

Chapter One

Underway

We still lived in Connecticut that Saturday my husband John and I took our seven-year-old daughter Kate to Mystic Seaport. As we reached the town of white picket fences and tidy window boxes of petunias, geraniums, and zinnias, John turned to Kate and said, “In a few weeks, we’re going to move on *Laughing Goat* and go sailing.”

I sprang to attention in the back. We had discussed breaking the news to Kate, but I hadn’t known when John would do it. He waited until we came under the spell of the tall ships and recreated nineteenth-century village where blacksmiths and carpenters plied their trades. As usual, John took his time, raising a cigarette to his lips, inhaling, flicking ash in the tiny metal tray, flashing a grin at me, and waiting for Kate’s response. Though the smell of his cigarette smoke no longer intoxicated me as it had twenty years ago, I still loved the sensual curve of John’s hand around a cigarette.

John was six when his family moved to Africa. Before they went, his mother told him about lions and tigers and elephants and snakes, anthills as big as houses, and the wild bush that would

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surround their new house where he could play. He couldn't wait to go. He wanted to impart a similar excitement to Kate about our voyage.

"Where are we going?" Kate asked.

"South. First to Florida. Then we'll figure out where we want to go from there—somewhere in the Caribbean. We'll snorkel. There are fantastic coral reefs, like nothing you've ever seen."

"What about school?"

"You and Mom will do it on the boat."

"What about our house?"

"We'll rent it out."

Kate glanced at me. Passing the schooners on Mystic River, I could imagine sailing down the Intracoastal Waterway through charming towns like those on Long Island Sound.

"It'll be fun," I said, feeling like Judas. I didn't share my doubts and fears.

Kate told her class the next day that she was sailing to the Caribbean and snorkeling, and she wasn't going to school anymore. Her teacher, a sailor, was thrilled for her and asked her to write the class about her adventures. She promised they would write back.

I wish it had been that simple for me. I did not want to go. John would tease me and say, "I'll have to drag you out kicking and screaming, clinging to the garden." I imagined myself red-faced and shrieking, my fingers black with dirt, while John yanked my legs and Kate stared open-mouthed.

I was not a person who yelled. John wasn't, either. In our twenties vacationing in Isla Mujeres, Mexico, I was surprised when one of the locals with whom we convivially joked at a bar described us as the "quiet couple." There was so much feeling between us that we never felt quiet to me. From the outside, though, we appeared so.

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We, us. When we fell in love, I glommed onto John as though he would save my life. He glommed onto me, too, as a way out of roles that smothered: husband and father at eighteen, John Jr. to his dad's John Sr., the inherited mantle of a family who sailed to America on the *Mayflower*. The youngest of four, with three older sisters, he was "irresponsible John" in his family, a party boy and artist in high school who beat to his own drum.

I, too, was the baby in my family, arriving nine years after my sister and eleven after my brother. A much unexpected, unplanned third child. The four were already a family, locked in one argument after another, instigated by my volatile mother. My dad was the only one who lit up when I came into a room. I learned to stay under the radar, to feel out the temperature before I ventured a word. In audiotapes my mother recorded of our family dinners, mine was the high voice piping up, "Shut up and listen." My dad died of heart disease when I was ten, and I was lost until I met John.

John and I lived in our house in Fairfield for nearly ten years, and Kate had lived there her whole life. Before that, John and I lived on old wooden boats in Long Island Sound for fifteen years. On the water, we had no address.

Our address on land, 425 Brookside Drive, sounded so solid, a red farmhouse on a hill alongside the Mill River and a nature conservancy from which deer would thunder out of early morning mists. At first, I would repeat the address over and over pinching myself as I wandered through the house on polished hardwood floors and flung open the tall casement windows.

I wasn't ready to give the house up to live out John's dream of sailing off. As we sailed, the house became a beacon for me, the cozy red house on a hill, lights twinkling from the windows, river gurgling, the smell of wild strawberries drifting through the air, and a tattered tire swing

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suspended from a maple tree that Kate and her friends swung on over the stream, waiting for our return.

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Now many years later, John has passed away and the voyage occupies a space in my mind as bright as the lights of Havana when we drifted outside the harbor waiting for daylight to enter, but I can no longer ask him what he thinks it all meant.

Chapter Two

Dream

John and I met at an offbeat company in Greenwich, Connecticut, in 1969 that attracted college graduates eager to avoid real jobs. On my first day, decked out in a mini-dress and white fishnet stockings, I introduced myself to John, twenty-four, in the office next to mine. I was twenty-two, with long, wavy chestnut hair, light blue eyes, and a small, round face. John's eyes were a piercing deep blue, and his blond hair was tucked behind his ears. His face was large and square-jawed. He wore jeans, leather sandals, and a white linen Nehru shirt. On the walls around his desk, he had pinned up children's drawings and a black-and-white photograph of a naked, curly-haired little girl in a field of daisies. He stared at me while taking a drag on a cigarette. He didn't say anything.

