

## **In Irons**

On the shoreward breeze Amelia Mays could smell late morning brunch cooking at Delano's restaurant down the on the boardwalk. She sat on the deck at her parents' house that faced the bay and beyond that was the sea. In her youth Amelia would spend entire summer days at Delano's restaurant, her mind filled with those blameless wishes and expectations that can only be felt and experienced during the transition between childhood and maturity.

From her chair on the deck, faintly, Amelia Mays could hear the laughter and children's shouts coming from Delano's. She imagined the waiters: adolescent boys in overlarge beige vests serving hot coffee and mimosas and bloody marys and chocolate milk on stainless steel trays. The boy-waiters smiling tightlipped to hide their cigarette breath. Amelia remembered sitting at the restaurant with her parents and feeling embarrassed for the boys her age and younger who tried to mask the smell from the diners that knew their families or that were their families. She saw them smoking out by the dumpster behind the kitchen, their vests unbuttoned, creased, the lapels collecting tiny particles of ash. When she was not with her parents and feeling bold she sometimes joined the boys and smoked half a cigarette or more. Outside the restaurant the boys did not try to hide it. Inside they became ashamed.

The sea and the sky were the same rich, infinite blue, interrupted where they met by low white clouds on the horizon and a dappling of whitehulled, whitemasted vessels moored in the bay. Amelia Mays peeled an orange and watched Dean out on her family's boat as he struggled with the boom. He looked the part of a leisurely boatman – if a little overweight – in his khaki shorts and pastel-yellow polo shirt with a cashmere sweater hanging from his broad shoulders. The problem was that he had no idea what to do on a boat further than what Amelia had taught him. If he were to have merely stood at the helm and looked off into the distance the image could

have passed for the cover of some acclaimed men's magazine. Instead he struggled. That morning Amelia insisted Dean should go out alone, that she was too tired on account of the wine from the night before. "Besides," she told Dean, "you'll get a better handle of it this way. I know you." When he kissed her his lips were dry and tasted of sea salt.

When Amelia Mays was a young girl her father Casey Mays taught her all of the proper knots and maneuvers so that by the time she was fourteen she could sail the family's twentyfourfooter beyond the calm waters of the bay on her own. On a fair day Amelia could go alone for miles until the shore was nearly pinched out at the horizon. If ever she felt afraid, she never admitted it to herself.

Every Sunday between Memorial Day and Columbus Day the yacht club sponsored a regatta. Beginning on Friday evening the harbor teemed with contenders from up and down the coast. Saturday at sundown there was dinner and music on the boardwalk. The high school's blue ribbon jazz band played. Everyone dressed his or her finest and laughed and talked over the music. Amelia's mother stood at the center of a large circle of friends, each an important, lifetime member of the yacht club. Amelia admired the way her mother commanded the direction of the conversation, the way the old bluejackets wanted her predictions on the ratings, or how the weather would affect a race's outcome, or who would be in the lead at the last buoy. "My Casey, of course," she always said through a coy smile. "Can one ever pick against family?" Amelia's mother was hardly ever wrong. Her word Saturday night became gospel Sunday morning.

And Casey Mays won more often than not. Sometimes he brought Amelia aboard to help him during the races. Amelia watched him move so quickly fore to aft, an Argonaut in topsiders, briny mansweat giving his shirtless torso a becoming sheen in the midday sunlight. Father

and daughter waved to mother onshore who waved back from the second-story deck. The deck overflowed with club members holding glasses of white wine. Amelia recalled the pride she felt as the boat flew towards the finish line – all action and all motion over a still world, as if the wind blew only for their boat – while her school friends looked idly on from the boardwalk or from the patio at Delano's.

The screen door slid open and from behind her back Amelia heard the sound of ice cubes knocking around the edge of a glass. Wearing a green robe, her mother stepped out onto the deck and sat down in the chair next to her. When Amelia Mays had moved back home in the springtime she saw for the first time how age had caught up with her mother. Her once bronze hair had faded to a dull gray-brown and become coarse. The lines on her face, which she had kept well hidden despite years spent by the sea watching daylight play on the water, were now unmistakably and irrevocably set. She had reached the age when a woman's body declares with certainty that it is old and the protestations of the mind against age begin to fail. Nevertheless, she carried herself like a woman not far removed from the last time someone called her beautiful.

"It sounds like a busy morning for Delano's," Amelia's mother mused, more out of habit than impulse. She shifted in her robe and rolled up her sleeves. "Oh, damn this heat. Hardly midmorning and it must be eightyfive, ninety, already."

