



It had been embarrassing, a ceramic crematory urn displayed on top of her fridge. She put the urn in the hall closet a month after Kurt's funeral and procrastinated as the urn gradually got pushed to the back, hidden by the tails of his raincoats and a stack of dining room table pads not used in years. She didn't entertain much anymore.

Truth was she didn't have the guts to throw his dust into the sea, as Kurt had requested. For a year the gold lacquered urn was out of sight. She watched old movies, westerns mostly, and read books to avoid thinking of Kurt. A tough assignment when the song he asked for at his memorial service was "Ghost Riders in the Sky," and the books she preferred were about sailboats and the people who lived for them. She tried to perfect her escape in their king-sized bed propped on pillows, snacking on salted peanuts. When she checked on their sailboat, which was now tied up to a mooring in the harbor, all her efforts to cut and run from his memory were useless. He was the heart of the boat.

On the one-year anniversary of his death, she surrendered. She dug into the back of the closet and slid out the urn. He had wanted the ashes sprinkled into the Pacific off Point Conception, latitude 34° 27". That's *Punta Concepcion*, named by the Spanish explorers. In the centuries before the Europeans came, it was the passage to eternity of the Chumash dead. It was said that, when they died, their souls fell from the sky and were catapulted from the launch pad of that boomerang-shaped cliff into the arms of the Great Spirit.

**SHE CALLED UP JIM SHEA** and asked him to give the old Yanmar diesel its annual physical—change the oil, check the filters, redo the belts. She couldn't see well enough to navigate the tight spaces behind the engine set up, but she ordered a backup filter, a replacement pump, and a pair of belts, just in case. She imagined the unimaginable, repairing the diesel under way in their beautiful Bristol Channel Cutter, *Ghost Rider*, which now was hers alone. For years, it was Kurt and Mina. Now it was Mina, period.

She was limited by sketchy engineering skills, although she was a pretty

good sailor. Kurt had always taken care of the mechanical stuff. Floundering on the big blue Pacific with a balky engine, even if you could see land, was not her idea of sport.

Kurt would say, "Well, you can always sail 'er in."

Yeah. Easy for him to say. As usual, she imagined the worst, a ripped main and a busted back stay. Would it be easy then, wise guy?

**T**he dirt on the boat's cabin roof had blown out of the sky after the most recent hill fires. Now it rolled off the boat into the harbor as she played a stream of water onto the cabin and deck. She thought of the trajectories of this dirt, the currents running along the coast bearing both the detritus of the city and the solemn grey whales. In the teeth of this current, she would sail out of the harbor, break free of the channel, and pound into the limitless ocean. It would be clean and blowy up around Conception, the headland at its most beautiful and least predictable. She hesitated to do it alone, but there wasn't a single male human she could ask to help. Except for Kurt, her choices of men were predictably poor. She picked the charmers, the high fliers, the hopeless wonders. In spite of all the self-help books, the encounter groups, the circle sessions, she could not see the spring traps hidden in the flower beds. Except for Kurt.

Besides, she had to do this alone. He would have done it for her.

She had only gotten close up to Conception once, when Kurt took her there as a surprise for her fiftieth birthday. He took her overland in the Jeep, through the Bixby Ranch. Strictly private, off limits, but he had pulled it off. Even needed a U.S. Coastie sign off. It had been a day like today, tumultuous anvil heads and an atmospheric high-pressure zone over the Pacific stoking the wind from the north. The seas were huge under a calendar-

perfect azure sky and they had shared a sandwich in the lee of the old stone lighthouse while they watched the show.

He had sailed her to the Channel Islands a few times, once to San Miguel. Elephant seals sprawled on the beach, slobbery and annoyed at the intrusion. At least they weren't in rut as they were during the winter

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months. She stood lookout on the bow, one leg hooked over the pulpit, waving Kurt off the rocks that swayed in veils of seaweed like pale wanderers looming up from the uneven bottom. Along the shore where the seas broke, a continuous hiss filled the air as

wind exploded in the waves and flung the remnants against the cliffs. At night, anchored under the limestone bluffs, the incessant howl tossed the boat fore and aft, ripping at the anchor chain and testing the fifty-pound Bruce. She stayed awake, wrapped in a blanket, too intimidated for sleep. Selkies and loreleis sang to her from the nighttime shadows arching against the bluffs.

