

THE TRIP

In a way, Bill had prepared for this trip his whole life. But now there was so much to do, checking and re-checking, counting and recounting. He felt the events taking place somewhere outside himself. His shirt clung to the sweat on his back as he carried the last load of supplies toward the boat. Beside him, Arlene walked Bubbles, her twitchy Pomeranian. Sunlight sparkled against her diamond ring and the line of rhinestones on the leash.

The forty-foot *Seacraft* dwarfed the other boats along the dock. When Bill bought the cruiser on their twenty-fifth anniversary—for a sizable sum—it was called *Rosebud*. He'd had the letters primed clean and the new name, *Arlene's Dream*, hand painted on the transom in Roman script. That was before Bill learned that it was bad luck to rename a boat, especially after your wife.

On the pier ahead, a weather-aged man sat squat on an upside down bucket. An assortment of fishing lines dangled in the water. The man's clothes were worn to an oily sheen and beside him a blue sailor's cap held a sparse number of coins.

Shuffling his load, Bill reached into his pocket. "Here you go, friend." He tossed a five dollar bill into the hat.

Arlene curled her lip at the fisherman. "Let's go, Bill."

Without taking his eyes from the horizon, the old man spoke. "You best delay your plans a few days till the storm passes."

"Excuse me?" Bill turned to the haggard man, out of curiosity more than to consider the warning.

"Best let the gales blow themselves out before you pull off." The man's gaunt expression was unmoved. Bubbles sniffed the strange man's boots.

"That's ridiculous," Arlene said yanking the leash. "Can't you see there isn't a cloud on the horizon?"

"They're coming all right, thick and black. Can't see 'em. Feel 'em."

The old man's eyes were fixed in a bland stare. "He's blind," Bill whispered to his wife.

"The sun's doing," the old man said. "Lost my boat to the storms. Drifted seven days on flotsam. Aluminum, bright and shiny. Saved my life. Took my sight as pay."

"Come on, Bill." Arlene fanned her hand in front of her nose. "Can't you see there's something wrong with him?" Her voice was intentionally loud.

Bill studied the man's vacant face. "How did you know we're headed out?" he asked.

"Hear things on this pier."

"I appreciate the warning," Bill said. "The satellite shows clear skies, but we'll be on the look out."

As they descended the pier, the fisherman called behind them. “Won’t know the point of no return until there’s no going back.”

Once aboard the yacht, Bill checked and re-checked the navigation screen while Arlene relaxed on a deck lounge. She stripped down to a crocheted bathing suit top and a pair of trim white shorts. “You’re not going to pay attention to the senseless nattering of that old bum are you? He told you himself, he was hearing things.” Squeezing a dollop of sunscreen on her palm, she massaged it into carefully tanned skin.

“Just checking sweetheart,” Bill called from the navigation station.

“I know. I know. You’re just checking. I intend to relax enough for both of us on this trip.”

Arlene stretched out on the recliner. “Dear, be sure to check the champagne while you’re at it. Then I need you to come rub some sunscreen on my back.”

“Right-o Captain,” Bill called, still studying the satellite screens. The skies were clear except for a few high clouds coming in from the northeast. Bill pulled his jackknife from his pocket and rubbed the handle with his thumb. Its smooth surface and even weight were soothing in his hand. He studied the pattern scrimshawed into the walrus ivory in feathery lines. Beneath the rendering, the word VICTOR was etched in Roman calligraphy. He recited the word over in his head twenty-one times.

Bubbles’ toenails tapped across the teakwood decks as he pranced from nose to stern. The tapping was only interrupted by shrill yaps as the dog jumped onto the cushioned deck benches to bark at a pair of seagulls.

Bill checked the champagne in the cold box and arranged the bottles so the labels were evenly aligned. He then climbed on deck to see that the rigs were secured before returning to the navigation panel to look at the satellite screens again. He reviewed the weather update, by his count for a seventh time as he rubbed his thumb across the ivory handle in his pocket. He recited the word *VICTOR* another twenty-one times.

Arlene's voice called from above. "Dear, be sure to remind Bubbles about his litter area. We don't want him to have a smelly on deck. And bring me a glass of champagne, will you?"

