***Sailing Lessons***

When I was young and living in California, and married the first time, my husband and I took sailing lessons at Berkeley Aquatic Park, a shallow saltwater lagoon that forms part of San Francisco Bay and runs alongside the Bayshore Freeway, also known as Interstate 580. There were nine of us, in little 8-foot long cat boats with a retractable centerboard and a boom that clattered back and forth in light airs like a demented toothpick.

Both of us capsized, on separate occasions, whereupon the instructor, Duane, a cheerful pimply young man of about twenty, would roar over in his motorboat to where we stood in the murky water, soaked and alarmed and trying to right things, and announce loudly on his megaphone what we had done to cause this calamity.

I remember two things: Failing at *Man Overboard* *drill*. “You would have hit your man overboard with the centerboard!” Duane announced as he whirled to a stop beside me in a stink of gasoline. And the thrill of flying along with all my other little catboat friends, like dragonflies skimming a pond, while semis the size of small trailers roared by.

When the class was over, Duane presented us all with little certificates, and Cliff and I celebrated with spaghetti and meatballs and chianti at a chaotic Italian place that is still there at the foot of University Avenue.

In two months, we had bought a 32-foot fiberglass sloop named *Paloma*, given up our apartment in San Francisco – from which, if you stood in the bay window in the living room with your nose pressed against the glass and looked to your right, you could just make out Alcatraz – and moved onboard. Now we had to learn to sail.

I knew from the start I would never be a first-rate sailor. I’d left it too late, and I lacked physical courage. But mainly, I lacked the instinct of the first-rate sailor.

But I was serviceable, I was okay. I wasn’t frightened when we ‘buried the rail*,’* and water was pouring down the deck, and things were banging below. I got the logic of sail, the power of the keel, understood that when the angle in the cockpit became unbearable, you could spill the wind from the sails, and the boat would right itself. It wasn’t efficient, no one wanted to do it, but it made things bearable.

I would go forward and reef the main. I’d rather do it myself than be at the helm while Cliff did. And to my surprise, I was good at the helm in a heavy sea. The concentration took my mind off my fear, and I could sit for a long time, transfixed by the compass, trying to hold course and minimize the yawing a small boat does.

They say you should reef (reduce sail) when you first think of it. And we rarely did. Cliff was an aggressive sailor, and *Paloma* was often overpowered. But he was a good sailor and knew when to back down. We learned how to reef, to switch from working to storm jib, the points of sail, tacking, gybing, going into irons, docking and anchoring.

But I never did master Man Overboard, and an anxious look would come over Cliff’s face if I suggested another drill. It was enough to have a wife who loved sailing. They are rare. We had a rule that anyone in the cockpit alone had to wear a harness clipped to a line that ran from the bow to the stern. It was a pain. The line or the harness was forever getting caught on something or other. But it lessened the fear of going overboard, always there on a small boat.

People who sail on San Francisco Bay like to say that if you can sail there, you can sail anywhere, and it was not until I heard the skipper of a sloop say the same in the English Channel that I realized sailors say this everywhere. It’s part of the lore. We all want to think our own watery corner of the earth is its most perilous.

All the same, the Bay is daunting, and when we’d done three years of it, we were ready to cruise south. So one fine morning in September, after two weeks of preparation, we sailed forth out of San Francisco Bay under the fabled Golden Gate Bridge, along with Mike, a longshoreman friend of Cliff’s who worked on the waterfront.

Mike was a gentle giant of a man, 6 foot 4 inches tall, with startling brown eyes that always seemed to be popping with excitement, and a mop of wiry and prematurely greying hair that surrounded his face like a bush. In repose, which itself was rare, he could seem like a pensive Einstein, reading *War and Peace* in his bunk, say, or splicing a line, or drinking tea in the galley. But because of his massive size, any time he went forward – if I was below trying to get some sleep while he stood watch – I would feel Paloma wobble under his weight and energy, the sails shifting in confusion, until he was back in the cockpit and they could right themselves.

