

## OVERBOARD

“Sequoia is missing.”

Capt. Kemal, now wearing a captain’s uniform instead of his usual cut-off denim shorts and greasy t-shirt, made the announcement after we had sat down for breakfast. He fingered brown worry beads as he explained that the Coast Guard was patrolling the waters and a policeman from Marmaris, the nearest city, was on his way.

“We will find her,” he vowed.

If I were writing this as a scene in a novel, I would have made the setting darker. Instead, we were on a sleek wooden *gulet*, traditional Turkish sailboat, anchored in a cove along the Turkish Mediterranean coastline. The shallow waters, which changed colors like a mood ring, were now aquamarine with specks of sun rays and so clear we could see schools of colorful, pooling fish. A tinny Michael Jackson song and intermittent laughter could be heard from a nearby yacht. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky or even any of the bees which usually buzzed around the honey pot.

Even before the captain’s announcement we knew Sequoia was missing. She was always the first one on deck, either doing yoga or meditation or, most recently, writing.

Sequoia was the one who always led the conversations during meals and seemed to know who was in physical or emotional pain. She ate heartily of everything, saying “no dieting allowed during travel.” After the meal was finished, she always helped stack the dishes for Ali, one of the deckhands.

Since breakfast had been delayed this morning, I was starving. But I joined the others in eating sparingly as we digested the captain’s grim announcement. Several women remembered seeing Sequoia at midnight talking with Ali on deck. No one could recall having seen her any later. We all looked suspiciously at Ali, who was slight with bright red hair and a boyish face. He looked downcast with dark rings under his eyes.

“There are several possibilities,” said Deborah, a former lawyer. “One, she’s been abducted or murdered.”

That set off speculation about the possible involvement of Somalian pirates, Islamic fundamentalists, and Tony, Sequoia’s ex-husband, who had once threatened her with a kitchen knife. But Deborah, easily the shrewdest of the group, shook her head at these outlandish suggestions.

“There’s no way that Tony living thousands of miles away in Tulsa would come all the way to the Turkish Riviera to hurt Sequoia or that pirates came onto the ship without us knowing about it,” she said. “Suicide or drowning is far more likely.”

Some said Sequoia was still suffering from the drug overdose of her teenage son, Randy, four years ago. They pointed out that she was on anti-depressants, although so were several other women. She also had a supply of sleeping pills, which had made the rounds since many were suffering from jet lag. Others pointed out that she was enjoying herself on the cruise too much to end it here.

As for the drowning possibility, we had been anchored all night in this cove with calm waters and Sequoia was an excellent swimmer.

“You haven’t considered that maybe she intentionally swam off to meet someone,” said Robin growing excited at the thought. “Yes, she might be meeting a man, someone she met in Istanbul or Elephant Island.”

“That’s a strange way to date,” said Deborah. “But no doubt the policeman will check all these leads.”

A male voice broke through from behind me. “You must be careful what you say to the policeman.”

No kidding Captain, I wanted to say, I saw *Midnight Express*.

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As a published author of some note, I have always avoided clichés in my writing. Yet I have found them useful in making sense of life. I have always believed that those who can’t write teach – apologies to Joyce Carol Oates and Tobias Wolfe – and those who can’t teach become writing center teachers. That was my first reaction when I received an email from Sarah, an old classmate from the Iowa Writer’s Workshop, who had – wisely from what I’d seen of her writing – become director of the Manhattan Writers’ Center. Sarah said she was expanding the faculty to a few “literary luminaries” and wondered whether I was available.

The idea of plodding through the manuscripts of overpaid lawyers and bored stay-at-home moms aspiring to become artists was far from appealing. And yet, timing is everything in life. Rudy’s sudden marriage to a younger woman now pregnant with the child he had always wanted, was a searing daily wound. The rewriting of my new novel, which I had chosen over

motherhood and marriage, was not going well. I was terrified to confront Isabel, my agent, whose criticism always sounded worse in her tony British accent.

Each morning I sat at my desk covered with index cards about characters and plot points. I periodically shuffled through them as if I were a failed Blackjack dealer who always let the house lose. Then I set the ceramic paperweight with the sunflowers back atop them. The paperweight bespoke of a different time. I had bought it that spring, soon after we were married, when Rudy and I rented a house in Provence. We had drunk wine at both lunch and dinner, shopped at the open-air markets, made love in the afternoon and I'd come up with the idea for a short story that eventually was published in *The New Yorker* as well as much of Exposed, my highly-acclaimed novel. All I had to do then was see a young French girl breaking open a fresh croissant and feeding it to her baby sister and, *voilà*, I had a new scene or a character.