Amelia watched as her mother fanned herself. Her mother's face and neck were flushed from some combination of her drink and a hot flash. "It may not seem so real now," her mother said through her lightly waving hand, "but someday you'll be an old woman, too." Squinting out over the bay she spotted Dean in the family boat. "You let Dean go out by himself?"

“He insisted,” Amelia lied. From the deck the women watched as the boom swung fiendishly over the starboard gunwale. The mainsail flared up for an instant and caught the wind, but it flagged just as quickly. Amelia’s mother stifled a laugh with a sip from her drink.

“Does he have any idea—”

“We thought it would be good practice for him to try it singlehanded. Just once around the harbor. She’s an easy boat. I wouldn’t put him up to it with the old twentyfour.”

The mainsail resembled white lung gasping for breath. He’s stuck now, Amelia thought to herself. He’ll be in before too long.

“Well, he’s got it unmoored at least,” said my mother. She reached into a side pocket on her robe and produced a pair of black sunglasses. “When’s he going to decide it’s time to start looking for work again?”

“It’s only been six months. Do I need to remind you it took Dad three years?”

“Your father,” she began, but checked herself before saying anything more. Her temper had momentarily risen to match the color of her face. Taking a breath, she began again, vaguely. “Your father is a special case. This young man though, this Dean, I don’t see that he has any direction. You had a job lined up in New York the fall before you graduated.”

“And we both know how that turned out, don’t we? Here I am back home again, Mom. And I haven’t been able to hold any job more than two months. ”

“Well then, is there an engagement on the way, or will this continue with the two of you sitting around until your dream jobs are dropped into your laps?” A thought came to her accompanied by an ironical smile. “Perhaps you two are perfect for one another after all.”

Amelia said nothing. Her mother arranged the sunglasses so they rested below the bridge of her nose. The orange sat peeled and whole on the round table.

One summer Casey Mays did not enter the boat in a single regatta. Amelia Mays pleaded with him to come around and register, just once, for her if not for himself. She even tried to register to race the boat singlehanded. But the registering clerk lied to her, saying without inflection that because she was not listed as a principal owner of the vessel she was ineligible to race, in accordance with some obscure rule laid down by the yacht club at the time of its establishment.

Casey Mays didn't set foot on the family's twentyfourfooter at all that summer, except maybe once to look for a favorite shirt. The first few Sundays he sat unmoving on the sofa in the living room, curtains drawn. Friends and respected club members visited periodically to ask what in God's name was he thinking. Without exception they left fuming and just ahead of a slamming door.

As time passed Casey Mays and his daughter grew apart. Only Casey's wife worried when Amelia Mays stayed out late. Amelia stayed at a friend's house for two weeks at a time, only going home for clean clothes. Soon Amelia's mother gave up scolding her and let Amelia make her own mistakes. One night Amelia walked on the beach with one of the waiter boys. He had a plastic bottle that held whiskey mixed with cola. Later, Amelia didn't mind his clumsiness or the sand in her hair.

Two weeks before Christmas Casey Mays lost his job. To save money, his wife convinced him to trade their boat for an older, slighter thing. It was a secondhand Rhodes 19 with a fixed keel, stripped naked of its paint at the waterline. No one ever even bothered to give it a name. Amelia took it out a handful of times and found that it moved about as well as a threelegged dog over a slick hardwood floor. Back home in the kitchen Amelia told her

father, “The sooner it sinks, the sooner it will be worth something.” He kept his back to her and swirled his glass.

That boat sat neglected in the harbor for years until one summer when Amelia Mays first brought Dean home from college. Dean had rekindled in her a feeling she had not felt since her adolescence, and Amelia wanted to show him how to sail. Amelia unmoored the boat taught him everything she could remember. Though she had hardly sailed in the years she was away at college, it was as if she had never missed a day on the water. The old boat had more life in it than Amelia once thought. It helped that Dean was a fast learner. By the end of the first week he was covered in bruises and could barely tie a square knot, but his tireless enthusiasm reminded Amelia of learning with her father years before. Dean told Amelia as often as he could that he loved her, and she said that she loved him back. She showed Dean photographs of her father as a younger man, found the trophies and the plaques in a cardboard box in the attic. One morning Amelia found a letter on the kitchen table. It was a note written by a wealthy distant relative to her mother. “I’m sorry,” it began, “but these are uncertain times for all of us and I’m obligated to protect my investments. Perhaps after the holidays if things begin to pick up I could send . . .”

The ice at the bottom of Amelia mother’s glass sat melting, glimmering. The dinghy ferried back towards the pier with Dean seated at the stern, his polo shirt half on. Amelia could tell from her chair on the deck that some of the lines would have to be retied. “I’ll have to go out later and fix them,” she thought.