"Aye-Aye my lovely."

The dog had stopped barking at the gulls and the quick, tic-tic of his nails resumed as he loop-d-looped from bow to stern. In addition to the elegant appointments, the gourmet galley, the state-of-the-art automation system—an expanse of the teakwood deck was covered by a plastic sheet and a slab of fresh sod for Bubbles.

Bill uncorked the champagne and poured the wine into a flute. Once on deck he tossed a white towel over his arm like a waiter and walked to where Arlene lounged. He stood over her in silence until Arlene was aware of his shadow blocking the sun's warmth.

"The lady ordered champagne?"

"Sit." Arlene patted her lounge chair. Bill sat and lifted the glass to Arlene's lips watching her throat move as she swallowed. He felt a moment of relief.

"Delicious. Put it there." Arlene motioned to the surface of a cargo box and handed Bill the tube of sunscreen. "My back," she reminded him as she rolled onto her stomach.

He squeezed the warm lotion from the tube and spread it across Arlene's shoulders.

"Don't wipe, massage," Arlene instructed. "That's right. Yes, there."

Bill felt her muscles soften as the lotion disappeared into her skin. "Done."

"What about the back of my legs?" Arlene said, but Bill jumped to his feet to resume his duties before she'd finished the sentence.

In the cabin, he resisted the urge to re-check the satellite view. If he checked it again he'd have to re-check it six more times. He finally fired the engine.

Bill watched the blind man on the pier as *Arlene's Dream* glided away from the dock.

Well offshore the sails fluttered and bloused in the wind. Ahead, the sky merged with the sea. Bill breathed in the tangy scent of the ocean and felt the tense band loosen from around his chest. For the first time in recent memory, he relaxed. With a light finger on the spoke of the wheel he closed his eyes and smiled into the sun, listening to the flap of the sails and the shatter of glass on deck.

"Damn it," Arlene said. "Bill, get me a towel will you? The wind knocked over my champagne."

"In a minute honey," he called in a carefree voice.

"Watch out Bubbles," Arlene warned. "I need it now. And bring me another glass, would you?"

"Right-o," he said locking the wheel. After he swept up the glass, he surveyed the collection of forward-facing wine labels and chose a Trilogie from Moët.

Arlene had changed out of her shorts and bathing suit top and wore only a leopard print sarong tied low around her hips. She rolled onto her side and rested her head in her hand. “Are you finally ready to start vacationing?” She smoothed back the leopard print to show off spa-polished skin.

They anchored by sunset in the open sea and for the next night and day they grazed on finger foods between sex and sweat, sips of champagne and lavender-scented sponge baths. She fed him pearls of beluga with a spoon carved from bone, and they sucked on sweet mango spears and strawberries dipped in dark chocolate. He watched Arlene dance by moonlight to the velvety voice of Etta James, then kneel before him and explore his body with her tongue and mouth, the back of her throat. When she wasn’t making him feel like her slave, Arlene made him feel like the luckiest man alive.

Salt spray hit Bill’s face. They’d fallen asleep on deck. Arlene’s head lay on his shoulder with her leg curled over his. The wind had swept up her leopard print sarong and it caught in the overhead mast like a streaming flag. It lashed free and whipped into the dark. He sat up, stunned. “Arlene, get up.” He jumped to his feet and threw on his pants.

“What’s wrong?” She rubbed her eyes, dazed from sleep. “Oh my God.” Naked, she sprang to her feet. While they’d slept the waves had gone from frosting curls to rabid swells.

Arlene clung naked to the rail against rollercoaster waves. “This is not okay. Bill, do something!”

He pressed a life vest against her chest. “That’s it?” she yelled over the wind.

Bill shook her once. “Put it on, damn it.”

For the first times in their lives, she did what she was told.

Bill yelled over the storm. “I need you to help me. Harness yourself to the tie line.” He nodded to the cable that spanned the portside of the boat. Jesus, this storm came out of nowhere. “Arlene, listen to me. We need to bring up the anchors.”

She looked beyond his shoulder and the color drained from her face.

He turned and saw an avalanche of water careen toward the boat. The vertical sheer rose before them. “It’s going to break right over us. Strap on,” Bill yelled. Arlene stood open-mouthed. “Strap on, Arlene. Latch your vest to the rail.”