Now, either I or the world had become less inspiring. I couldn't flesh out the protagonist of my novel, Penelope, a once well-known painter seeking a comeback. Getting out of the apartment a few evenings to teach writing didn't seem like a bad idea. And there was also the generous fee which I frankly needed.

In the first novel-writing class, I said that the opening chapter of a student's novel "lacked any semblance of a plot or characters." The woman -- an \$800 an hour criminal defense attorney, I later learned -- burst into tears.

Sarah instructed me to "tread lightly" during the critiques. I so learned to use my red pen to make some very mild and general suggestions such as "expand here" or "this is confusing" and add smiley faces next to the better passages.

While teaching, I had managed to eke out the opening chapters of the new novel which I sent to Isabel. A month later, she sent me her review: Penelope sounded whiney, ungrateful, and even cruel. No one would care, said Isabel, that her work was rejected by top galleries or that she was having trouble painting. She has already achieved far more than most artists could expect.

"Make her more sympathetic," Isabel instructed.

But it wasn't so easy. As the July heat kicked in and my desperation with everything increased, I received an email from Robin, the director of "Write Away," an agency which ran writing workshops in exotic settings. There was a last-minute opening for a teacher on a weeklong Turkish cruise where I would only be required to teach two hours a day. The rest of the time I was free to do whatever I wanted. Was I interested?

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It was almost noon: The policeman still had not arrived, the Coast Guard had turned up nothing and the U.S. Consulate refused to send anyone until 24 hours had elapsed. We waited, still docked in the cove, the fear and anticipation mixing with boredom. No one dared take a swim or take out one of the kayaks. The only activity among the eight women that seemed acceptable was to talk about Sequoia.

“I’ll never forget the day I received a nasty email from my partner who’s so furious that I went abroad without her,” said Paloma. “‘You shouldn’t let anyone spoil your right to lead your life,’ Sequoia had told me. It really helped.”

Deborah nodded. “She told me several times how much she enjoyed the piece I workshopped on the cruise. It was so motivating.”

Several of the other women murmured that Sequoia had said similar comments to them.

“I thought Sequoia herself had the talent to make it as a published author,” Robin said. “Don’t you agree, Margaret?”

I forced myself to give a slight, but equivocal, nod.

“She was an inspiration,” I said.

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Women clad in headscarves and long coats and even *chadors* glided through the terminal of Istanbul Airport. A gate posted departures to such remote places as Dushanbe and Tehran. When I asked a young man behind a food counter for a local drink, he sold me a bottle of *Visne Suyu*, cherry juice that was blood red and delicious. In the gift shop I browsed through boxes of *lokum*, evil eye pins and worry beads.

With three hours until my connecting flight to Bodrum, I sat down and tried to work on the novel. Isabel had been right. It was physically painful to read what I had sent her. When the plane for Bodrum finally left, I had a splitting headache and my mouth felt dry. There was turbulence and a nonstop crying baby. In Bodrum, the driver who was supposed to meet me, was nowhere to be seen. I got into a taxi which lacked air-conditioning and with open windows that felt like blow dryers in the intense heat. The driver sped through hairpin turns and almost collided with a truck.

We finally arrived at the marina filled with boats of all sizes painted cheerful bright colors. Then I spotted royal blue sails imprinted with “The Alize,” fluttering in the wind. A red-

headed deckhand relieved me of my luggage and led me to a cushioned seat in the shade. Within minutes, I had been handed a frosted glass of cherry juice and a bevy of middle-aged women – it’s always just women in writing groups – encircled me saying that *Exposed* had “changed their life,” “made them weep,” and “kept them up all night reading.”

A petit woman with a cheerleader demeanor introduced herself as Robin and pulled me aside. “It’s such a tremendous honor for these women to have a writer of your caliber as their mentor. Perhaps you’ll be that special inspiration for some budding author here?”

Then one of the deckhands rang a bell and a heavysset man with a pencil thin mustache and the manner of someone who is used to being listened to, called for quiet.

“Welcome ladies to the *Alize*. I am Capt. Kemal. We will be leaving soon. A few rules. Please be careful on deck, especially at night. If you do fall overboard make sure to do so after the trip is finished,” he paused for the ensuing laughter. “The most important rule on the *Alize* is for you to enjoy yourself. If you need anything at all do not hesitate to ask one of the boys.”

