# BLUE WATER

A NOVEL

A. Manette Ansay

***NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *VINEGAR HILL***

"Ansay shows with fluid and graceful prose the uncharted paths of ordinary, flawed human hearts." —*Chicago Tribune*

A. MANETTE

ANSAY

# blue water

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*For Jake Smith;*
*for Genevieve;*
*for the cruisers we met along the way;*
*for my longtime editor, Claire Wachtel, who waited for this one so patiently;*
*and with thanks to the people involved in making my new life possible and whole: Arya Nielsen, Surendra Patel, Deborah Schneider, Dr. Erika Schwartz, and Oprah Winfrey, whose kindness set in motion the experiences that launched* Blue Water.

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*And enduring love and gratitude to Ann Patchett and Karl VanDevender.*

You can spend a year at sea waiting, but one day it becomes impossible to endure even another hour.

—*The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor,*
GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ

# Contents

Epigraph

Part One: Chelone 1

One
Forget what you've read about the ocean. Forget white sails on… 3

Two
We left Portland harbor on the Fourth of July, entering the Gulf… 23

Three
For the first days after the squall line passed, Rex and I were… 45

Four
We ate dinner at the round teak table: hamburgers, canned green beans… 62

Part Two: Houndfish Cay 81

Five
Imagine a woman rising on a dark, December morning, cursing beneath… 83

Six
Three weeks in Bermuda while Chelone sat on the hard, scorched electronics… 105

Seven
There were three places to meet friends for a drink on Houndfish Cay. 130

Eight
Imagine a woman stumbling along a solitary trail,
the eastern horizon dark… 152

Part Three: Blue Water 175

Nine
The Echo Island airport was roughly the size of
a living room. 177

Ten
Amy Kreisler opened the door to find a barrel-chested
man in an orange… 206

Eleven
It was dark by the time I arrived at Twin Lakes. 236

Twelve
The day of the wedding dawned bright and clear,
but just before… 257

Thirteen
The whisker poles were not long and straight, as
I'd imagined. 268

About the Author

Other Books by A. Manette Ansay

Credits

Cover

Copyright

About the Publisher

# part one

## *CHELONE*

# *One*

*Forget what you've read about the* ocean. Forget white sails on a blue horizon, the romance of it, the beauty. A picnic basket in a quiet anchorage, the black-tipped flash of gulls. The sound of the wind like a pleasant song, the curved spine of the coast—

—no.

Such images belong to shore. They have nothing whatsoever to do with the sea.

Imagine a place of infinite absence. An empty ballroom, the colors muted, the edges lost in haze. The sort of dream you have when you've gone beyond exhaustion to a strange, otherworldly country, a place I'd visited once before in the months that followed the birth of my son, when days and nights blurred into a single lost cry, when I'd find myself standing over the crib, or rocking him, breathing the musk of his hair, or lying in bed beside Rex's dark shape, unable to recall how I'd gotten there. As if I'd been plucked out of one life and

dropped, wriggling and whole, into another. Day after day, week after week, the lack of sleep takes its toll. You begin to see things that may or may not be there. You understand how the sailors of old so willingly met their deaths on the rocks, believing in visions of beautiful women, sirens, mermaids with long, sparkling hair.

The crest of a wave becomes a human face, openmouthed, white-eyed, astonished. The spark of a headlight appears in the sky, edges closer, fades, edges closer still. There's a motion off the bow, and I clutch at the helm, catch myself thinking, *Turn!*

But, eventually, I learn to let my eyes fall out of focus. Blink, look again. Wipe my sweating face. There is nothing out there but gray waves, gray waves.

Clouds. A translucent slice of moon.

Space.

We alternated watches, Rex and I: four hours on, four hours off. We had a ship's clock that rang out the hours. We had charts and a sextant, a handheld GPS. We had an outdated radar system; we had a small refrigerator, a water maker, clothing and books sealed in plastic wrap. We had five hundred pounds of canned goods, nuts, dried fruit and beans, powdered milk.

We had a ship's log, where we jotted down notes: latitude and longitude, course and speed, wind direction, weather, unusual observations.

We had a float plan, which we left with my brother, Toby; he posted it in the fish store, on the bulletin board behind the cash register. People stopped by with farewell gifts: cookies sealed in Tupperware, a book of crossword puzzles, religious cards, funny cards, cards simply wishing us well. Everyone in Fox Harbor knew

why we were leaving, of course, and this was another reason why I'd agreed to rent our house and move onto the sailboat Rex had bought in Portland, Maine. Our first destination was Bermuda, our ETA three to five weeks. From Bermuda, we'd continue southeast to the Bahamas, island-hop down to the Caicos. Perhaps we'd winter over in Puerto Rico. Or perhaps we'd cross the ocean to Portugal—who could say? We might even head to Panama, pass through the canal, find our way north along the coast to the Mexican Bajas. So much depended on weather, on wind. On our own day-to-day inclinations.