She only turned her face from the wall of water and stared down at her feet. Bill staggered to her and braced her from behind. He fumbled with her vest latch as the wave reared and curled. There wasn’t time. He wrapped his arms around her and locked his fists to the guard rail.

Time stood still, or maybe space warped. The wave was still coming when it swept him up and heaved him across the deck. Water rushed over him and he pulled himself to his feet. “Arlene!”

Bill heard a guttural shred that made him cringe followed by the sound of a saw blade cutting through metal. The anchor cable must have caught in the propeller blades. *It’s tearing through the shaft.* The deck warped. Planks buckled and splintered. A propane barrel rolled into his leg and he crashed face first to the deck floor. Water gushed over his head. Metal howled and he felt the boat tip. Oh God, we’re going down, Bill thought. Rapids flooded the deck, sucking the boat into the sea. He spit saltwater from his mouth and waded waste deep to the cargo hold. Bill harnessed the life raft to the boat’s jack-line and yanked the inflation chord. The raft burst open and knocked him back.

“Arlene,” he called. “Arlene!” Damn it, answer. Please answer. Blinded by black water he floated on his stomach groping the deck floor in all directions. The contents of her purse bobbed about his head, a gold tube of lipstick, Fendi sunglasses. His fingers touched something warm and beating and he pulled it to him. “Bubbles,” Bill said, clutching the dazed dog, tiny and shivering in its drenched state. He hurled the animal from his hand. “Arlene!”

The boat pitched to the side and the jolt threw Arlene within his reach. “Thank God.” He grasped her limp arm, pulled her to his chest and kicked forward to grab the raft grip. Bill hoisted her over the edge of the raft and rolled in behind her. The raft’s tie-line tangled in the rails. The drowning weight of the boat would drag them under. He sliced through the line with his knife and the raft whirled into black foam. As he cradled his wife, Bill watched the remaining light of his grand boat flicker and dim. His thoughts went still, his attention held by the ocean swallowing the last remains of *Arlene’s Dream*.

The wind died suddenly and the massive swells flattened into chops, a change so stark Bill feared they were in the eye, slated for the storm’s other half. A plastic container of turkey jerky floated in the debris. He laid Arlene beside him and reeled in the supply satchel tied to the raft. He un-strapped an oar and dragged the water, salvaging the jerky and two floating cushions.

The sky went from black to purple-blue. In the pre-dawn light he looked down at his wife and lifted her against his chest. “Arlene?” A gash splayed the skin to the bone and ran from the tip of her ear, to the bridge of her nose. It oozed blood and a jelly-like substance. He touched his finger to the artery in her neck. A slow pulse seemed to rumble beneath her skin.

“You’re going to be fine, sweetheart.” Her head lolled open-mouthed against the up and down of his chest. “I’ll get you fixed up in short order.” Using a towel from the satchel as a mop, he wrung the pool of water from the raft then laid Arlene on the salvaged float cushions. Still shaking, he fumbled through the satchel for the first-aid kit. After dousing her wound with disinfectant he spun her head in a cocoon of gauze until the blood no longer seeped red.

Bill kissed the crown of her head, breathed into her damp hair and rocked her in his arms as he replayed the catastrophe in his mind. Stunned that it had all happened so fast, he was astounded by his swift decisions, his crystal focus. The old brain had taken over, the survival brain, an endowment that had gone dormant in his comfortable life. Nature obliges us to stay alive.

With that thought, he searched through the pockets of the satchel taking inventory...a flare gun, with three flares, flashlight, batteries, a collapsible fishing pole, an old army survival manual, four packets of sucrose tablets, four liters of water, a tarp and a container of turkey jerky. “Where is it?” He ripped the Velcro from the adjacent pockets searching for the solar still. “Here it is, Arlene.” He held it up as if to admire a wine label. Bill dipped the base in the ocean and assembled the evaporation dome over the top to distill precious water molecules from sea water.

“Don’t you worry, sweetheart. Planes navigate this route all the time. We have provisions to stay afloat until we can get a flare signal through. We’re in good shape.” He exhaled and leaned back against the raft. He’d reserved a berth at the yacht harbor ten days out. It could take up to two weeks before anyone would start to search for them.

