

3898 word count

Amy

In this day and age, blue water sailing alone is not unheard of, but at this particular moment she was beginning to question the wisdom of doing so. The alarm in the bilge let her know that she was taking on more water than was being pumped out. Normally this wouldn't be cause for panic as all that would be required would be for her to open the floor hatch under the shower, check to see if the pump was working properly and, if it wasn't, replace it with one of the two spares that she carried in the aft storage, under the stern deck. But today wasn't normal as she was dealing with thirty knot winds coming in from different directions and trying to bring down the mainsail. She had all the sail lines rigged to come through the helm station, where she could bring in and let out the sail while steering the boat. It was a very efficient set up, recommended to her by Sam from the marina she had set out from seven months earlier.

Ellen had bought her single mast catamaran five years past, the fulfillment of a lifelong dream to sail to the Caribbean, a dream not shared by her ex, Richard. Their separation and eventual divorce had been amicable enough, both having achieved a level of professional and financial success to allow them to pursue paths in their lives that they desired. It just happened that these respective paths were not parallel, and headed in opposite directions. Richard was set upon proving to everyone they knew that he could be more successful than any of them, and set about to build a body of small businesses and enterprises locally that would showcase his name to the world. Ellen was set on exploring the world and her own personal boundaries. Her idea of success was to follow every latitude to see where it led too. His was to establish himself firmly where he was.

After the dust had settled and the finances had been worked out, Ellen took her resources, paid off all her outstanding debts, and flew to Florida. Renting a small apartment on the outskirts of Miami, she spent the next year researching sail boats, taking sailing lessons, and plotting out the new direction in her life. After a full eleven months, she found AMY, a forty five foot Leopard, built in South Africa and sailed to the U.S. three years earlier. The current owner had decided to settle on land and put the boat up for sale. AMY was named as a play on the french word ami, or friend. Ellen loved the name as she knew she and the boat would become inseparable friends. She also knew that changing the name of a boat was widely viewed as back luck. It was also considered back luck to have bananas on board, but she really didn't get that one. Whenever asked, she pronounced it 'ami', though spelled it Amy. It just felt right to her.

AMY had three cabins on board and was considered an owners model. That meant that one of the two hulls that made it a catamaran, was a huge owner's cabin, with a queen size bed and large head (bathroom.) The other hull, reached by one of the two sets of stairs from the main lounge, contained two cabins, each with its own small head. She loved this set up, as it allowed her plenty of personal space for whenever she had guests on board. The lounge contained the kitchen and a large table, surrounded by a u-shaped dinette. It was in truth more room than she needed, but she loved the stability of a catamaran, which sailed much more comfortably than a single hull sailboat. That stability

also allowed her to sail solo with greater ease, as there was room to run all the lines right to where she could manage them, without having to run all over the deck. Which right now was very important, as she was taking on water and sailing in a squall, which she hoped would pass soon.

She managed to get the main sail reefed in, so that it was taking a minimum amount of wind and clamped the line. The autopilot was still engaged so she was able to leave the wheel and quickly head inside and down to shower in the owners cabin. She got the floor grate up and it was full of sea water that quickly started to spill into the rest of the bathroom. She set the grate aside. Put her hand down into the water and feel if the pump was working.

“What the fuck,” she swore out loud. The pump was working fine, running at full capacity but not keeping up with the amount of water coming in. She had to stop and think for a moment as this was entirely unexpected. She had thought, hoped almost, that the pump was not working and that she could quickly swap it out. Now the worst came to mind. Was there a hole in the hull? She couldn’t have run into anything, this far out in the Sea of Abaco. It wasn’t a deep part of the Caribbean, surrounded by islands that sheltered it from the strong force of the Atlantic. But she was in the center, where she couldn’t possibly strike bottom.

Whatever the cause, she had to find out where the water was getting in to Amy. Her mind raced through other possibilities as she climbed back up to the main salon and turned on her computer.

“AMY On!” she commanded in a firm tone. The virtual screen came on, appearing suspended in mid-air in front of her. Amy was slow to respond, showing only the time and date while an endless circle spun and spun. It was six forty-five am and the year was 2072. At least that much was working correctly. The display finally came on, showing a course heading and weather conditions. Ellen knew all this already and went right to the heart of the matter.