I asked him about the photo. It was his five-year-old daughter, who also made the drawings. He must have married even earlier than I had at nineteen.

We were assigned to work on a project together. I sat on the floor in his office, my legs tucked under me, as he paced around and smoked. When I asked a question, he didn't answer right

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away. His pauses flustered me. He took a moment, rested his chin on his palm, smoked a cigarette, and stared into the distance or at me, while I pulled at my sweater and fidgeted. I wasn't used to people thinking about what I said.

We got to know one another. I found out that he learned to sail at the age of four. His English and Scottish ancestors were ministers and university provosts. He grew up in Greenwich but spent part of his childhood in Africa, where his dad, a mining engineer, opened up a copper mine. Supporting a wife and child, John took seven years to graduate from college while working as a sailmaker and baby photographer. I zipped through college in three years and then got a master's degree. John wanted to buy a boat when he had enough money.

He asked, "Have you ever sailed?"

I laughed. I wasn't athletic. No one I knew sailed. I grew up in landlocked Ohio. My Jewish immigrant family prized education, not sports. I had a tenuous connection to the water through my parents who emigrated with their families on crowded ships in the early 1900s to escape persecution in Eastern Europe and Russia, but John talked about the Bermuda Race, a three-day sail from New York, that he had always wanted to do. I imagined sails flying in the wind as a green island with tiny pink houses shimmered in the distance.

John teased me mercilessly. I came to work one day in a blond wig and slinked around the office like Marilyn Monroe, fishing for compliments. My boss praised my sexy look. When John saw me, he chortled. Until that moment, I thought I looked great. A few minutes later, John came into my office and stuck a paper bag over my head.

"Ha!" I think now, more than forty years later. "That's John." At the time, it startled me. I hardly knew him, but he saw me differently than others did, or than I saw myself.

He admired Diane Arbus, Richard Avedon, Andy Warhol, Janis Joplin, the Rolling Stones.

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His icons tested cultural boundaries, which made me uncomfortable. I liked Impressionist paintings, Russian novelists, and Simon and Garfunkel.

Over wine-fueled lunches with our colleagues in the early 1970s, we discussed peace marches, the draft, Woodstock, and Richard Nixon. We had all married young, and the heady new freedom in the air stirred desire and longing.

I met my first husband, a medical student whom I was supporting through medical school, in college. When he discovered that he hated the sight of blood, he quit med school to become an IBM salesman. I wasn't sure what to make of his betrayal of our future.

Then, one day when he came home after work, he said, "I have to be honest. I've had an affair with someone I met during training." Since then when I hear, "I have to be honest," I brace myself. That night after I yelled at him and cried, I lay on my side of the bed watching him raise the windows precisely one inch so he could sleep, and I questioned what I ever saw in him. I began therapy.

At work, my friendship with John deepened. I draped myself over a chair in his office and we talked for hours, mostly about sailing. His sailing stories captivated me.

The daydream went on and on until, two years later, I left that company for a market research job near Croton-on-Hudson, New York. I missed John terribly. Every day he called me from his office, or I called him.

One day, we met for lunch. Wrapped in a purple woolen *ruana*, I sat across the table trying to contain the onslaught of emotion overtaking me. John stared at me through wisps of cigarette smoke. After lunch, we took a walk in the woods to talk about our feelings. Our hands touched, and we pulled together. Then we couldn't keep our hands off each other—in his office, in the car, in the park.

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I left my husband and rented an apartment on the second floor of a house in Croton-on-Hudson, where I could glimpse the Hudson River through cherry trees whose limbs brushed against the windows. John came over every night and left for home around midnight. I began writing, tapping away on the typewriter as cherry blossoms drifted in through the windows.

It was hard for John to make up excuses to his wife for his absence each night. I ignored his discomfort. I liked how things were going. I didn't want to make another decision.

He kept bringing up his difficulty. I casually mentioned what he said to my psychoanalyst in Manhattan, whom I was now seeing four days a week.

Dr. R. said, "Does he want to move in with you?"

"Yes."

"How do you feel about that?"

"I'm not sure. I like the way it is."

"He is implying that he would leave his wife and children for you. This is huge. Do you understand that?" The usually soft-spoken Dr. R. practically shouted.

Silence filled the room again.

