

Jibing

The Captain was storing provisions aboard *Shannon*, his 40-foot Cal, when he got the call that Mark and Lindsey wouldn't be able to make it. "Sorry, I know it's last minute," Mark said, "but we have a family emergency." Lindsey's mother suffered a stroke, he explained, and it didn't look good.

"Sorry to hear that," the Captain said, standing on the finger pier and leaning back against the starboard side of his sailboat. "I understand...but damn. Really can't cross with just the two of us."

"I know," Mark said. "We've been planning this for what, the last five years? I'm beyond disappointed and so is Lindsey."

"Please tell her I'm sorry about her mother and hope she makes a full recovery."

"I will. But listen, I have two friends who might be interested."

"Yeah? Experienced?"

"On Lake Michigan, yes," he said. "They're Chicagoans, been sailing the lake for decades. They have a bunch of certifications and I think Jenkins has his captain's license. They've done some sailing up on Superior, too, and out in San Diego during the winter."

While the Captain didn't like the idea of crossing the Atlantic with two crew members he didn't know, the idea of putting off the excursion until the following summer was depressing. He took the phone numbers, repeated his condolences, then disconnected the call. He absently stroked his short gray beard while thinking over the situation.

A few minutes later Chrissie appeared, all auburn curls and useful muscles, rolling a cart along the dock. "I know that look," she said as she drew closer. "What's wrong?"

He explained and she began to curse creatively. This was often followed by tears. They'd been friends since college and he knew her patterns.

"He did throw a lifeline," he said, hoping to stem the tide of tears.

"Pray tell."

He explained and added his qualms. "Not ideal, but I'd still like to go," he said. "If we were twenty years younger I'd risk it with just the two of us. At our age, though..."

"Call them," she said without hesitation.

He smiled and reached for his phone.

Matthew Jenkins and Rob Edwards, small business owners and avid yachtsman, jumped at the opportunity. A week later they flew to Boston and met for lunch at a restaurant with a view of the harbor. They were somewhere in their middle forties, about a decade younger than the Captain and Chrissie. Jenkins was a tall bald man who moved with an athletic grace; Edwards was shorter and skinny and had a head full of untamed gray hair.

"Hey, this is exciting," Jenkins said as they sat at a table. "Been wanting to go on a real ocean voyage for years."

"We're glad you could make it, Matthew," the Captain said.

"I go by Jenkins."

"Okay."

"That's all it says on his business cards, 'Jenkins,'" Rob added, playfully elbowing his friend. "Thinks he rock star like Bono or something."

They ordered and Chrissie asked them about sailing on the Great Lakes.

"Superior is my favorite, specifically the Apostle Islands area," Jenkins said.

“Heard they get some steep waves there.”

“That’s the truth,” Rob said. “We only experienced them in one squall, but that was enough.”

“Bad feeling when you crest one of those bad boys and know you’re going to slam down into the trough in the next second or so,” Jenkins added. “Hope we don’t see anything like that on this voyage. How long you figure to Portugal, Captain?”

“Two weeks or so to the Azores. I thought we’d hang out in the islands a few days, and then it’s another week to Lisbon.”

“If we don’t run into one of those pesky killer whales,” Chrissie said. “They’ve taken out a few sailboats recently.”

“Just a big dolphin, right?” Jenkins said.

“Yeah, but they’re smart and know how to disable a boat, going after the keel,” she said. “A mystery why the pods off the Portuguese coast are especially aggressive.”

Rob shrugged. “No worries, I see one coming, I’ll just shoot the damn thing. Problem solved.”

Chrissie stared at him. “You’re joking, right?”

“Hell no, if it’s between me and an animal, the critter is gonna die.”

“Well, with any luck we won’t see any orcas,” the Captain said, trying to lighten the mood.

“Nice we can all take the time,” Jenkins added. “I almost went under during the pandemic, but now I’m up to nine employees who can handle the shop while I’m gone.”

“Same, pretty much,” Rob said as he buttered a roll. “Are you two retired?”