Daybreak yielded a mauve-colored fog and he found himself praying, pleading for clear skies and planes. They drifted in the gauzy mist all day until night brought a black fog and a sky without stars.

Useless satellite report, Bill thought. “That old man on the pier knew. What had he said, Arlene?”

She lay without moving.

“He said we won’t know it’s too late until there’s no turning back. He got that right.” The weather hit broadside, a freak out of nowhere.

Bill fished his ivory jackknife from his pocket, studied the insignia and repeated the word *Victor* twenty-one times. He touched the ivory once to his bottom lip then cut a notch into the nylon strap of the pocket where he’d stored the rations. One day down, thirteen more to go.

That night, Bill stayed awake attending to every murmur and stir from Arlene. He dripped water onto her tongue and used his body to keep her warm. The waves slapped an even rhythm against the rubber raft and he spooned beside her under the spray and the tarp, humming the tune to *Amazing Grace* into his wife’s ear.

By the second day, Bill began to establish a routine. In the morning he peed into the ocean, ate a half-stick of jerky and rigged a shield with the tarpaulin.

The same autonomic force that took charge during the wreck now commandeered his body. He excreted precious little fluid and nothing else. He dribbled three capfuls of water down Arlene’s throat and took a swig himself. He’d read in *National Geographic* about a desert tribe that hunted for days with hardly any water by keeping their mouths

filled without swallowing. Just one more, he told himself and held the water in his mouth until it turned soupy.

By mid-morning, the sun burned through the haze to reveal squinting blue in every direction. He watched for contrails and specks on the horizon. “It’s a damned big ocean Arlene.” Her large diamond ring sparkled in the sun and the sight of it repulsed him. “It’s just a pretty rock. When we get home we’ll start a foundation. Would you like that, baby? We’ll feed the hungry or something.” He spent the better part of the day dragging the water with the fish-pole while he brainstormed plans, potential board members and strategic alliances.

“We’ll make a real difference, sweetheart,” Bill said, as he cradled Arlene and administered water into her mouth. He laid her down and smoothed his hand over her matted hair. The gauze had hardened, starched with blood and that jelly substance. He drew back his hand and dipped it in the ocean. After touching the knife handle to his lips he cut another notch into the nylon strap. He whispered the word aloud in three sets of seven.

He woke to cold water splashed in his face. A random wave turned the raft into a bathtub. Supplies floated like rubber toys. He spent the morning wringing water.

By high noon it must have been 90 degrees. Bill searched the provisions again for sunscreen, chap-stick, anything. He tried using the tarp as a sunshield, but it only trapped the heat and blocked his view of the sky. Arlene’s face turned radish red and giant blisters sprouted like toadstools on her nose and lips. In the dry heat, an inch of water accumulated in the solar flask. With a 360-degree view, Bill’s gaze fixed more and more on the still and the droplets of moisture that fogged the dome. “Sand in an hourglass,” he

said to the sky. There were seven notches on the strap. He'd already gone through the jerky. The salt intensified his thirst and he had less than a half-liter of water left.

He checked his pole. Nothing. "Where in the hell are all the fish?" The survival manual said flying fish had been known to jump right into the raft, but the manual was a good twenty-five years old. He took a package of sucrose tablets from his life vest pocket. The packet read,

CONSUMPTION OF THIS RATION WILL HELP MINIMIZE THE NEGATIVE
METABOLIC EFFECTS OF ACUTE STARVATION. *Cool Mint.*

He tore open the packet and popped one on his tongue. "That's one hell of a cool mint." The inside of the packet shined like aluminum and he attached a strip to the line of his pole.

Bill caught a glint of Arlene's ring and thought of little Bubbles. He felt sorry he'd flung away the dog, the size of a small chicken.

"All the trappings of luxury, it's a lie, insulation against nature Arlene, against this." He swept his arm in a half circle. "Downy beds, eight-hundred thread-count sheets. We think we can get a safe distance from the microbes and the maggots. What a joke." He spun the ring on her finger so the stone faced inside of her hand.