"I love him," I whispered, tears running down my cheeks.

"Yes?"

"I don't know if he'll stay."

Up to that point, I hadn't acknowledged the strength of my feelings for John. Despite my happiness as I danced around my apartment singing off-key to the cherry trees, the warmth that spread like mellow wine through my body when he was with me, the feeling of my life sliding into place in a way that I remembered from when my dad was alive, I tried to ignore my feelings. I had

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pushed them aside for so long, and my mother called frequently to draw me into her sphere where the fledgling feelings for John had no place.

John met my mother when he helped me move my belongings out of the garden apartment I shared with my first husband in Scarsdale into my new apartment in Croton-on-Hudson. Uninvited, my mother had popped in for a visit the weekend I was moving out. When John walked in, he said, “Hello, Marion,” and she didn’t correct him as she usually would: “That’s Meriam with an e,” in a loud, bright voice with a fake smile. She seemed a little afraid of him.

John and I escaped into the apartment hallway. He said, “That’s your mother? She’s so *heavy*.” He was laughing, incredulous. He wasn’t talking about her weight; she was short, thin, and pretty. It was the heaviness of her spirit, a darkness I could never put into words. A crushing weight that had burdened me from the time of my dad’s death lifted a little. I had set myself the impossible task of making her happy and nothing ever did.

John didn’t let up about moving in. Eventually, we set a date. As the days ticked by, the date loomed like a neon sign I couldn’t turn off, blocking out other thoughts.

Fifteen minutes before he was due to arrive, though, I panicked, jumped in my car, and drove towards New York on the Taconic Parkway. My thoughts raced. Why had I asked him to live with me? He probably wasn’t coming. If he did come, he would leave. He would go back to his wife and children. How could I have been so stupid? He wasn’t coming.

Although lost in thought, I spotted John in his orange Peugeot heading in the opposite direction on the parkway, toward my house. I jerked up in my seat. I wondered if I should continue to New York City where I had a good friend. She wouldn’t mind if I needed a place to stay. I would take a break and get some perspective.

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Instead, I slowed down. I pictured John banging on the locked door and an icy fury taking hold. I turned around at the next exit. When I pulled into the driveway behind him, he stepped out of his car.

“Did you just get here?” I asked brightly.

He looked at me, smoking. He made me wait and then he said, “Where were you?”

I wanted to say, “I don’t know,” or “You pushed me into this.” I was plunging off a cliff. I didn’t want to be this person with feelings roiling around.

“I came back,” I said, crying. “I’m glad you’re here.”

John had brought some clothes, a royal blue paella dish, a Julia Child cookbook, a Nikon camera, a couple of his drawings, skis, and a boat knife. I helped him carry it all upstairs, neither of us speaking. I lingered in the kitchen while John set his things down in the living room. We still hadn’t spoken, but I was beginning to take in that he was there.

John was in such turmoil. He was miserable about leaving his daughter, Raegan, now nine, and his young son, Shae, three. Guilt colored our evenings as John drank himself to sleep and I pictured myself as the adulterous other woman.

He said, “You may have hitched your wagon to the wrong star.”

When we picked up the children on Sundays for the afternoon, I’d duck down in the car while John faced his wife. Sliding up to peek through the car window, I imagined the bitter words they exchanged at the front door. Once in the car, Raegan chattered about her week, singing her latest choral songs, while Shae tried to get a word in. We would visit John’s parents, and I marveled at the difference between his mother and mine. His mother had a sense of humor and taught the children about the plants in her garden.

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I was enamored of this man who prepared sophisticated French dishes and could intuit the precise moment when a béchamel sauce was ready. Although I knew little about hockey, I watched Rangers' games on TV with him in bed and lustily cheered. We lazed on pillows on the floor around an old ship's hatch we converted into a table in our living room, John's arm enfolding me as we listened to Bob Dylan and Leon Russell. I loved how he looked at and listened to me.

When we fought, usually after a few beers or glasses of wine, John would slam down the stairs and the Peugeot disappeared in a spray of gravel. I huddled in bed crying, imagining that he'd never come back. It didn't take much to lead to a fight—John would be irritable or lost in thought, and I'd complain he wasn't paying attention to me or lash out about how long it was taking him to get over the separation. He'd roll back in during the night, climb in bed, and we melted gratefully into each other, forgetting about the fight until the next time. He never told me where he went, but I figured he found a bar somewhere.

After John moved in, I had a dream in which I was sitting in a crowded train station at night, on a bench with other passengers next to a broad, plate glass window that reflected the high arched ceilings and glittering glass chandeliers inside. The window overlooked a busy downtown thoroughfare. Waiting for my train, I was alert yet absorbed in the book I was reading. Suddenly, a giant bare foot crashed through the window and a big laughing bearded man popped through.