“Yes, retired teachers,” Chrissie said. “We both taught in the Boston area for thirty years.”

“Are you...” Jenkins asked, wagging a finger in their direction.

The Captain and Chrissie looked at each other and laughed. “No, I’m divorced,” the Captain said. “Chrissie and I have been friends forever, done a lot of sailing up and down the East Coast. I bought *Shannon* a few years ago and live aboard.”

“Nice,” Rob said. “Though it must get pretty cold in the winter.”

“Not bad down in Florida,” the Captain said with a wink. “I head south to Fort Lauderdale in early October.”

“I’m gay,” Chrissie interjected.

The ensuing silence was broken by Jenkins. “We’ve gone out to California a few times to sail in the winter,” he said. “Nice place to visit, wouldn’t want to live there.”

After lunch they walked the dock to *Shannon* and the new crew members stored their gear. Chrissie and the Captain then gave them a tour, reviewing the navigation, engine and other systems. “I have the front berth and Chrissie has the aft. That leaves the side berths for you. We’re both willing to switch, though...”

“Generous of you,” Jenkins said. “But the side berths are fine, right Rob?”

“Yeah, definitely. You have a beautiful boat, Captain.”

“Thanks, Rob.”

“So, when do we leave?” Jenkins asked.

“I was thinking first thing in the morning.”

The two newcomers looked at each other. Jenkins said, “How about right now? I mean, tomorrow morning is fine if you still have stuff to do...”

“No, we’re provisioned and ready to cruise.”

“Bad luck to leave on a Friday, though,” Chrissie said.

“Well, I’m not superstitious,” Jenkins said. “Don’t care if you re-named your boat, stir your tea with a fork or have a woman on board.” He winked at Chrissie and she forced a tight smile.

“All right, then,” the Captain said. “Let’s free the lines and set sail.”

The first three days were uneventful as they left the coast behind and made the boat home. They stood two-hour watches during the night, short enough to keep them all fresh. On the fourth morning, with Rob at the helm and an aft wind blowing at fifteen knots, Chrissie frowned as she looked at the tell-tales on the mainsail.

“You might want to...”

Before she could finish the sentence, Rob yelled, “Jibing!” and the boom swung violently across the cockpit. Chrissie ducked and cursed and then directed some invective at Rob, who retorted, “Don’t tell me how to sail, bitch!”

The shouting brought the Captain and Jenkins up from below. It took them several minutes to get their friends calmed down. “Look, things will go wrong and we’ll disagree occasionally,” the Captain said. “But let’s not resort to cursing and name-calling, okay?”

Jenkins laughed and the Captain glared at him. “Sorry,” Jenkins said. “Rob and I are veterans of Chicago regattas. Cursing and name-calling go with the territory.”

“Well, we’re not racing, Jenkins, and I think it’s best if we all try to get along on an extended voyage like this.”

“Point taken.”

“Sorry, Rob,” Chrissie added. “The boom came a little too close for comfort.”

Rob merely nodded as he focused on the horizon.

The following afternoon, as the captain went below for a nap, he heard a grating voice spewing from Rob’s MP3 player; he’d explained that he was dyslectic and so preferred audio books to print.

“Damn, Rob, how can you listen to that bullshit?”

Rob looked stunned. “Bullshit? He’s a leading conservative voice in the country, sticking it to the libs.”

“Just put on your headphones, okay? Not everyone shares your taste in political discourse...or music. Do I make you listen to Van Morrison?”

Overhearing the discussion, Jenkins stepped over to the open hatch. “Van Morrison is helluva good singer and songwriter,” he said. “Given your obvious liberal leanings, I’m surprised you’d like a musician who called B.S. on that Covid nonsense.”

“I like his music, not his politics,” the Captain said. “But at least we’ve found some common ground.”

“Common ground,” Jenkins said looking around. “Way out here on the deep blue sea.”