It was our first day out. The breeze was good, we had a following sea, and we were heading south with Half Moon Bay our first port of all. We were frisky with excitement as we sailed under The Golden Gate Bridge, packed with traffic as always, and turned left to slowly pass Ocean Beach, Daly City, Pacifica, those dismal towns south of The City, and the coast of California slid slowly away from us as we edged out to sea. Even Cliff, calm by instinct, was exuding a new energy. What an adventure we were beginning!

Our first night out was uneventful, if fogbound, tied up to a buoy in Half Moon Bay, a small anchorage roughly half way between San Francisco and Santa Cruz, and we set off early the next day to make good time on the long passage between Half Moon Bay and Santa Cruz, where we had a berth for two nights.

We’d just eaten a late lunch – a chicken and rice casserole that I had prepared ahead and frozen with green beans – when we began to pay more attention to a wooden cruising ketch about 40 feet in length that had been sailing near us for awhile.

Every time we looked over, the skipper waved, so we waved back. Was he alone? He seemed to be sailing closer to us, we were almost in tandem. The boat would disappear in the vast rolling swells, and we would think we’d lost him, that he’d taken off for the open sea, then there he’d be again when we peaked on top of another swell, closer.

“Why don’t you get on the marine radio and see if he’s in trouble,” Cliff said to me, as though we were routinely to be found cruising around the Northern Pacific rescuing foolhardy sailors. We were barely hanging on ourselves. In fact, I’d never used a marine radio before, and there followed a fraught and static-laden exchange as I stood in the galley trying to make myself heard above the roar of the wind and the sea and the rigging – dishes unwashed in the sink – looking out at Cliff in the cockpit, in black beanie and foul weather gear, both hands on the tiller as he fought to keep Paloma on course.

The weather had changed. Dramatically. Gone was the steady wind that had been carrying us gently over unbreaking swells in a kind of dreamy reverie. In its place was an ugly grey mass, breaking all around, sending up vast slapping curtains of spray, and dumping water into the cockpit. The bilge pump was working, but Mike had to manually bail every time the cockpit was pooped so the water didn’t reach the engine controls.

How quickly things can change at sea. How different from Bay sailing, from a leisurely lunch in the lee of Alcatraz and later, cruising along the Waterfront, Chardonnay in hand, picking out Nob Hill, Coit Tower, The Ferry Building. Market Street, Broadway, the Embarcadero.

The radio exchange was made worse by the skipper being Dutch.

“Are you in trouble?” I yelled, through the static.

“Yes! Yes! Ve are in trouble. Ze boat, she is fine, she is okay, but my wife, she is sick. She has the concussion, I think is called. Ve are needing a hospital.”

“Have you called the Coast Guard?”

“Yes, but they don’t come out. The weather is too bad. They will not lift her. Is that how you say it? *Lift*?

There was nothing we could do, obviously, other than provide psychological support. I said we were going on to Santa Cruz and hoped to be there in two or three hours.

“Maybe less at this rate,” Cliff called out from the cockpit. One good thing for bad weather: You can make speed if you can hang on.

“You can see it on the chart,” I added.

I told him it was a good-sized town and there’d be a clinic if there wasn’t a hospital. Otherwise, San Jose was not far, and she could be taken there by ambulance.

There is something special about entering a place you know from the sea. It is the same but different, the land, the buildings, the streets, the hills, even the height of a place. How spread out it can be is one of the things that strikes you. Or how cramped. It was dusk by the time we straggled into Santa Cruz, exhausted, tied Paloma up to the dock, plugged in the electricity, and plonked ourselves down in the cockpit, beer in hand. Shortly afterward, Bart hurried over to meet us.

He’d already called an ambulance to take his wife to hospital in San Jose, and he had no time. He also had no medical insurance for the United States and was worried about what this was going to cost him and how serious it might be.