Looking back, I can still feel the thunderous jolt of John entering my life, the swell of my heart when I heard his steps on the stairs to the apartment after work, the sure-footed steps of a sailor.

Chapter Three

Dad

The bowline is an exceptionally versatile knot. It is quick to tie...it doesn't slip and it doesn't jam.

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The bowline was John's favorite knot. At first, when I tried to make one, a light tug would unravel it. When John made a bowline, the knot held. John insisted that I learn the bowline before we left on *Laughing Goat*. I practiced on the handle of a pail we kept in the cockpit locker until I could do it without thinking and it would hold.

My dad would not have known a bowline from a half hitch, but like John's bowline, he held onto me even after he was gone.

My dad was the center of my universe. I would make up jokes to crack him up and write poems addressed to "Lou Cole on the Porch." I would watch him dunk coffee cake in his coffee at breakfast and close his eyes as he took a sweet, soppy bite. On Saturday mornings, he brought me to his office downtown and lunch at Howard Johnson's while my mother attended garden club meetings. We ate ice cream and wrote notes to each other on the napkins.

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One time, when I was around nine, he wrote, “I liked your story this week about the planets. How is your newspaper going?”

I had started the *Morley Road News* with a friend across the street. I wrote it, and she was supposed to make copies and coerce her younger brother into delivering it, though I was never sure if she did.

“Mrs. Hickenshniiffer goes shopping for her family’s trip to Mars this week.” I jotted down the note, referring to my serial about Mrs. Hickenshniiffer and her thirteen children.

I jumped in my seat in anticipation as he wrote me back. I watched his hand, the graceful fingers holding the fountain pen, the small hairs glowing in the sunlight and the dark red stone gleaming on his gold ring. He looked gentle and smart, like a professor. I pounced on the napkin before he slid it over. “Keep it up!” he wrote.

My favorite picture of us was taken in a photo booth at Woolworth’s five-and-dime store in our winter coats. Our glasses glinted companionably, matching our nerdy smiles. We looked like a couple of book lovers anticipating an afternoon of browsing through a bookstore. I imagine him waiting until just before the flash and saying, “Susie, keep your eyes open.”

We traded knock-knock jokes and Dad challenged me to spell silly words like pickle. He tried to win me over to Adlai Stevenson, who ran for president against General Eisenhower in 1952, and whom my dad considered a great man. I responded by marching around chanting, “I like Ike!” On country drives, he would roll down his window and moo at the cows, to my delight. On summer nights, even if he were reading, he would take the time to examine fireflies I caught.

He was fifty-six when he died of heart disease. I was ten.

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Even now, saying that my father died is hard. Losing him was like falling off the edge of a cliff, a free fall with no hospitable landing. The center of gravity that had held me up, though I hadn't noticed how central it was, had vanished. I could not make sense of it.

A boy in my grade lost his dad around the same time. I didn't want anything to do with that boy...he looked as sad as I felt. He was in the other fifth-grade class, so I hardly saw him at school. He blushed when anyone talked to him.

He lived on the next street over from mine, and one Sunday, I was practicing jacks on the sidewalk when I spotted him walking with his mother. He glanced at me. I glared back, afraid that he would burst into tears and blubber about his dad. I was relieved when he clasped his mother's hand and they turned for home. I did not understand then that despite my valiant effort, I could not erase the pain of losing my dad.

After Dad died, my brother moved back home to help my mother run my dad's steel brokerage. My brother had been in the Navy, after flunking out of Cornell. My dad's office had been a wonderland of typewriters, adding machines, drawing paper, and pencils. Now, it echoed with the shouts of my paranoid mother and brother, who screamed at each other all day from adjoining desks about mistakes they made. Neither had any business experience. Over dinner, they criticized each other, railed against enemies like the government, and spewed forth loony money-making ideas, "million-dollar" gadgets that never went anywhere. Some nights, we watched home movies. I loved seeing my dad on screen and hearing him talk, but the emptiness of the room after the lights came on made me so nauseous, I would go straight to bed.

I struggled through my teens locked in anger at my dad because he had left and furious with my mother, who traveled frequently on cruises looking for a new husband, leaving me alone with my brother, who brought women home. I would lock myself in my bedroom to avoid him but

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sometimes, as I listened from behind the door, I heard screams, and at least once, a girl ran out of the house sobbing. I did not feel safe. My brother was less of a threat when my mother was home, but she did little to help me, a young girl lost in grief.