On the eighth day, Arlene's eyes opened, a shock of blue against her red face. "Arlene?" Bill cried out. She looked startled before her eyes rolled back in her head and she closed them again. "Sweetheart, can you hear me? Squeeze my hand if you can hear me." He thought her fingers moved. Didn't they? "Stay with me sweetheart."

He filled the bottle cap and dissolved a sucrose tablet in the water before trickling it between her lips. "That's my girl. Drink it down." Blisters colonized her nose and eyelids and sea salt corroded the wounds. The gauze around her head emitted a sour smell

and had turned the color of a scab. He held her to his chest and scoured the sky, careful not to touch the stiff gauze. Not one damned plane.

His body must have needed potassium. He ate bananas for each imaginary meal, bananas and shortcake biscuits, bananas and buttery ice cream with pralines or bananas in ripe clusters hacked right from the tree. He devoured them under its shade, standing upright, bare feet on cool grass. How he ached to stand and give his sore bones a rest. His body seemed to use first the store of fat that made it bearable to sit.

He waited until sundown when he could cut another notch in the strap. By the end of the day the solar still yielded a pint-and-a-half of water, subsistence levels for one person, not two.

Bill dozed on and off throughout the night. He dreamed of fishing by way of a special ring tone on his cell phone. Something knocked into the raft and he jolted awake. Shark, he thought and felt for the flashlight. There it was again. Something definitely nosed the raft. He swept the light over the water and saw a car tire bobbing beside the dinghy. "Jesus," he said, fanning the beam across the water. A nodding flotilla of garbage stretched as far as he could see...plastic cups and containers, toothbrushes in bleached pastel, plastic knives and sporks, plastic milk jugs, plastic salad trays, plastic, plastic, plastic. He salvaged some knives and sporks and one of the gallon milk jugs and went back to sleep.

The bottled water was long gone and they had to rely solely on the daily contents from the distiller. Bill leaned against the raft holding his pole in one hand and the old Army survival manual in the other.

DRINK THE AQUEOUS FLUID FOUND ALONG THE SPINE AND IN THE EYES OF LARGE FISH. CAREFULLY CUT THE FISH IN HALF TO GET THE FLUID ALONG THE SPINE AND SUCK THE EYE.

Bill tossed the manual down with a sigh. How would an eyeball be in his mouth, slimy, bouncy until it broke against his teeth? He longed to know. “Here fishy, fishy, fishy.” He studied the water for dorsal fins. Where there are sharks, there must be fish. The waters had been calm, idyllic for floating nowhere on a rubberized piece of shit. Yellow scabs of neoprene peeled from the edges of the raft. He worried more for the sun-cracked raft than the salt sores on his own skin.

If only he’d listened to the blind man on the pier, they’d be sipping champagne now and eating four inch thick steaks ladled in béarnaise. After dinner they’d relax on deck, under a muted sky while Etta sang in the background. Arlene would do her cute little lap dance routine then she’d want him to massage her feet.

“Arlene!” he screamed. I sound like a maniac, the observer in him noted. “Arlene, Arlene!” he raged at the sky, roaring her name until he fell exhausted into a coughing fit.

A little more than a quarter-cup of water accumulated from the solar still. I’ll take half and give the rest to her, Bill thought. When he moved the cup to his lips, the bliss of water against his throat brought such relief, he gulped it all. He wished for more and re-filled the still with seawater and attached the evaporation dome.

Bill stared at Arlene, her unconscious head propped on a cushion. He thought of spitting into her mouth. Even if he could bring himself to part with it, he had no saliva to give. Open blisters covered her lips. The crown of her head was sun-bleached angel-hair against her scabbed face. He'd always seen her as young, the same bold, sexy twenty-five year old, at thirty, at forty, at fifty. Wizedened from the sun, she now looked tiny and frail.

I'll give her the next ration, he thought, and turned his attention to his fish-pole and the thought of aqueous spinal fluid. His mind drifted and he was struck by an idle thought. *When she dies there will be more water for me.* Startled by the idea, he insisted he didn't mean it. *It wasn't me.* It was the thirst talking, his inner maniac. He thought of his knife and without taking it from his pocket he recited the word until his thoughts again floated idly and he found himself thinking on off, on off as the waves slapped against the raft. As soon as a few drops accumulated in the flask he dribbled them into her mouth. That night he didn't bother to cut a notch into the strap.