“Anything?” giggled a heavysset blond with dark roots wearing a low-cut red dress.

Soon there was a hoot and roar of an engine, the scurry of feet toward the railing, girlish squeals and the positioning of cameras and selfie sticks. Capt. Kemal, now at the helm, turned the wheel with no more effort than someone backing out of a driveway. When we were past the breakwater, the motor was cut. The deckhands hosted the sails and wind propelled the boat into open waters.

I suddenly felt my stomach twist in nausea. I had not anticipated seasickness. Then I focused on the horizon and the pleasure of the air ruffling through my hair. My pain subsided as I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Robin telling me to start the first workshop.

The women assembled noisily around the outdoor table. I asked them to briefly introduce themselves. I wondered whether I would be able to match the women to the writing samples they had emailed before the trip. It wasn’t hard. Deborah, who had written about a cross country trip she had taken as a teenager that read like a AAA guidebook, was fit-looking with oversized glasses and a habit of furrowing her brow and narrowing her eyes in concentration. Paloma, author of a goofy lesbian romance set during 1920s Prohibition, sported a long gray braid, nose earring, and rose tattoo on her collar bone. Then there was Sequoia, the woman in the red dress. Hers had been the first piece I received – more than the double the maximum length size I had requested. It was a rambling, cliched and stilted summary of her life.

“I’ve been through many rings of fire which I’m exploring in my writing,” she had written. “Sequoia, as you might have guessed is not my real name. It’s a pen name I adopted because Sequoias are tall, sturdy, and difficult to uproot. When I write that my stories are by Sequoia, I can just feel my creative juices flowing. The most important thing I’ve learned in life is to keep my spirits up. As Scarlett O’Hara said, ‘Tomorrow is another day.’ It’s for the same reason that I always wear red. I’ll probably wear red at my own funeral!”

During introductions, Sequoia, the last to speak, described the breakup of her marriage and death of her son. Because of the sensitive subject matter, it was impossible for me to silence her. Then Sequoia insisted that the deckhands introduce themselves.

After that, less than 10 minutes remained, not nearly enough time for my first lecture openings. I closed the lesson plan just as the *Alize* pulled into a cove and the anchor was dropped.

I was headed back to my cabin to get my laptop when Sequoia practically suffocated me with a bear-like embrace. I have never understood this need some people have for physical contact with strangers.

“I am such a huge fan of *Exposed*,” she gushed.

“Ah, thanks.”

“All your fans are dying for a new novel. It’s been too long,” Sequoia wagged her finger in mock discipline.

Why did people say such hurtful things to others? Didn’t she think that I knew that it’s been nine years, four months and two weeks since *Exposed*?

“If you’ll excuse me,” I said. “I really must get to my room.”

“If you’re looking for a new idea, why don’t you set your next novel on a cruise in Turkey?”

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The policeman from Marmaris didn’t look as if he had come from the cast of *Midnight Express*. He resembled an adolescent with his slight build, soft brown eyes, and the faint outline of a mustache. He was clearly nervous as Capt. Kemal escorted him around the boat. The women were called individually to be interrogated at the outdoor table. Capt. Kemal functioned as translator – something that seemed highly unprofessional. After all, everyone on the *gulet* was a

suspect, even him. Several women, led by Deborah, whispered that we shouldn't agree to be interviewed without a lawyer present. But Paloma put a stop to that.

"How could you live with yourself if you didn't do everything possible to find Sequoia?" she asked.

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The days on the ship settled into the routine I had envisioned. During the morning workshops, I taught the women how desire was at the root of all fiction and good dialogue revealed character. We critiqued two of the women's pieces each day and I praised them effusively while pointing out a few passages that didn't make sense or suggested that the "protagonist perhaps hadn't earned the ending."

When the workshop ended, the women scurried off like teenagers who had been trapped in summer school to go kayaking or swimming. I heard their laughter and the splash of water and smelt suntan lotion as I remained at the table with my laptop and tried to conjure up sentences. The setting helped. It was difficult, given a weak WIFI connection, to check email or surf online. There were no reminders of Rudy or the pervasive odor of stale coffee and muffins that permeated the Starbuck's where I sometimes worked. I started to make progress.

By the fourth day, I felt that everything I had written was awful. That same day, Sequoia positioned herself at the other end of the table, also hunched over her computer, typing away with ease and concentration. One of the women called for her to join them, and she said, "Later alligator, I'm on writing roll."