“AMY diagnose!” she yelled it this time, as if extra volume would speed the process. As the circle spun endlessly, she could hear the water down in the head start to splash against the inside of the closed door. The room was watertight and she knew this well, but the sound of water inside of Amy was terrifying to her.

As the circle continued its infinite loop, Ellen realized that this was not the immediate solution she needed. She turned and grabbed the emergency procedures manual she kept by the communications equipment on the shelf beside the door. She opened it to the contents and ran her finger down the headings until she found emergency diagnostics. She flipped to the page and read frantically. Five of the six steps involved using the diagnostic program and the different functions it could provide. She turned to look at the display and the insane spinning circle was still spinning. She turned back to the book and to the very last step. It was titled SensGen.

It started with a caution. It said in bolded letters **ONLY USE AS A LAST RESORT IN EVENT OF EMERGENCY**. Well this was clearly the case now and she skimmed over the explanations and further cautions to get to the operations. The SensGen, short for sensory generator was a device that allowed the user to ‘feel’ in a general sense, what the boat was feeling. This didn’t make a lot of sense to Ellen at that point, but she continued on to how to access it. It was built into the boat, behind a panel on the wall that normally mounted the fire extinguisher. This was to allow emergency access in the event of the mainframe becoming disabled. She removed the extinguisher from its mount and pried open the wall panel behind

it. This revealed a clear plastic panel, shaped to fit a human hand. The various points of the panel were fitted with a number of contact points that connected wirelessly with the human hand. Through these, a person could feel the sensors at the other end of the connections built into the hull.

Ellen did make note of the last line of warnings that read 'Prolonged exposure to SensGen can lead to physical and mental damage. Use only as a last resort in life or death situations.' She decided to check the water level in the head one last time, as this last warning did add to her growing anxiety. She went back down and pushed the door open a crack, and water as high as the door handle poured out into the hallway. She pulled it back shut, climbed back up to the salon and to the SensGen panel. Anxiously, she extended her right hand towards the panel. It fit loosely into the hand shaped impression.

Ellen had to brace herself with her other hand on the wall as a wave of dizziness swept over her. Her eyes stayed open but lost their focus. For a moment, she was no longer there on Amy. Her mind and her body were awash in physical feelings, as the sensors in the hull made connections with her. Her mind was having trouble distinguishing her own feelings from those of the boat. She could feel the wetness of the ocean but was dry herself, inside the cabin. It took a few moments, but the feelings began to distinguish themselves, as if she had another limb attached to her body. She closed her eyes, forcing herself to focus on these new sensory inputs, and to put out of her mind the chaos around her. She knew that she had to react to find where the water was coming in, but this added anxiety was clouding her focus.

She pulled her hand away, opened her eyes and took a deep breath. Looking around, the storm was gone. How long had she been standing there she wondered. Outside, the sun was shining again, the clouds mostly parted and the breeze had died down. The waves had dropped in size and Amy was bobbing in place, not really moving as the sails were still down.

Ellen climbed back down the stairs and stepped into ankle deep water right away. The leak was still there and water was still coming in. She could hear the bilge pump still running, so that much was good. She headed back up to the panel, took a deep breath again, and placed her hand back on the SensGen. This time she knew what to expect but it was still taking some time to understand what she was feeling. The wetness of the water she figured out and then tried to focus on what hurt, or felt different from the rest of the feelings she was taking in.

The SensGen had been developed just a few years earlier, first as a diagnostic outreach for the mainframes but then further developed, integrating neural port connections that had been developed for amputees. Someone, somewhere, had combined the two and found that, like an artificial mechanical hand that could be controlled by the wearer, it could also send feedback to the user. That was the breakthrough, when the company announced that these pathways could send AND receive.

The technology was still in its infancy, being used for the most part for simple arrangements. A researcher had died when his mind was unable to process the feedback from connecting to a propulsion system, overloading his neural system and turning off his physical functions. He died there in lab, on camera and in front of military representatives, who had been hoping for a major breakthrough. That death led to restrictions on the SensGen in its commercial applications, and to its most basic uses. The company found that in its simplest application, users would be able to feel the simplest of stimulation possible, recognizing familiar sensations but not overloading their senses.