By noon the next day the heat was heavy on his skin. It was his thirst that caused him to drink the full day's water himself. It seemed to absorb directly into his tongue. Arlene is lucky, he thought, spared this nagging thirst and hunger.

The sky turned burnt orange as the sun seeped into the ocean. He pulled his knife from his pocket and studied the scrimshaw design in the ivory. Bill sensed the glands beneath his tongue tighten as if his mouth might water. The insignia filled him with sadness. It would be a mercy to let Arlene go. Withholding water would be an act of charity. It's what she'd want, *maybe*. If their situations were reversed, he'd hope she'd do the same to survive.

That night, he held his wife in his arms and sobbed without tears.

The next day Bill faded in and out of sleep, mortified and strangely calmed by the knowledge that Arlene wouldn't live much longer. What a strange world this is, Bill thought. Perfect in its savagery. Out of all of the potential designs for life, why in the hell choose one where we need to feed on each other to live? He was filled with the question why, hungry and thirsty with the question.

He hoped for a heaven, but the same minds that invented heaven, invented hell. Even if there was a heaven full of souls resigned to people damned, one thing was certain, he wouldn't want to hang out with them. He prayed to the sky to send a flying fish into his raft.

Bill woke thinking about a spring drive in the country that he'd taken years ago. Almond orchards lined the road and the mustard fields were in full bloom. It had just rained and up ahead he saw squirrels huddled together on the damp pavement. As his car approached they scurried away leaving a half-eaten carcass on the road. When he drove by, he saw the bushy tail, brindle hairs blowing like dead grass. His roommate in college had told him once about a pregnant dog left to starve in an abandoned yard. When she had her litter, she ate them all. His roommate said after that, the poor dog went crazy. Bill's dried saliva glands began to throb.

He grabbed Arlene's limp hand and righted the diamond ring on her finger. The sparkle calmed him some. Bill thought of grave sites in even rows, satin-lined boxes filled with shiny rings on slender gray bones. We humans respect our dead. He spent the day pushing away thoughts of thirst and hunger and feeding animals. His only escape was

sleep. He woke to squirrels, their tearing teeth their full cheeks and round stomachs. He slept, not caring if he ever woke again.

Dusk. His khakis were frayed and crusty with salt. He pulled the knife from his pocket. It no longer felt like a familiar tool in his hand. Bill held it with care. The blade was dull, or maybe he was too weak to score the strap.

Out of habit he touched the knife to his lips. They were scabbed and sore and tasted of salt. He stared at the word. VICTOR. It now meant something else. Who knows the real meaning of anything? He let go of the word, sensed it float away over the open sea. Without the word he was empty, filled with clear air.

Dark, the sky turned to stars, startling in their brilliance. The waves inhaled and exhaled and Bill felt peaceful, an infinitesimal part of something very big. He thought he heard music, a lilting crystalline tremor in everything, in the raft, in Arlene, in him and the stars and the space between the stars. He shot the flares into the night to watch them burn. After they were gone he lay awake to the music, looking up at the glitter of seventy-sextillion suns.

Before sunrise, he took Arlene in his arms, touched his hand to her head and kissed the blisters on her mouth. With his face against her neck he breathed in her smell, pungent and sweet. "I loved you," he whispered. He laid her head against his arm, as he drew the knife from his pocket and turned it in his hand. "Victor," he said aloud with the faint smile of someone who knows he's heard a joke, but doesn't quite get it. He tossed the knife into the water and watched it sink. An old song about clouds started up in his head. About how the shapes of clouds are what people see in them and how people change and clouds change. How there's just no figuring some things.

Gently, he lifted Arlene and laid her over the edge of the raft. Catching his breath against the cold he eased himself into the water. Bill lifted his wife into the sea, holding her hand lightly until it was natural to let it go. The song about clouds still played in his mind and he tried to sing the words. His breath was too fast and his throat choked with emotion. Water lapped into his mouth. Morning was unfolding. He kicked away from the raft and rolled on his back, staring into the sun without squinting and without counting, or holding back or reaching forward. He floated away in the song.

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