In this post-Dad world, the family myths that had loosely formed during his lifetime—I was smart, my sister was promiscuous, and my brother, mentally disturbed—grew like tumors. I hung out with my brainy best friend and earned As but had little fun. My sister had flagrant affairs, and my brother became unhinged. When I was fifteen, he was jailed for rape. Though I was glad he was out of the house, my mother was even more preoccupied than usual until she bribed a judge to release him.

Although my grades slipped when my brother was in jail, my test scores made up for it, and I got into Barnard in New York City. My best friend would go to Radcliffe. We were eager to leave Cleveland behind. My dad would have beamed with pride that I made it into the Ivy League.

New York led me to John. Still, my past lingered. When John would leave on a business trip, I would shake with sobs and give myself over to feelings of utter abandonment. I didn't do so deliberately, but with each departure, I relived my dad's death. I was convinced I would never see John again.

One day after John and I had lived together for a few months in Croton-on-Hudson, as I sorted through a box of old family photos, a yellowed napkin fluttered out with a faded orange and turquoise Howard Johnson's logo, marked with my dad's elegant script and my uphill scrawl. As sunlight slanted across the wood floor, I hugged myself and sobbed—wrecking, heaving sobs—and allowed myself to remember how much I loved my dad.

Chapter Four

XL

When John discovered a live-aboard community of boaters in Sausalito, California on a business trip, he wanted to buy a boat to live on. Our first boat, *XL*, was an original 1903 Fire Island ferryboat, forty-eight feet long. *XL* had carried passengers from Bay Shore, Long Island to Fire Island.

John spotted *XL* in a New York Times classified ad. We bought her from Woody, who lived on the boat with his wife and baby at Oyster Bay Yacht Club and held up his jeans with a rope. *XL*'s hull sparkled with a fresh coat of white paint. The spacious, sunny interior had a Franklin stove for heat and comfortable wicker chairs. Stairs led to an upper deck with sun lounges.

When the boatyard hauled *XL* out of the water for inspection, stinky masses of seaweed and mud, along with thousands of snail-like barnacles, clung to nearly every inch of the bottom.

“You got a real garden under there,” said one of the workers, as the others grunted in agreement.

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The surveyor, a crusty New Englander, tapped a small hammer in different spots. He said, “This hull will outlive you.”

We were pleased that he felt the boat would hold together. Only later did we learn that his nickname was Blind George.

As we worked on *XL* nights and weekends that first summer, other boaters would stop by to offer encouraging remarks like, “You know the two best days in a boat owner’s life? The day you buy her and the day you sell her.” Gleefully, they would spell out the toil and expense to repair an old wooden boat.

Although John had helped on his dad’s sailboat, we had a lot to learn. John taught me to operate a palm sander, choose the right grit of sandpaper, roll bottom paint, dig out the rot and mix two-part epoxy. Each evening we went home to the apartment exhausted.

While I showered off the grime, though, far from feeling daunted, I admired the jaunty curve of *XL*’s bow. I was at ease among rumbling travel-lifts, riggers shouting from atop masts, sanders blasting, and fishy low tide smells. The boatyard evoked a memory of the flats in downtown Cleveland where my dad worked in the steel business amid tall stacks spewing fiery exhaust and men loading trucks with steel beams.

After John and I finished painting and repairing *XL*’s bottom, we left the boatyard in Connecticut to head to Mamaroneck, New York where we had arranged for a mooring. It was my first time on the water.

John, who had never run a large boat before, backed *XL* out of the slip. The steering wheel was in the sleeping cabin, which overlooked the bow. Sweat dripped from his forehead as he worked the levers. His eyes narrowed to anguished slits.

“The throttle’s stuck.”

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I wasn't sure what a throttle was and ran in circles in the small open enclosure at the bow, shouting, "What is it? What's going on?"

As *XL* sped forward toward a small knot of people waving goodbye on the dock, they split in all directions. I ducked inside. We crashed into a small fishing boat, but miraculously, the boat wasn't scratched.

John said, "We've got to get out of here." I nodded, unable to speak.

John tinkered with the throttle, and *XL* edged away from the dock. We didn't look back. Once out on the Sound, far from any other boats, John put the boat in neutral, and we climbed the stairs to the top deck. Lying back on lounge chairs, we gazed down the Sound from the majestic height of our upper deck and could hardly believe that this bright, airy ferryboat was our new home.

On the way back down into the cabin, John slipped on the stairs and landed on the engine. We had left the cover off in case it overheated. Bloody welts and burns slashed across his back. I grabbed rags to stanch the blood. Our outdated first aid kit was useless, but we did have acetaminophen.