We never fully understood what had happened to his wife, due to the language limitations and the chaos of the moment. Only that she had taken a bad fall on the boat and had a concussion. There was no email then – no Internet – and no point in exchanging numbers as we were heading south in two days. They’d left Vancouver and had a long cruise ahead to Rotterdam. We never saw them again.

Two days later we did the long southerly run across Monterey Bay. We rigged the spinnaker, the first time ever, and what a fiddle it was to get the damn thing up on the bow and keep it there with the whisker pole, so it pulled Paloma along, like in all the glossy sailing magazines, not allowing it to drift to the side or get caught up underneath the bow.

In Monterey Bay we lived for two days among otters, endearing creatures in response to whom the tendency to anthropomorphize is strong. I have a photo of Cliff rowing the dinghy through the fog – which stayed with us the whole time we were there – being followed to the jetty by a pair of them. They would come right up close while we were eating lunch in the cockpit and lie on their backs as though faintly amused by the noises we made, gazing at us smugly as they cracked open their abalone shells with a rock.

Then, to cap it all, not only did the fog lift finally as we sailed out of Monterey Bay but we were joined by dolphins. They seem to *Pop*! out of the water by the bow, six of them, and spent half an hour bopping back and forth from one side of the boat to the other. Then, as smartly as they arrived, they left. Bored, probably. Mike watched it all from the bow, holding onto the pulpit with both hands, yelling at the wind and the sea, riding Paloma as if she were a horse on a plain.

We were enjoying ourselves finally, and sailed on past Point Conception to Santa Barbara, where Mike had to leave us to fly back to San Francisco and his job.

I would like to report that our time cruising the Channel Islands was uneventful. But you wouldn’t believe me. Things are never uneventful at sea. Twice we dragged the anchor and had to reset it, and then the fan belt on the diesel engine broke. A better equipped boat might have had a spare fan belt or two. As it was, we improvised with a pair of *L´Eggs* pantyhose.

Our main adventure we saved for our return voyage, for Point Conception, known as “the Cape Horn of the Pacific,” where the coast of California seems to bend and, in a sense, Northern California becomes Southern California. Here the prevailing winds are north westerly and mostly ferocious, the rule for sailors from the south being Get there early in the morning or early in the evening. In our infinite wisdom, we made our approach around 2 in the afternoon. The sea was wild and ugly, the wind howling, but at least we had reefed the main and were under storm jib.

Even so, Paloma was heeled at over massively and water was pouring along the decks. These were the worst conditions we’d ever been in. We probably should have doused the main and tried to fly on jib alone, but neither of us wanted to leave the cockpit, even wearing a harness, and go forward onto a roiling deck. Taking the sails down and going on under power seemed fraught with danger. We were taking on water; the pumps were straining. Were sailors ever so green?

As we were wondering what to do and whether to turn tail and try again in the morning, a sudden gust of about 40 knots per hour pushed us even further over and one of the companionway doors came loose from its hinges and flew overboard. We were stunned. It had never occurred to us that a boat could even be so far over that this would happen. Once we had registered the shock, what it meant for the voyage, four more days, Cliff wanted to go back and get it.

“Go back and get it?” I tried to make myself heard above the roar of the wind, my teeth beginning to chatter with fear. “Where? Where do we go back and get it?”

We watched with horror as the door sped away from us.

“But if we don’t get it, ¨Cliff yelled back at me, “we’re going all the way back without a door to the companionway. We’ll be soaked.” I could see his point, but I was having none of it.

“We’ll put a tarp over it. We’ll figure it out. We’re never going to get close to it,” I was shaking my head madly, “and if we did, get close to it, how are we going to reach into the water and get it on board? At least if it’s a person in there, they can help. We’ll bump into it or we’ll run it over. Look at it, it’s already gone.”

One minute it would appear and then there’d be a huge wave and it was gone.

I flashed on Duane, bopping around the Aquatic Park, barking instructions: ‘Never let him out of sight! Keep him in view until the helmsman brings the boat back to him.’