Two days later, in the confused seas of the Gulf Stream, the Captain was napping when he was roused by a clamor. He dressed quickly and went topside. Jenkins was at the helm, Chrissie on the port bench and Rob on the starboard. They were not quite yelling.

“How can you, in good conscience, vote for a sexual predator who vilifies immigrants, instigated a riot at the Capitol and vows to be a dictator on day one? And he told what, thirty-thousand documented lies?”

“According to who?” Rob asked. “The liberal media?”

“That’s rapist stuff is all bullshit,” Jenkins added. “No evidence at all. Just angry bitches who are out to get him.”

“He’s on tape boasting about grabbing women by the pussy!”

“Locker room talk.”

“Hey guys, let’s not talk politics while aboard *Shannon*,” the Captain said. “We’re together on this boat for the next couple of weeks, and it’s important we work as a team, help each other, and that’s hard to do if we’re arguing about politics.”

Without a word Jenkins and Rob switched positions. Jenkins pulled a cigar from his pocket and went through the ritual of lighting it. He blew a stream of smoke into wind. “So you’re censoring us?” he asked. “I mean, I respect you as captain, but I’ve got a right to my opinions.”

“Of course you do,” the Captain said. “I’m not censoring you, Jenkins. Just asking that you keep your opinions to yourself until we reach Portugal.”

“Sounds like censorship to me,” Rob said.

“Sounds like a wise decision to me,” Chrissie said. “So, I promise not to espouse my political views again, okay?”

“Yeah, think we’ve heard enough for one trip,” Jenkins said.

“For a lifetime,” Rob added.

Chrissie’s mouth opened. She turned her angry eyes on the Captain, who pressed his hands together as if in prayer. Nodding, she closed her mouth, ran her thumb and finger across her lips as if zipping them together, and went below.

The peace lasted almost a full day. The Captain wasn’t sure what set off the argument belowdecks between Chrissie and Jenkins. He asked Rob to take the helm and went below to investigate.

Jenkins turned to him, red-faced. “I’m flying back when we reach the Azores,” he said. “I’ve had enough of you and Miss Lefty Lesbo there.”

“I heard that!” Chrissie shouted from behind the closed door of the head. “And I’ve had enough of you and your fascist buddy for a lifetime! Good riddance!”

“Jesus,” The Captain said, hanging his head.

For a moment Jenkins looked sympathetic. “Look, I’m going to do my job, stand my watches,” he said. “I know you just want to have adventure, Captain, test your skills and enjoy the company of your crew.” He shrugged. “Two out of three ain’t bad.”

“So sayeth the Meatloaf,” Rob said from above. “May he rest in peace.”

The Captain managed a smile. “Maybe you’ll change your mind by the time we reach the islands.”

“Nope.”

“Me, neither,” Rob said. “I’m leaving with Jenkins. Three days to go, right?”

“Weather permitting.”

“Can’t wait,” he said. “Maybe we’ll get a tailwind.”

The mention of wind seemed to catch the attention of the sailing gods, who responded with a nasty squall. A few hours later the winds died entirely. After an hour of listless drifting, Jenkins suggested they start the engine.

“We were hoping to sail the whole way,” the Captain said.

Jenkins shook his head. “Let’s keep moving.”

“Yeah, let’s motor,” Rob said.

Chrissie turned to him. “You ever try thinking for yourself, Rob? Or do you just follow Jenkins’ lead in everything? Oh wait, are you two...” She wagged a forefinger at them.

“Shut the fuck up!” Rob said.

“I second the motion,” Jenkins said. “Anyway, we have a tie vote, two to two. You gonna pull rank, Captain?”

He thought about it for a second. “No, we’ll motor. And please, let’s knock off the childish name-calling and try to get along.”

“Tell that to her,” Rob said.

“I’m just asking questions,” Chrissie said, mocking the go-to line of Rob’s favorite political commentator.

Balling his fists, Rob stepped toward her. The Captain and Jenkins immediately stepped into the space between them, violently knocking their shoulders together. For a second their eyes met, inches apart in a deadly glare, like fighters before a grudge match.