Every time a wave hit, the bed rolled to the other side of the sleeping cabin and wicker furniture slid around the main salon. None of the furniture was built-in, as it was on most boats. My job was to ensure John had enough cold beer while he steered.

John asked me to check on the dinghy that we towed from the stern. A bulkhead blocked his view. I leaned into the hallway and peered towards the rear where there should have been a back wall. Instead, a vista opened of the water and shoreline. The dinghy was bouncing along in the water behind us. I told him the dinghy was fine, but something was wrong. He raced back and rabidly eyed the water.

"The transom fell off."

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The transom, a twelve-foot long, two-inch thick wall on the stern that normally enclosed the bottom half of the boat, had vanished. John spotted it floating beside us, “*XL, New York*” emblazoned across the middle. He hurled a rope overboard to lasso it and missed. Then, he dove over the side, yelling over his shoulder, “You’ll have to turn on a dime!”

I was now alone on a forty-eight-foot ferryboat. Before the trip on *XL*, I hadn’t been on any boat larger than a rowboat, yet John expected me to steer. I clutched the wheel and my feet froze to the spot. How did I get myself into this? What if I couldn’t find John? Lightheaded, I tried to get my bearings. I didn’t see him.

John learned to swim when his mother made him jump off the dock in Greenwich into Long Island Sound. He learned to ski by strapping on skis and hurtling down the hill. I had grown up without any aspirations toward physical bravery. I longed to hide under a blanket until the situation went away, and I seethed with resentment that John had put me here.

XL staggered on. Sun sparkled off the ripples racing across the Sound. The bright blue sky stretched out and each wavelet that brushed across the green-gray water cracked like a whip against the hull. A pale blob caught my eye in the water off to my left, breaking up the ripples. It resolved into John, swimming for the boat.

I exhaled and choked out a laugh as he towed the massive hunk of wood. I pulled a lever, hoping the boat would slow down. For a moment, I felt like a ship’s captain in charge of a daring rescue. John got close enough to hoist himself up and reached into the cooler for a beer. I cried with relief.

He was soaked and bruised, his back covered in bright red scrapes from his earlier fall. He drank the beer and steered. I found more acetaminophen.

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Dusk was falling as we limped into Mamaroneck harbor. I stood on the bow with a boathook ready to swoop for the mooring, but when we found it, we were going too fast to pick it up. Just as I thought it was hopeless, we hit a nearby boat, caromed backward, and I hooked the mooring. John shut off the engine and the boat stopped moving. We went to bed and fell asleep instantly.

The next morning as the sky lightened, I woke up. *XL* was pointing in a different direction than when we went to bed.

“John, wake up.” I shook him.

“What?”

“The boat moved. We’re not in the same place as when we went to sleep.”

He looked out the window. “It’s the tide change.” He turned over and fell back asleep. We were affected by the tide change? Until then, I knew about tides only through literary allusions.

In the early morning, I was up at first light and watched the sky lighten to yellow and pink as the sun rose from the horizon. We cleaned up the boat and pattered around in our dinghy. John examined the errant transom, which had served as an entrance ramp when the ferryboat was in service and found the culprit, tiny eyehooks not strong enough to hold. We would purchase heftier fastenings.

We debated checking on the fishing boat that we had crashed into in Norwalk, but imagining the wrath of a sinewy fisherman and his angry relatives, we decided not to. A marine policeman inspected the boat we hit in Mamaroneck, which appeared undamaged. When he asked for our boat papers, we were shocked that bureaucracy could ensnare us even on the water. Neither of us had paid taxes for several years and we each had piles of unpaid traffic tickets. We hoped to stay under the radar and not hear from the police again.

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Each weekday morning on *XL*, John and I would row ashore in the dinghy, a Dyer Dhow that originally belonged to John's dad, to go to work. John would climb in the dinghy first to hold it steady for me. But in choppy autumn seas, the dinghy swerved in and out of reach. I would hesitate in *XL*'s doorway before jumping, as John hooted with laughter.

The Dyer Dhow is a nine-foot fiberglass boat with wooden gunwales, seats, and mast. Originally built in Rhode Island of plywood in the early 1940s, the Dyer Dhow was a rescue boat for the Pacific front in World War II. Our little boat had seen better days. The gunwale was splintered, the centerboard leaked, and we had removed the mast and seats for repair. It was a sailing dinghy, but we had yet to sail her.

Perched on a pile of old lifejackets, John rowed while I bailed water sloshing over the bow with a coffee can. When I rowed, John would yell, "Pull! Pull! Starboard! Starboard!" I understood the urgency and pulled with all my strength, though I didn't fully grasp that the force of my rowing could keep us from capsizing.

