue.

The engine coughed and died. Rachel turned back from her numbness. She took one look at the empty gas can and sat bolt upright.

“No! You *idiots!*” She screamed.

“What?”

“It’s green! Can’t you see?”

We looked at her helplessly. It was, yes, green.

“Green! As in, Diesel Fuel!”

We still didn’t get it.

“This is a gasoline engine, you morons!” She forced herself to calm down.

“You just put diesel in a gas engine. You don’t do that! Now the whole fuel system needs to be flushed. Then we need to start over with gasoline. If we’re lucky we might get it going after that.”

I spoke up.

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“There’s no gasoline. I checked all the storage compartments. This was the only fuel on board.”

Rachel despondent stroked Luis’s lifeless hair. I joined Carli at the helm, useless as it now was without power from sail nor engine. Indi joined us. We mirrored each other’s exhaustion in our orange life preservers. The ship rocked gently in the dwindling swells.

Our emergency beacon saved us. A military-looking ship appeared on our starboard bow. We hooted long bursts on our air horn, as if they hadn’t already seen us.

It was the Coast Guard. They rolled Luis onto a stretcher and slung him to their deck with a crane. Then they questioned us.

They’d done their homework. After going over Luis’s accident they got to the point:

We had registered six people on the ship in our sail plan with the harbor. We were only five here. Where was the sixth?

SEVEN

Climbing down the companionway after we'd stretched the sail fabric under the keel, I had found Luis, miraculously still alive. But until I got up close, I couldn't figure out how he'd avoided sinking into the bilgewater and drowning.

Clutched under Luis's arms and lifted, and beneath his weight I saw – Ken! What was *left* of Ken: a body dead on all fours under the water. He'd formed a platform. He'd supported his crewman and saved Luis's life, had our captain, and he'd given up his own.

Right away, you'd have pegged Ken as a stand-up guy.