“Well, he certainly gave it quite the effort,” said Amelia’s mother.

From within the house came the sound of heavy footsteps. Turning in my chair Amelia saw her father’s shadow passing from the kitchen into the living room. Hunched now,

hobbled, sunstarved, the old strength drained from his shoulders. Little more life in him than a piece of furniture. Looking much older than his fiftysomething years. Since Amelia returned home they had hardly spoken, except regarding how long she planned to stay. The night Dean arrived from the city Casey Mays didn't bother coming downstairs to greet him. His head dipped out of sight as he sunk into the living room sofa.

Amelia felt her mother watching her. "I should tell you," said her mother. Turning, Amelia found her own reflection in the sunglasses. "Yes, since it affects you and, I suppose, Dean as well. Since it appears you'll be staying here indefinitely."

Inside on the sofa Casey Mays coughed. To think how good of shape he was in at Dean's age, and Dean already getting fat around the waist and breathing heavy and sweating just from standing up.

"We almost gave up our mooring space this past spring." She grinned closedmouthed. Amelia did not know what to say. It took all of her composure to hold back a shout. "Yes," her mother continued. "After thirtyfive years in the family. I was down at the clubhouse ready to turn in the paperwork and your father came in and stopped me. Imagine that."

*Imagine that*, Amelia thought. Imagine now seven or eight years living on the cusp of the ocean and not touching the ocean, hardly looking at the ocean, even when standing staring straight ahead and pivoting in a circle half of all you see is ocean. After all of the glory the ocean brought you. Imagine living those years in a monklike hush, apologizing to no one, not even yourself. Then taking the pains to drive down to that self-important yacht club that once praised your name and subsequently disowned you and you drowning the last timeworn husk of your pride, all to stop your wife from saving you two thousand dollars per annum on a mooring space for a boat neither of you touched since the day it became yours.

“Thirtyfive years,” repeated her mother. “Can you believe it. Since before Dad and I ever met. When my parents, your grandparents, lived in this house. Before they had a waitlist for mooring spaces. And this will be it. It has been settled. This is going to be the last summer.”

“But he stopped you.”

“Yes. And it wasn’t the first time. But it was the last.”

“But the waitlist is ten, twenty years. If you give up that mooring, we’ll never get it back.”

“I used to take him out. I taught *him* everything I knew about sailing. Did you know that? He never told you that. Until we met he’d never sailed, no. Never even paddled in a canoe, for godsakes. After you were born I stopped. Had to. Hadn’t the time. But he kept at it. And of course he became great.”

The two women sat in silence. Out on the water the nose of the dinghy leapt and fell as it rode over the waves. Less than fifty yards from the pier now it plowed slow and stubborn through the oncoming wind.

“But he’s sixty now,” her mother said without emotion, “and it’s six years since his last job ended. We simply can’t afford the luxuries we’re used to anymore.” She lifted her glass and shook the ice cubes around as if to remind herself that she had finished her drink. “What a shame.”

Dean’s head, dog-tired, still bowed. The ice cubes dissipating in the glass. The orange peel shriveling on the plate in the sun. From Delano’s the smell of bacon and hash browns and cigarette smoke burning, the sound of a toddler crying on the patio. The sound of stillness emanating from within the house.



“Damn this heat,” said her mother, rising. “I’m going to change out of this robe.” At the door her mother hesitated. Her eyes might have found something within the house to set upon or she might have been staring at nothing, absorbed in some thought too vague to be apprehended entirely. Shaking her head, she lifted one foot over the threshold of the doorway and was half-swallowed by the living room’s shadowy interior. To Amelia she appeared to be half a person, frozen in time like the fleeting last image of a dream interrupted at an important moment. “Perhaps,” said her mother without meaning to be overheard, “it is all just a background.”

The last time Amelia Mays could remember sailing with her father she was sixteen years old and it was late in the fall. The water was choppy and gray. It churned like a bed sheet tangled with a sleeping body stuck in a violent dream. The wind blew hard out to sea, strong enough that Amelia might at any instant have been thrown overboard. But with her father accompanying her she felt unshakable. Pulling the tiller to starboard across the wind her father aimed the boat towards the horizon. He looked down at his daughter’s skinny legs and at her feet planted firmly to the deck. He thought her feet looked like ancillary masts bearing up her body as a sail. Amelia busied both her hands trimming the jib. Sheeting it in quickly to keep it inside the forestay. Her father tasting with his tongue the thick windy air, wet now, almost wet as the sea over which it swirled. With his eyes her father gave the command. *Now, pull.* And away they went.