When we reached shore, we would race into the bushes to change into our business clothes, which we stored in garbage bags in our cars. If one of us forgot a car key, we had to return to the boat and repeat the trip. On those days, we usually called in sick.

XL had no electricity. We used hurricane lamps and flashlights. We bathed in a tub the size of a double sink. As autumn wore on, we huddled in sweaters under a warm blanket in front of the Franklin stove. I read *Living on the Earth* and wrapped lettuce in damp paper towels to stay fresh. John read *Wooden Boat* magazines and learned about boat repairs. He was our carpenter. I was the boat's plumber.

XL's head had an unusually long waste hose winding through the bilge, a damp smelly no-man's land between the floor and the bottom of the hull. The hose was frequently clogged. To

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repair it, I squeezed into the bilge, lay on my back, undid the clamps, and shoved a plumbing snake through the hose.

“Pump!” I yelled through the floorboards to John.

John would convulse with laughter at the image of me stuck in the bilge, wrestling with the stinky waste hose. I had grown up expecting boys to hold doors open for me. I had never repaired anything before, but John made it clear that we were in this together and I had to do my part.

I held my breath and scabbled out of the way in case a foul mess shot out of the end. When done, I screwed in the clamp and climbed out, trying not to throw up. A friend bought me a “Headhunter” t-shirt with two crossed plungers.

Potted red geraniums flourished in the bright sunlight that poured into the main cabin. I set up an easel in a corner and painted large canvases with clouds of light colors and propped them against the walls. We rowed home after work under pink and orange skies at sunset.

When winter came, we moved to a marina in Stamford, Connecticut, for the luxuries of electricity on the dock and heated restrooms with showers. We met a motley crew of others living aboard their boats: divorcees, drifters, drug users, and dreamers saving money to sail away.

We all slipped and slid down icy ramps, arms full of groceries or boat supplies that at any moment could tumble into the water. To fill our water tanks, we dragged long heavy hoses from the marina office down to our boats and back up again. The live-aboard boaters got so sick of fighting off water rats that we impaled one of our kills on the dock manager’s door to compel the boatyard to exterminate.

As primitive as the living conditions were, though, I loved the hushed harbor in winter where water splashed past snowy banks onshore. Shrieking seagulls swooped high overhead to drop clams on the docks with enough force to smash them open to eat. Bluish light sifted through the

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hatch during the day. At night, steaks from the butcher shop sizzled on the stove or, if we made it to the fish market in time, clams boiled in a fragrant mix of wine and herbs. The harbor boasted large affluent homes, but I wouldn't have traded places with any of them.

John's parents lived across town, and we would drop in at their house to do laundry and shower. John argued with his dad in a way that I never dared with my mother. His dad would criticize John's treatment of his ex-wife and did not understand John's career path. John had left the market research company where we had worked and taken a job at the boatyard. He had new friends like Shaky Jake, the ironworker who fell off a ladder and broke his shoulder. John didn't intend to stay at the boatyard but hadn't yet figured out his next move. John's boatyard stories did not amuse his dad, a partner in an engineering firm.

After some months, John interviewed with a management recruiter, who suggested jobs in New York. John balked at joining the grim commuter masses in gray flannel suits, like his dad. But he was drawn to New York's energy, and the idea of working in an advertising agency intrigued him.

John purchased new clothes for job interviews. The day of his first interview, he appeared on deck in a spiffy white suit and Panama hat. His new boatyard friends catcalled and whistled as John made his way down the dock.

John landed a job in market research at J. Walter Thompson, at the time the largest ad agency in New York. He wore a suit that he hung on the back of his office door to client meetings but otherwise wore jeans and topsiders—no socks—when his colleagues wore suits and ties. At the office, he became known as the “thinker.” Some mornings, John didn't make it to work, when we had water up to the floorboards and we had to pump the boat out before she sank.

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John's mother would stop by the boat with fresh tomatoes and flowers from her garden. If we were not home, she left a basket for us on the dock outside the door. John adored his mother, and she thought he was the funniest human being on the planet. His dad had traveled a lot for work when John was young, and though John respected him, he never formed a strong bond with him. His mother begged John to make up with his dad.

John's relationship with his parents fascinated me. In my family, so much was unspoken. John's family expressed how they felt.

When John and I took *XL* out on the water, calamity would befall us. The steering would fail and we would drift helplessly, or the engine would blow coils of thick black smoke that curled past the white curtains out of the windows. As his captain's hat, John wore a five-legged red jester's cap with bells on the ends. Somehow, he always got us back to shore. He would pump his arm in victory and proclaim, "Cheated death again."