With the sun at its low point for coastal winter, it was a Wagnerian dawn. She had felt like she hadn't slept at all, but, since it was a silent morning and she had failed to notice the transition from black sky to pink, she must have slept some. Her neck ached and she longed for food and for the warmth of Kurt's hairy body. When the snoring stopped in the forward berth and the yip of the sleeping bag's zipper told her Kurt was awake, she prepared her face to convey confidence and to hide her craven heart.

He ducked through the forward hatch and reached his arms overhead, expanding a shirtless chest and groaning.

"It's freezing," she said.

"Yesss," he shouted. He flashed a toothy grin.

After the addition of a sweatshirt, he put the kettle to boil, fished in the lazarettes for bread, tea, peanut butter. He came up with a fist-sized parcel wrapped in thick brown butcher paper.

"Surprise," he said. "Guess."

"I can't."

"Guess anyway."

"I need a hint."

"Divisidero Street."

"Your childhood dump? You said the food was awful."

"Come on, try harder. Think ancestors. Think mustaches."

"Chewing tobacco?"

She still sat tucked in and mummied against the damp chill. He took her hands from under the quilt, spread them open, and pressed the paper parcel into her palms.

"You know it," he said and stroked her cheek with a raspy thumb.

The package was square, firm, but not hard, and smelled like burnt cookie dough.

"Is it edible?"

"We're doing breakfast and she asks is it edible!"

"I can't."

"You must." He had squatted in front of her, fingers creeping up her legs,

caressing her calves. He opened the last fold of wrapping paper. Inside was a four-inch square of golden tan, pungent, sweet Norwegian cheese.

"Hjetost!"

"Thank you, God," he said.

**SHE MISSED HIM ALRIGHT.** She missed his illogical lack of fear. Out on the ocean, he was his most alive—comfortable with it, playing tag with it, reading it. She had always confronted the sea like it was an antagonist. To him it was a formidable brother.

"*Ghost Rider* is a tank of a boat, a galleon. She has so much weight on her buns, it would take a rogue to knock her down. A giant rogue," he said. "Besides, I'm not the Ahab type. I haven't developed an iconic death wish. Not yet anyway."

He grinned at her, the loopy grin that made him look younger than he was. It revealed a darkened bicuspid tooth, loosened in a fight in Panama City while he was in the Navy. He could never afford to get it capped and, now, it had turned a dull gray. When he smiled, it marked his face with years and acceptance.

"Mina, you gotta quit thinking Ahab."

She had believed him to a point. But when they were blue-water sailing, when he was asleep below and she was alone on the watch, even a mild sea seemed perilous. She had mostly outgrown sea sickness, but not her catastrophe-prone imagination. It would start with the wave action. If the swells increased, it suggested they were sailing into waters in sympathy with the furies up ahead. She would picture the volumes of sea water passing under their keel and she would avert her glance from the fathometer registering the depth to the ocean floor. A foundering woman would encounter sharks, kelp, pirates, deadheads, sea mammals, drift nets—the list was endless.

**IT TOOK ONLY MINUTES,** to know she would not be taking catnaps on this cruise. Six knots upwind with a heavy swell from Conception and there was a telltale fuzz

between the mainland and Santa Cruz Island. Windy Lane was in session.

She fishtailed past Coal Point, sailing like an idiot. Around her, an oil slick seeped up between breaks in the ocean floor and bloomed iridescent ribbons of petrol. You could see the oil slick for miles and she wondered if anybody ever tried to set it afire.

Finally, under steadier hands, she got the *Ghost* pointed clean to weather, leaning on a breeze that was more northerly. The wind direction made her tack more often and she now appreciated Kurt's cockpit setup that allowed her to single-hand the *Ghost*. Maybe those years he argued in favor of roller furling had proved right. He called her a hopeless romantic because she wanted only the traditional ways, but his enthusiasm for modern conveniences had made this passage possible.

Rounding Coal Point, the western headlands of Santa Cruz Island popped out through the port-side haze. The increased wind velocity had flattened the sea and swept everything—wave tops, haze, rain—in its path. She set the autopilot and went below to find her safety harness and umbilical. It would be getting sporty, but she felt competent and in control.