The plan, Rex liked to tell people, is not to have a plan.

It had always been Rex's dream to live aboard a sailboat, and *Chelone* was exactly the boat that he had wanted. A blue water boat, he called her. A boat built to sail around the world. He'd grown up on Cape Cod, sailing with his father; at twenty, he was captain of his college sailing team, and before heading west to Madison for law school, he'd worked as a mate aboard a private schooner, cruising the Virgin Islands. On cold winter nights as we lay in bed, listening to the east wind screaming off Lake Michigan, he'd tell me about the islands he'd seen, casuarina trees and pink sand beaches, sailboats at anchor outside each rustic harbor. Passing these boats, you'd see dogs racing from bow to stern, bicycles lashed to the safety lines, laundry fluttering from the rigging. Entire families spent their whole lives just cruising from place to place, dropping anchor wherever they chose. No bills to pay, no responsibilities. You didn't like your neighbor, no problem, you sailed away.

Maybe, he'd whisper, his breath warm against my neck, we could do the same thing someday.

I like our neighbors fine, Rex.

Seriously.

I am serious.

At the time, I couldn't imagine saying good-bye to Toby, to my friends at the accounting firm where I worked, to our fieldstone house overlooking the lake, to the small, Wisconsin town where I'd been raised. Still, after years spent trying to conceive a child, after the shots and surgeries, the herbal teas, the special masses; after trying to adopt the infant of a teenage girl who changed her mind, I started to pay more attention whenever Rex talked about heading to sea. I leafed through his copies of *Practical Sailor,* his scrapbook of sail plans and hull designs. I studied the glossy brochures he received from boat builders around the world. I'd always enjoyed sailing, and though I'd only sailed on the Great Lakes, I figured that the ocean couldn't be all that different. Water was water, after all. You wore a life jacket. You learned to hang on.

Then, one week before my fortieth birthday, I discovered I was pregnant with Evan. After eleven years of marriage, we were finally—unexpectedly—about to have a child. Our plans no longer belonged to us, and the truth was that we gave them up eagerly. We wanted to make sacrifices. We wanted to shake our heads ruefully, saying, *But then we had the baby so we couldn't . . .*

Six years later, our lives changed again, when Evan was killed in a car accident involving someone I'd known since grade school. Someone whose birthday parties I'd attended. Someone who, the summer I turned sixteen, became my closest friend before our lives diverged, abruptly, the way the lives of young girls do. Someone who'd left her family's farm to marry a man much older than herself and build a magnificent house on the lake that was featured in magazines. Someone who, twenty years after that, was driving her own three daughters to school when her life intersected with my own once more, this time irrevocably, permanently.

It was 7:55 in the morning. It was three weeks before Christmas, 1999. Crows rose out of a hawthorn bush as I slowed for the right turn onto County C, glossy feathers like fingertips, stroking the milky air. The thin black swoop of telephone wires. The smell of Evan's cough drops, eucalyptus flavored, sweet. He'd been out of school since Thanksgiving, confined by a stubborn case of bronchitis, and I still had my doubts about whether or not he was quite ready to go back. But he'd begged, cajoled, pleaded, not wanting to miss any more school, and the truth was that I was just as eager to return to work. My cubicle, across from my good friend Lindsey Steinke. My files, my favorite coffee mug, my ergonomic chair. Though I'd worked from home when Evan was younger, I never got as much done in the breakfast nook we referred to, generously, as my *office,* as I did when surrounded by colleagues, friends, everybody red-eyed and commiserating over the end-of-the-year crunch.

"If your cough starts acting up," I said, "ask Mrs. Hochman to let you see the nurse."

Evan said, "Do you know what they call a group of crows?"

"Promise me," I said, accelerating onto the straightaway, and he said, pieces of cough drop clicking against his teeth, "A *murder* of crows."

"Is that right?" I said.

He said, "Do you know what they call a group of buzzards?"

We lived just a few miles from the elementary school, which was new; beside it, the middle school was still under construction. In a matter of just a few years, County C—which ran east and west—had evolved from a sleepy back road into a busy rural highway. At the remains of the old brick schoolhouse, where my grandparents learned their ABCs, a second highway, known as the Point Road, ran to the north and south. This intersection had always been

dangerous, County C yielding the right-of-way, which meant you had to slow just as the slope of the hill pulled you forward. But with the schools coming in, C had gained, at last, the upper hand. Now you could ride the curve, down and down, passing beneath the flashing yellow light, until you reached the foot of the hill. Weekday mornings, cars lined up a quarter mile to turn into the school yard, everybody dropping their kids off at the flagpole in front of the principal's office.