The next day she was there again, clearly in the flow while I was going against the tide. I tried to match her stride. But the writing just wasn't coming.

One evening after dinner as I was headed back to my cabin to attempt writing yet again, Robin handed me her own copy of Exposed and asked that I read a passage out loud for the group. I reluctantly agreed. There was a breeze now on deck so some women were huddled under blankets, looking like overgrown children made cozy. In the distance were the twinkling lights of the nearest city or town, but otherwise darkness that was somehow comforting in its vastness and mystery. Ali dispensed drinks from a cart, but he stopped as I started to read.

I chose a passage from Exposed, which told the story of Regina, who had grown up an only child in a dysfunctional family. Her mother was bitter that she herself had traded a promising career as a singer for marriage and motherhood. Similarly, her father had wanted, and

failed, to become a professional baseball player. They had been unable to give Regina the love and attention she had craved. I read from the climax when Regina was leaving her home for college:

*“She faced these two people who had given brought her into the world. They had imbued her with the spark of their thwarted ambition and perhaps that was enough for her to accomplish what they never could. But she would do it for herself, not for them.”*

I closed the book. The women stood up and applauded. I stood taking in their appreciation for my art and then I felt I wanted to be alone. Revitalized with my potential, I wanted to try once again to conjure up those elusive words.

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It was dusk when I was summoned for my interrogation on deck. The sun, the color of a blood orange, dipped downwards, slowly at first and then all at once. The smell of kebab, presumably our dinner, wafted through the air. Capt. Kemal sat at the table with his arms folded over the strain of his stomach. The policeman, looking exhausted, lit a rolled cigarette with small callous hands and spoke.

“We know you had been drinking heavily the night Sequoia disappeared,” Capt. Kemal translated.

He knew that better than anyone. The day after my reading, I gave myself a break and joined the women on an excursion to Cleopatra’s Island with its beach of pale white sand, said to have been imported from Cleopatra for a tryst with her lover, Mark Anthony. The water was delicious. When I returned to the ship and slipped off my damp bathing suit, the revelation once again hit me that I might never be able to sell another novel.

I quickly consumed two glasses of wine before dinner, watching the women chatter about their children and their m. When I went to the table, Capt. Kemal, who had decided to dine with us that night, pulled out a seat next to him for me and insisted I try Raki. The liquor taste burned my mouth. But I drained the glass in one shot which he refilled with a sly wink. Every time I drained the glass, he filled it again.

“I had some drinks like everyone else,” I said.

Capt. Kemal translated and the policeman’s eyes narrowed. Turkey was a Muslim country where no doubt many men disapproved of drinking, especially by women.

“He asks whether you were upset about something.”



I almost had to laugh. Where to begin? But I steeled myself.

“What could I be upset about? I’m on a cruise in a beautiful place.”

Capt. Kemal spoke for several minutes in Turkish. He could be telling the policeman anything. It struck me that being interned in a Turkish jail would provide all the material I would ever need for a bestselling novel or memoir. But I’d have to survive it.

“He asks about your relationship with Sequoia.”

“I barely knew her. I’m just the writing instructor.”

More words. The policeman looked confused.

“What do you do as the writing instructor?”

“I look at their writing and offer encouragement.”

“Anything else?”

“I suggest changes, to make it better.”

“Do you upset your students?”

“What do you mean?”

“He wants to know whether you might have upset Sequoia by saying something about her writing.”

During the first critique of her work in class, I had encouraged Sequoia about her work. But there had been a second critique, completely unplanned, that took place after dinner that night, as the others went off to their rooms. I was drunker than I’d been in years. Every glass I consumed was another handful of pages I would never write as well as I had once written. As I sat watching the water, I thought about Virginia Woolf slipping on an overcoat weighed down with rocks and drowning in the River Ouse. Ernest Hemmingway pushing a 12-gauge shotgun into his mouth. Sylvia Plath sticking her head in the oven. That left drowning in the Mediterranean Sea as an original suicide venue. It would be so easy and who would really care? Not Rudy. Not my parents. Not my friends who I had abandoned.

I was moving toward the ladder leading down to the water when I saw a red dress glowing in the dark.

“Going for a swim?” Sequoia asked.

“That’s right.”

Sequoia looked over the railing as if inspecting the water and then turned to me. “I just wanted to tell you how I’ve enjoyed this workshop. I haven’t felt so inspired in ages.”