Ellen, more composed this time, could feel something different in this new outreach. The water, warm and smooth, flowing over the hull was calm, nice. But there was a rough spot on the hull where the water was coming in. She took another deep breath and held it. Focusing all her abilities on this one, aberration in the water flow, she could sense where it was. Knowing the layout of Amy by heart, she was able to 'feel' the penetration in the area behind the toilet.

Pulling her hand away, Ellen sprinted out the door to the back deck, and made her way to the front of the boat, stopping at a small square hatch in the deck. She kneeled down, opening the two latches holding it tight in place and opened it, flipping it all the way open. Looking down it was dark and full of murky water, with half full cans and lines floating on the surface. One by one, she pulled the debris out of the water. She had grabbed a hand light on her way there and switched it on, shining it down into the water. Right away she could see the problem. The pipe coming from the back of the toilet split into a y, with one pipe heading into a holding tank and the other out the side of Amy, where waste could be discharged when she was not in a harbour. The pipe that ran to the outside was hanging loose, unconnected to the side of the boat, with water rushing in. The one way valve on the end of the pipe had ripped right through the hull and pulled right inside.

"Sorry Amy, looks like I ripped you a new one," she said apologetically. Ellen had no idea how this could have happened but she knew it had to be dealt with. Running to the aft locker on the other side of Amy, Ellen quickly found her fiberglass repair kit, her harness and gloves, and hurried back up front. She decided it would be easier to patch Amy from the outside, even if this would scar her sleek appearance. It was too dark and cramped to work properly inside the front storage space. She also didn't care much for the thought of swimming in the sewage that was now well mixed in with the sea water.

The repair kit was simple enough to use, unrolling the fibre mat, cutting it to cover the hole and then using the molecular binder to weld it in place. The hole wasn't that big, but it was big enough that the pipe would not pull back into place to close it. The fitting had pulled right through the skin and hull of Amy and left a jagged hole.

With the patch in place, Ellen set up another pump on the deck and began to pump out the hold, while the bilge pump inside now made headway and eventually drained the washroom and hull. Deciding to wait to clean up the mess until she could dock somewhere, she lay course to the nearest port, which on the map was at a place called Moore's Island.

There was a single dock there, which was designed to service the fishing boats of the area. It had fuel and a place to unload and store their catch, but there were no repair faculties or places to tie up. When she reached the harbourmaster on the transmitter, he would not give her permission to tie up, as the fuel dock was only for temporary use and he had many customers who would need to use it. He allowed that she could anchor in the small bay, and he would keep a watch out for her. He could not offer her any help other than to say that there would be a good weather window for sailing in a couple of days, and that she should make for Freeport, where the best facilities were. The autopilot had functioned on the way to this small island, but Amy's systems were still in some state of shock, with the simplest commands taking minutes and minutes to complete. Ellen knew how to sail and navigate, that wasn't the problem. The main problem, as far as she was concerned, was that her uplink to the sky was intermittent at best. Her Moms hologram faded in and out while they were sitting and having coffee, annoying and troubling her. She knew she could call for help if needed, but being cut off from her live

music, movies and conversations was something she had never experienced. Every bit of music and programming she had saved over the years was up there, now unreachable. She sailed that last day into Moore's island listening only to the sounds of the sea, lapping at and flowing on Amy's hull.

That night, after satisfying herself that the hull patch was holding and solid, she set about cleaning and drying the interior of the cabin. That part was ok, it was cleaning out the hold up front that she dreaded. She used every bit of disinfectant that she could find, liberally spraying it all over the hold, then rinsing it with fresh water and pumping it out again. She hoped she didn't have to climb in there anytime soon.

After supper, as she finished putting the dishes away, she went to replace the fire extinguisher when the plastic handshape on the wall caught her attention again. She put the extinguisher down, stared for a moment, and then put her hand onto the panel.