She was three quarters there; San Nicholas, the farthest north of the Channel Islands, was invisible in the gunmetal mist. As expected, there was a dark wind line streaming around Conception and whipping across the Santa Barbara Channel as it opened to the Pacific. It happened every day about this time. She couldn't tell yet whether it would pay to slip into the lee of Coho Bay for the night, or whether she should make a run for Conception, cast the ashes overboard, and get the hell out of there.

She pulled on a foul-weather jacket which had been Kurt's. While her body was cozy, the skin of her bare legs was patterned with goose bumps. It was blowing thirty knots with no sign of fall off and her brain drifted to the calamitous possibilities. What if the wind turned to southeast and drove her up on the rocks in Coho Bay? What if she ran for Conception and the current wouldn't let her make the turn? With introspection came the first stage of *mal-de-mer*, pallid skin and dry mouth. She licked her lips and swallowed repeatedly, rubbing her thumb with her forefinger like a nervous banker. She slogged unhappily forward, close-hauled, hoping the weather would decide for her.

**T**hen, it did. Abruptly, out of the benign mist, an ugly line of white froth underlined a ridge of dark water barreling around Conception.

It was racing to her, pushing a volume of warm dry air that made her eyes tear. Her *mal-de-mer* quickly forgotten, she found herself reflecting in bystander fascination at the resemblance of the advancing wave to a charge of animals. Here they were, the infamous Dogs of the Sea. The site of them shook her out of treacherous wool-gathering, the sailor's state Kurt used to call a shit fog. She headed up into the wave and furled the Genoa; she shortened the mainsail and let it luff.

The initial surge was a blunt assault. When the squall line hit, the boat bravely leaned back and took it on the underbelly. After that, there was nowhere to go but nose down. The *Ghost* dove under the first load of water and struggled up through the green, only to take it again on the underside. Mina tied down the tiller, clipped herself onto the jack line and shortened the mainsail even more.

Kurt always said the sea gods were whimsical. Suddenly, the wind grabbed the top of the main and ripped it loose, ripping it from the slot.

In less than a minute, it streamed from the boom, lines flapping like lassoes. One caught her on the cheek and she knew the skin was laid open. During the next dive, she heard a sickening snap and felt the boat shake her bow and shudder to regain balance. As she looked up, the top third of the mainmast came down on the deck and slid over the side, dragging the sail and rigging into the churning ocean.

Now she knew why Kurt kept that small hatchet taped under the lid of the stern lazarette. She pulled it free and, sliding along the jack line, chopped the rigging that still held the main and was dragging the boat broadside to each surge. When the weight was released, the boat righted some, but with no sails and no forward motion, she wallowed around in every trough.

When she reached for it, the ignition key was still in her breast pocket. She found the slot, pushed it home and pressed the start button. The Yanmar coughed and blew smoke, but started as if she were at the dock drinking a cold one. Now she could head up under power, measly though it was.

She held onto the safety harness with one hand and the tiller with the other. She felt her cheek to see how bad things were. Her hand came away dark with blood that dripped on her yellow foul-weather jacket and drizzled into the Velcro seams. Soon she was up on the rail, jamming the tiller hard with her foot. It made little difference. Without the power of the main, the boat wallowed and flopped in the seaway, barely keeping up with the wind's natural tendency to force the boat broadside. A glance at the changing scene ahead filled her with dread.

There it was, the thing Kurt had reported in nightmares, the wave some called a rogue. But it was not really a wave at all. It was a hill of black water, seductively glistening like an oiled monster as it flexed and rolled forward in a great heave of ocean. The swell was just gathering to break at its apex and was beautiful in its simplicity. This one was aimed to flick her

away like a flea.

There was a shock wave of adrenaline, perhaps compounded by anger. She considered the inflatable, but sagged at the thought of pumping it up while trying to stay on deck. It was out of the question. Even as she considered the option of abandoning ship, she remembered Kurt's mantras.

"Stay with the boat and strap yourself in."

Whenever heavy weather sailing came up, he had repeated his rule.

"Stay with the boat and strap yourself in."