I wondered what Sequoia would think if she knew how little I cared about her and her inspiration. I held onto the ladder and dipped and swirled my foot in the water which felt warm like the baths I'd taken as a child.

"I've been writing like crazy," Sequoia continued. "I have almost 60 pages now which I'd like to send to you, if that would be okay."

I didn't have the time or interest to read more of her writing. After this cruise I was never going to see Sequoia ever again.

"Yes, sure, send it to me," I said airily. "Send me whatever you want."

Sequoia's face brightened. "Thank you so much, that would mean everything to me. I think it's good enough to send to prospective agents and have them send to publishers."

"Publishers?" The water on my foot felt suddenly very cold and slimy. I withdrew it.

"Yes, the fact that you liked my writing has really encouraged me. It's made me feel that I'm a real writer."

"Then I've made a terrible mistake."

"I don't understand."

"Nobody is going to publish your work. Ever. It's terrible."

"But you said-"

"I know what I said, but it's what I'm paid to say. Here's the truth: To get published takes raw talent, which you don't have, and a good subject, which you also don't have. It also takes hours and hours of the hardest work you've ever done. You will have to produce draft after draft and then give it to someone you can trust to tell you the hard truth about it. And whatever they criticize, you will have to take it. So, no, you're not a 'real' writer and you shouldn't call yourself one."

I felt clear-headed, as if I'd consumed several espressos in quick succession. Sequoia stood frozen and then smoothed down her dress. For the first time I saw that her eyes were moist and I wondered whether she was going to be another woman I'd made cry.

"It's too late and a bit chilly for a swim, don't you think?" Sequoia asked. "Why don't we both go inside?"

My stomach felt queasy. I followed Sequoia back towards the cabins where we separated and eventually I fell asleep. Only the next morning did I realize that Sequoia had saved my life, but by then she was gone. My words had been harsh, but I hadn't pushed her overboard.

But I said none of this to the policeman and Capt. Kemal who were now standing as a small boat approached from the distance with what looked like equipment covered in a black tarp. As it came closer, the women crowded around: Deborah collapsed, Paloma screamed and Robin burst into tears.

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The U.S. Embassy consular official, an expressionless young man in a gray suit, informed us that we would have to remain in Bodrum until the police determined the cause of Sequoia's death. The others had decided to stay together in a central hotel. But I chose a different hotel, one on the outskirts of town. I hung the "Do not Disturb Sign" on the door, ordered in room service, refused the housekeeping service, and ignored the WIFI code. I sat at the small desk and then I spent hours first stripping down and then building back up Penelope. The new Penelope now wore pink, because it was her late mother's favorite color and had an abusive husband and an alcoholic son. And in one of the novel's most dramatic scenes she prevented Marie, an accomplished artist, from driving home after a night of binge drinking.

After I finished, I finally checked my email. Amidst all the junk mail there was a blank message Sequoia included was an attachment titled "My Story." The email had been sent several days ago, the evening that we'd talked on the deck. Then I read the attachment and knew that I would do yet another rewrite of my novel. Not long after, Robin called me with the news that the autopsy had revealed an overdose of sleeping pills; Sequoia's death was officially ruled a suicide.

"We're all free to go home," Robin said. "Sequoia's body is being flown back home. But we decided to have a memorial service for her tomorrow morning on the *Alize* in the marina. It would be wonderful if you could say some words."

There was a strong wind and hovering clouds when I boarded the *Alize*. All the women were there, looking grim and exhausted. Capt. Kemal and the crew stood with somber expressions. During the memorial, each woman recounted some of their favorite Sequoia stories. But it was Ali, I thought, who was most poignant. He held up a small *Hello Kitty* notebook and a red pen.

"She give me this and tell me to write what I feel every day. This make me happy," he said.

I was the last to speak. I hadn't prepared a speech nor would I speak from my heart. Instead I slowly read part of the pages Sequoia had sent so it was her voice that boomed over the boat:

"I always wondered whether my life would end by own hands as I've so often considered. Before I go, I want to believe that I acted my best towards others with lovingkindness. If I changed just one life it would be enough for me to feel that I had accomplished something."

Perhaps this writing would not impress Isabel or a book editor. But that wasn't the only purpose of writing. You should write to leave a gift to one's survivors. You should write to give one's life meaning. You should write to make your internal world more interesting. But to be a published writer, one whose work reached a wider audience, required not only talent and lots of hard work. You also had to have a touch of the ruthless. You even had to be the kind of person willing to exploit literary details wherever you found them, even in the life of a dead woman.