The feelings were more familiar now, the still, cool water against the slick hull on the outside. A comfortable dry feeling from the inside. But she could still feel something abnormal where she now knew the patch was. It was different than before, not an urgent feeling that the rushing water brought on but more of a dull throb, like the beginning of a toothache. Ellen's mind, not knowing the difference between her body and that of Amy, interpreted the pain and reacted with feelings of sadness. As she focused and concentrated more on the hull breach, tears slowly built up leading, moments later, to full on crying.

She pulled away from the panel and sat down, crying out loud. She couldn't stop and soon had her hands wrapped tightly around herself, sobbing out loud.

"You Bitch!" she screamed towards the wall. She hated being this upset, and it made her mad. She forced herself to take some deep breaths. As she calmed down, the rage turned to sadness. Ellen knew she wasn't sad for herself, she thought she was fine. But she felt an overwhelming sadness for Amy, who was in distress. It took almost a whole hour for Ellen to calm herself to the point where she could stand up again. She hadn't even cried like that when her marriage ended, or even anytime that she could remember. She poured herself a sundowner, a nice merlot, then sat on the back deck to watch the sun fade below the horizon. The wine helped, her anxiety subsiding, but these feeling took her back to many places in her past, reliving many of the hurts she had buried. She knew she was ok now, and that Amy too would be fine, and she slowly calmed to the point where she fell asleep on the deck, not even making down to her bed.

She awoke the next morning to sound of seagulls, flying overhead and screeching in anticipation of the fishing boats that were entering the bay. Surprised at waking up on deck, it took her a moment to realize where she was and how she ended up curled up on the bench, covered with a towel that she had hung to dry. Walking inside to fix some breakfast, she caught a glimpse of the SensGen panel, still uncovered. With some hesitation, she replaced the panel, and hung the fire extinguisher back in place, knowing now about the connection had shared, and could share with Amy.

Two days passed and as the Harbourmaster predicted, good winds came in from the east, and carried her under sail to the marina at Freeport, where real repairs could be made. Amy was hoisted out of the water and the repairs began. It was going to be a quick job, so Ellen just stayed on board while aground, not seeing the need to pay for a hotel.

The first night with Amy up on blocks, Ellen enjoyed an entire bottle of wine, not needing to worry about the boat drifting or the anchor losing its grasp on the bottom. Her mind drifted back to places she had blocked out, ran from really, and she really began to look at how her marriage ended. She always told herself, and anyone who asked, that they had drifted apart, but really, the more she thought about it, it was she who had pulled away. Ellen began to realize that on many levels, she didn't want anyone, anything, or anyplace, to tie her down. Richard had been a good husband and partner. They had fights, sure, but how many of them were because of her need to be unrestrained. She began to try to separate the silly, normal fights and arguments from those that were from her need to not be held there. The more she thought and replayed the ugly days that she could remember, the clearer the picture became that she was the one who left the marriage, and that Richard had been fighting to save it.

Awaking to the sounds of a busy boatyard the next morning, Ellen located the pain relievers to deal with a really bad headache. The workers were already on the bow, with the patch removed and a permanent repair underway. Tossing back the pills with some water, she felt a little different today. Last night's merlot had helped her to dredge up some revelations that she came to grips with, even still now, as the mid-morning sun played through the front windows of Amy. She didn't feel regret, more like a realization of herself, a better understanding of her actions and reactions. There was some sadness for sure, as she saw how her behaviours affected relationships in her life.

The repairs were done by the end of the next day, the hull seamlessly repaired and no longer scarred with the jagged hole and patch she wore on the way in. Amy was hoisted back into the water and Ellen set course for Florida, as hurricane season was fast approaching. It would take all day and through the night but she had done this many times, the autopilot allowing her to nap through the night.

At three thirty that morning the alarm went off and startled her. It was just to wake her to check course and she was relieved to find all well. After some thought, she opened the SensGen panel and reconnected with Amy, just to check, she told herself.

The now familiar feelings were calm and comfortable. There were no negative feelings, just the smooth feeling of the water against the hull, flowing uninterrupted, unbridled. The damage from before being repaired, all was uniform in how it felt. She was in a clear direction again.

"Good girl" she said aloud, as she replaced the panel.