“Sorry, Jenkins,” the Captain said.

“Tight quarters,” Jenkins said. “No problem. Just put a leash on her, would you please?”

“Fuck you,” Chrissie said.

“No thanks,” Jenkins said. “I’m married and you’re not my type.”

They motored through the night and all the next morning. At noon, the Captain was alone at the wheel, marveling at the sea around him; he’d never seen it so still. When he saw the water temperature was seventy-four degrees, he impulsively killed the engine and went forward to toss out the sea anchor. Alerted by the cessation of the engine’s drone, the crew was waiting in the cockpit when he returned.

“Look at this!” he said, spreading his hands in wonder. “Let’s take a short break. We gotta swim.”

“Damn right,” Chrissie smiled, kicking off her boat shoes and stripping down to her shorts and sports bra. She went down the aft ladder while Rob, after a moment’s consideration, stripped to his underwear and dove over the port lifelines.

The Captain zipped the engine key into his cargo shorts and removed his shirt. Jenkins sat on the port bench and volunteered to keep watch. “Appreciate it,” the Captain said. “I’ll just take a quick dip and then switch with you.”

“Naw, take your time,” Jenkins said. “I’m not much of a swimmer. I’ll just hang here, keep an eye out for sharks...Hey, there’s one at nine o’clock!”

Whirling, the Captain expected to see a dorsal fin slicing through the water. Instead he saw Chrissie doing a lazy crawl.

“My bad,” Jenkins smiled. “Looked like a predator for a second there.”

The Captain took a deep calming breath, then dove off the stern and swam over to Chrissie.

“Swimming in water fourteen thousand feet deep,” she said in awe. “Not like taking a few laps at the Y.”

“No.” He looked to the south. “How you doing, Rob?”

“Just fine,” he said as he moved south using a breaststroke. “Don’t want to talk to you, though.”

“All right.”

The Captain thought about making another overture in a few minutes; maybe he could repair some of the damage.

“Don’t even try,” Chrissie said, reading his mind. “We only have to put up with them a couple more days.”

“You know, sound carries across the water,” Jenkins said from the cockpit. He was stretched out on a bench, using a square flotation cushion as a pillow, the bill of his Cubs cap covering his eyes.

Floating on his back, gently kicking to maintain buoyancy, the Captain closed his eyes and thought of all the creatures great and small swimming beneath him. A moment later he was seized by a jolt of pure joy, unexpected under the circumstances, and he focused on the feeling, hoping it might last and somehow encompass his contentious crewmates. His reverie ended when he felt a breeze caress his cheek.

Opening his eyes, the Captain saw *Shannon* in the distance; the current had taken him about thirty yards southwest—too far, if a shark came along. He then saw Rob swimming toward the boat, now using an efficient crawl. Chrissie was a few yards to his left; her eyes were closed and a slight smile indicated that she too was at peace for the moment.

“Time to go,” he said. She tilted her head up and, spotting the boat in the distance and Rob’s approach, immediately flipped over and began stroking hard. The Captain fell in next to her. A moment later he heard the electric winch, hauling in the sea anchor. *Not funny, boys*, he thought, and picked up the pace.

A few strokes later he raised his head and saw Rob on the ladder, grinning at them. In the background he saw the mainsail rising.

Shannon began to move sluggishly. Chrissy and the Captain, both strong swimmers, were in a full-out sprint and closing on the stern. They were within a dozen feet when *Shannon* matched their speed. A few seconds later the boat began to outpace them. Even in a light breeze they couldn’t catch her.

Both were breathing hard as they quit their pursuit and began to tread water. They watched the sailboat glide through the lazy swells. Holding the top of the wheel with one hand, Jenkins looked over his shoulder. “See ya, Libtards!” he shouted, then turned away.

After a moment the Captain said, “They’ll come around and jibe and pick us up once they’ve scared us sufficiently.” Chrissy nodded but her expression told a different story. *Shannon* continued east, a white triangle on the cerulean sea, ever smaller as she cruised toward the horizon.