But it was no Berkeley Aquatic Park out there. There were no lorries hurtling by on I580, no secretary in little black heels with a notepad calling us in when class was done. It was life and death! We watched the door whirl away from us – varnished just before we’d left, along with its mate, so they’d look spiffy along with the handrails – bobbing briefly into view now and then on top of a breaking wave until it disappeared forever.

Chastened, horribly chastened, we let out the sails and turned tail from our first attempt, Point Conception gazing blandly down at our debacle. We would try again in the morning. We anchored off the beach at Coho, where the sky was just bright enough for us to see the beached hulls of a small sailboat and a good-sized fish boat. Neither of us slept. The roar of the wind kept us awake all night, but at least we were out of it. And the anchor held.

Cliff and I parted a few years later, but we never tired of talking about our sailing adventures. He continued to single-hand Paloma well into his 70’s, heading out under the Golden Gate, the foghorns booming, to the Farallon Islands.

And Mike was hooked, of course, on all of it, every single bit, drama included. He spent three years getting his Small Boat Captain’s License, and the last I heard he was delivering yachts in The Antipodes and The Caribbean. Big ones, I hope.

Me, I’m an armchair sailor now. The shame of it coats me like clingfilm. Now I watch the sailboats from my home overlooking the Mediterranean. Sometimes there are eight or ten of them, of all sizes, and it’s a race or regatta. Sometimes it is a yawl or a ketch from England or France or the States, weathered with voyaging.

Sometimes a small sailboat will come so close to our bluff that it disappears from view, and I will hold my breath, imagining – old instincts die slow – that something has gone wrong. The jib sheet is jammed or the sail itself is hooked on a forestay. And it all comes rushing back to me.

I am there in the cockpit, my eyes glued to the sails, waiting for Cliff’s ‘*Hard to lee,’* then the glorious moment as she heads up into the wind and the sails start to luff. I let go of the jib, then the rattle of the winch and that unique noise a sailboat makes when she’s tacking, the jib flapping on the bow like an angry seagull. Then cleated and quiet again, hearts can stop pounding as she settles on the new tack.

There was a solo sailor out there the other day, close hauled in a small sloop, the sails trimmed perfectly. She steamed toward us, slicing through the smooth water like a sabre. What was he doing? Eight knots? Nine? A sailboat under sail – and many aren’t these days – is one of man’s finest creations.

It’s easy to remember just the horror stories of sailing, and we would spend hours doing just that at the end of the day, sunburned, wind-weathered, exhausted. So why do it? When there is so much drama, so much that can go wrong?

Let me give you another memory:

It is night, there is a full moon, and I am alone in the cockpit. The sea is calm, and we are on a medium reach, with the sails full. “Happy sails,” as Cliff would call them. Down below I can hear two able-bodied seaman snoring. I will do my best not to wake them for any reason short of death. They need sleep.

We are standing three-hour watches – the most we can bear – and Mike is still with us. We are heading south east. We have roared past Point Arguello and Point Conception and, almost immediately, the water changes. The rolling grey chop is gone. It feels calmer, bluer even, southerly. I have my foul weather gear on, but I can feel the air change, becoming warmer.

All around me is the inconceivable immensity of the sea. I have my own little triangular visual routine: Compass, sails, sea. Compass, sails, sea. Compass, sails, sea. Every few minutes I stand up and do a quick check of the horizon to make sure I haven’t missed a tanker. All around me is plankton, glowing in the moonlight. Now and then I see shark fins, two or three of them, but they don’t linger. Occasionally, there is the eerie sound of a ship. We are in the Santa Barbara Channel now, and there are oil rigs, huge complicated-looking things that make weird clanging noises.

The immensity of the solitude, as I sit here with a mug of hot chocolate in one hand and the tiller in the other, is something I will never know again. It is frightening, of course. But it is also awesome, to be out here alone in this tiny vessel on the margins of the world, reliant on my own humble abilities.

I wouldn’t have missed it for anything.

Word count 3450