Curses, prayer, radio messages, flares—it was all too late for that. She unbuckled the umbilical and rolled over to the hatchway, sliding butt first below deck. Reaching overhead, she wrenched the hatch cover almost closed. Then, she secured the three self-sealing hatch boards in place, the middle one a decorative and sexy plexiglass which she hoped would hold up in the coming onslaught. With the boards in place she was able to slide the hatch cover completely closed and to lock it from the inside.

Before she went below, she did not peek at the monster swell coming down on her. It scarcely mattered how fast it moved or how near it was. As she fought to pull herself into the pilot berth, she felt the boat move into position for a vertical slide, bow pointing to the heavens, the entire hull ready to fall stern-to-down the face of the huge mass of ocean water. The *Ghost* seemed guided by a benevolent hand, ready to dive once rather than roll and roll. Was Kurt in charge after all? As the boat reached its tipping point, she got the strap across her hips and cinched the buckle tight. For one insane instant, she wondered if she should have tried the dinghy.

"That rotten little punk," she said and laughed. Kurt had talked about pitch poling, but he'd never really done it.

When the boat went over on her nose, she grabbed the handhold fastened to the cabin roof. Out of the corner of her eye, as the portholes grew first green, then grey, then black, among all the gear thrashing around inside the hull—tomato soup cans, socket wrenches, books, nautical charts, pillows, kitchen knives, CDs, First Aid Kit—she did not see a yellow flashlight accelerate across the cabin. It struck her head hard, over her eyebrow and near the right temple. Above the roar of the great wave outside, there was a strange sound, a brittle, shivery sound which could have been the flashlight innards or could have been her head. Then, she saw a brilliant white light streaked with blue.

**WHEN SHE CAME TO** and re-entered the Pacific Time Zone, she was still strapped in the berth, the wreckage in the boat distributed in haphazard fashion; some heavier objects hung from the bunks and towels floated around in a soup of sea water, bilge, maple syrup, motor oil, Sani-flush, and Windex. The plexiglass hatch board had snapped. Her head hurt, her arm hurt, and she was thirsty. She unbuckled the strap across her hips and sat up. In the faint light leaking through the intact ports, she could see a fine dusting, like talc, spread over the entire cabin—in the cushions, in the bilge muck, in the galley. Just aft of the ladder to the cockpit, she saw the shards of the gold-painted urn. It had broken in several pieces when it became airborne during the dive. The entire boat was dusted with Kurt.

Outside, the air was eerily tranquil and there was no swell. From inside the cabin, she couldn't see a landfall. She lay back. If only the wave had taken her. If only it was over.

Many times she had dramatized her death at sea—the life vest waterlogged, the waves swirling and breaking, pulling her down. Or, she had imagined days in the inflatable, her parched tongue grown enormous until finally choking off her air supply, days circled by dark fins cutting through the waves, brushing against the bottom of the inflatable dinghy. She had imagined the sandpaper hide shredding the plastic, sea water pouring in.

She didn't know how long, perhaps an hour later, she was brilliantly awake. The boat rocked gently, port to starboard. She was motionless, barely drifting. She unbuckled the strap holding her down and stood in the swill on the cabin sole, swill seasoned with Kurt. He would be laughing his head off.

She unlocked the hatch, removed the remaining panels, and slid the hatch back. Halfway up the cockpit ladder, she saw the bare stern of the boat—the auxiliary anchor, the inflatable outboard, the radio antenna, all gone—ripped off by the force of the rogue. A few steps up and she looked forward. A stump of the mast was all that remained, sheared off at the cabin roof; there was no pulpit, no forestays, and no backstays. Nothing. She was floating in a bare hull.

But there was a change. A little toward the south was the humped ski jump that could only be Conception. Toward the east she could see the shimmering edge of land in the distance. She figured it was maybe a mile or two away and, lying that low, it had to be the sand cliffs just north of Point Conception. She had, willy-nilly, *drifted* around to the appointed place.