After we had lived aboard for about four years, we hauled *XL* out of the water for repairs. *XL*'s leaks had multiplied to the point where John was sleeping with one foot on the floor. In the heat of summer, we spent weekends and nights repeating the work we had done when we first bought the boat: digging out worn caulking, stiffening the rotten wood with epoxy, sanding and painting the topsides and bottom.

We stayed with John's parents for a few weeks while the boat was out of the water. I imagined that they thought of me as the other woman, and I kept out of their way. But when I was sick with flu, his mother proffered cool washcloths and acetaminophen. On nights John had to work late, they cracked jokes about him that made me laugh.

After a last backbreaking push in the early fall of 1976, we asked the boatyard to launch the boat.

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The next morning as John and I entered the gate, a fireman yelled, “Get back!”

A fire truck and a cluster of firemen hovered near the water. We raced over.

The tip of a black smokestack stuck out of the water, pointing sideways like a broken finger. Through the murky water of the Norwalk River in Connecticut, I could make out a milky white shape. *XL* looked like a stricken animal, her soft white skin undulating helplessly under the yellowish-brown water. Red smudges, the remains of my scarlet geraniums, floated down the river.

XL was on her side. A pump had shorted out during the night, and she had filled with water and sunk. The firemen told us not to look, but we kept vigil while they raised her.

As we stepped inside that afternoon, our deck shoes slid on the brown slime that coated the floorboards, along with the orange Scandinavian dining table that had been our first big purchase together, and the stacks of Beatles and Bob Dylan records. The stench was overpowering, a blend of sea muck and dead fish. I held onto the doorframe to keep from slipping, frozen in place, unable to move or think.

John blamed himself for not staying aboard the boat, but if he had, he might have gone down with it. John insisted on remaining on board that night, and I went to his parents’ house for blankets.

I drove like a maniac. Glassy eyed with shock, I ran into the kitchen where John’s mother and Pat, John’s sister who lived nearby, dropped what they were doing.

“The boat sank!” I stood there in disbelief while my words hung in the air. Yesterday, at the relaunch, John’s parents had brought a bottle of champagne.

“What can we do? What do you need?” his mother asked.

Pat and I raced to the linen closet for sheets and blankets, and John’s mother put together food and drinks.

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Over the next week, with friends' help, we scrubbed *XL* down with bleach, soap, and vinegar, and threw out whatever couldn't be salvaged. Having lost so much, John asked his parents for financial help to get back on our feet and suggested that I ask my mother, too. When I dismissed the idea, he said, "This is what families do. They help each other."

My mother was a survivor, albeit a paranoid one. Everyone was out to cheat her, even her children. Not only did I never ask for help, but I also waved my independence like a flag of honor. But John had a point. I strode to the paint-spattered phone booth in the boatyard, dialed her number, and when she picked up, told her our boat had sunk and we had lost everything. An aching lump formed in my throat, admitting such a setback to my mother, to whom I rarely confided what transpired in my life.

Like many people, she never grasped why we would want to live on a boat in the first place instead of a nice suburban house. Calmly, she asked where we would live.

"Will you move in with John's parents in Greenwich?"

His parents lived in Stamford now, but while John was growing up, had lived in Greenwich, which my mother correctly associated with "old money" and wealth. John's parents, however, fell in the income mid-range in Greenwich. She imagined us living in a mansion with a staff of servants. Her false assumptions infuriated me. I pictured her self-satisfied smirk.

"No," I screamed, "we're fixing up the boat and will move back in. We need your help."

"What about John's parents? Why can't they help?"

"They *are* helping," I shouted. I was crying now. His parents had not questioned us, even though John and his dad were at odds.

"You bitch!" I shouted, hardly believing my voice. I had never shouted at her. I slammed the phone down.

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Shaking, I ran to the boat. As my crying subsided, I told John about the call. Years of unexpressed anger at my mother now rained down on John, for suggesting I call her. John thought I should call her back since I hadn't allowed her to answer.

“Are you crazy? I never want to speak to her again. I knew she would do this. How could you have thought it was a good idea? I knew it.”

I attacked *XL*'s floor with a boat brush. But the call forced me, at least at that moment, to face a reality about my mother that I preferred to gloss over: she was not there for me.

We finished cleaning up the boat and moved back aboard but did not feel the same about *XL* after the sinking. Before, even when we woke up with water rising through the floorboards, we had faith that we could keep *XL* afloat. Now, that faith was broken. Within a few months, we sold *XL* to a hang glider enthusiast who wanted to park her somewhere and smoke weed with friends using his extensive bong collection.

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