The key to the inboard was somewhere, but where? It had bounced out of the starter. Her glasses were missing. She tried the radio, flipped the switch on the master board. No response. Either the battery was dead or, more likely, something had shaken loose. The flashlights were smashed either on her head or in the Kurt-seasoned swill standing in the bilge. They were worthless. Back out on the stern, when she opened the lazarette on the

swim deck and tried to read the battery switches without her glasses, she could only make out the glint of brass. She remembered the conversation with Kurt about those new gadgets that signal your location when the boat is crippled. They had decided the item was too pricey.

She could wait and hope for rescue, but this was a shipping channel. With lousy luck, a container vessel heading south for Long Beach, or north for San Francisco, could bear down on her doing 18 knots and never notice a bump.

Kurt had kept a loaded pistol in the owner's bunk. It was a big heavy thing, probably weighed eight pounds at least. She could shoot a hole in the hull and capsize *Ghost Rider* for good. She could stay with the boat the ultimate time and go under with Kurt. Or, she could shoot a hole in her head and let the boat drift where it may. Finally, she could capsize the boat and try to swim to shore. Idiotic, but one choice of several bad ones.

She found the pistol, clean and dry, wrapped in ancient oiled canvas and tied with waxed cord. It was nestled in a paint-stained woolen shirt that Kurt had stuffed under the spare anchor in the forward bunk. Fortunately, the anchor hadn't gotten loose—a blow from that would have been definitive—and the neat parcel squirreled beneath the heavy anchor had survived. She cracked the gun and saw that all cylinders were full. She knew how to fire the thing, but she had forgotten how heavy it was. More like a salmon weight than a firearm.

She lay down in the pilot birth and strapped herself in again, placing the pistol on her stomach where it rose and fell with each breath. She lay there thinking about the alternatives, bunching up the woolen shirt that had cradled the gun. Like a message from the other side, she could smell Kurt, smell his body, his special odor—cigarette smoke, sweat, garlic. She held the shirt to her face and breathed deep, breathed him inside. He felt very near, near enough that now she knew what he would do.

The midday light crept into the wreckage inside the cabin. In her state of tense awareness, she felt rather than heard the sound of current running over the gunwales—that friendly, busy sound of water slipping around in orderly channels. It had done its job moving layers of warm and cold, miles of seaweed, rivers of plankton, schools of fish, and one wrecked cutter.

She climbed out of the berth and went on deck, carrying the pistol with her. The body aches she had acquired in the pitch pole had subsided some and she felt she could manage the heavy gun. The scene on deck was the same, the boat stripped of virtually all moveable gear.

Lifting the cover of the lazarette, she pulled out the largest flotation vest and got herself cinched in. The vest was damp and a bit moldy, but it should float. She stripped off her boat shoes. Then she went back down into the cabin and lifted up a few floor boards near the engine, exposing the bilge. She aimed the pistol into the bilge and emptied the cylinders, all six, into the hull. She had to hold the pistol with two hands and prop her right leg against the nav station to absorb the recoil. The sounds of the explosions were strung together in a sonic boomlet.

A couple of the shots didn't make it through the hull, but most of them did. Seawater seeped in, slowly at first. She scrambled up the ladder and stood in the cockpit. As the boat began to settle, she could see the debris rising in the cabin and, for the first time since his death, she felt hot tears roll down her cheeks. Bilge gunk clouded with Kurt's dust mixed with the sea water that was sucked in through the holes in the boat. He was being sent off in style. When the water inside reached the cockpit, she turned to the stern and stepped off.

It was cool, but not cold. She rolled on her back and watched as the boat settled a little more to port and then slid under. It lay there, just below the surface, enough air in its inner spaces to prevent complete submersion. She was disappointed that there was no immediate dive to the bottom, but, as she watched, treading gently, the boat breathed its last and heavier materials began to take over. Soon, she couldn't see anything but a slick of rubbish and some stray bubbles.

The sea was still calm and the sun stood high in the bright sky, a sky so sun-filled it was almost white; she had about six or eight hours of daylight. There was no sign of a vessel or of any unusual swells so she paddled around with her back to the green and gold cliffs. She figured they were just below Vandenberg Air Base and she hoped the Air Force wouldn't think she was a terrorist.

For an instant, she smiled as she began an easy backstroke towards the land.

"Goodbye, sweetheart," she said, and started to hum verses of "Ghost Riders in the Sky."



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