That morning, we were running late, Evan and I. The roads were strangely empty. The power had gone off during the night—nothing much, just a blip—but enough to disable our bedside clock and, with it, the alarm.

"Let me drop Evan on my way to work," Rex said, watching me fly around the kitchen like a madwoman, but it wasn't on his way. Rex's law firm was in Milwaukee, while Lakeview Accounting was right in Fox Harbor, three doors from the fish store, five minutes from Evan's school.

"It's okay," I said. "We'll get there."

*We'll get there*. Looking back, it strikes me as an odd thing to have said. Because, of course, we didn't.

I was coming up on the intersection when the old brick schoolhouse caught my eye and, just beyond it, headlights. People tended to forget that the Point Road, now, had the posted yield. That's why I observed those lights, noted them, tucked them away in my head. That's why I made absolutely certain that the vehicle, an SUV, was slowing deliberately, significantly, before I let myself glance away.

"A group of buzzards is a wake," Evan said, and I grinned at him in the rearview.

"I used to know that one," I said.

"What about a group of magpies?"

He'd been born, so it seemed to us, loving words. He'd been reading since the age of two. For the past few weeks, he'd been writing little stories as he lay on the couch, his smooth, narrow chest slick with Vicks. *How do you spell marsupial?* he'd asked me one morning, and I'd had to call Rex at work, smothering my laughter, whispering into the phone so that Evan wouldn't hear.

"How *do* you spell it?" Rex had said.

"What the hell is it, anyway? A monkey, right?"

"No, a kangaroo."

"I thought a kangaroo was a kind of rat."

There I was in the kitchen, doubled over with laughter and pride. Above the sink, the cuckoo clock chimed. Already, the gods had closed their eyes.

More crows rising, wheeling. The blinking yellow light ahead absorbed as if by cotton. My mind busy with the day to come, the work that was waiting for me, Christmas shopping. Would we visit my parents in Florida this year? Rex still didn't know if he'd be able to take the time. Already, it was the third of December. We hadn't reserved our flight.

"A ponder of magpies?" I guessed, and Evan said, "A gulp," and I was lying under bright lights, my neck immobilized, naked from the waist up. I do not remember the moment we were struck. I do not remember Cindy Ann Kreisler—I'd known her as Cindy Ann Donaldson—continuing to accelerate after hitting Evan and me, pushing our Taurus twenty feet along the Point Road before we spun free, flipped 180 degrees, plunged down into the gulley. Evan's neck was broken. I broke my right ankle and the bridge of my nose, cracked several ribs, bit through my tongue. Cindy Ann's three daughters were treated for minor bumps and bruises, while Cindy Ann herself

complained of a stiff neck, a headache that—she told a triage nurse—was probably *just a hangover*. Her blood alcohol level, determined two hours after the crash, was barely within Wisconsin's legal limit.

Why hadn't any of the officers at the scene administered a Breathalyzer promptly? Why had it taken a nudge from that triage nurse to get it done? We would learn, Rex and I, that Cindy Ann had been argumentative, angry, cursing the paramedics who examined her daughters as they crouched by the roadside, stunned, hugging their school backpacks. Eventually, one of the officers, Randy Metz, had confined her to his squad car. He was a slow-eyed, heavyset, awkward-looking man, someone who, like Cindy Ann, I'd known since childhood. In court, he would say that no one had tested Cindy Ann because, well, they'd been busy with the injured.

And after the paramedics arrived?

"To be truthful," Randy said, looking directly at me, "it never did cross my mind. You just don't guess a person like that has anything to drink about so early in the morning."

I took a leave of absence from Lakeview Accounting, then extended it, extended it again. Even after the swelling in my face had subsided. Even after I could sleep lying down, hobble around the house. The live-in nurse we'd hired went home. Rex went back to work. My father returned for my mother, who'd stayed on after the funeral to help. She did not fly—refused to even consider it—so the two of them drove all the way back to Miami, to the planned community where they'd retired: identical townhomes with red tile rooftops, sidewalks spooling around a series of landscaped preserves. Three times a week, then twice, then once, Toby drove me to physical therapy in Horton while his girlfriend, Mallory Donaldson, filled in

for him at the fish store, manning the register, answering the phone. We did not talk about Mallory, who just happened to be Cindy Ann's youngest sister. We did not talk about the accident, or Evan, or anything else, for that matter. At the time, I was not yet angry. Shame had lodged itself in my throat, a lump that could not be swallowed. How could I have survived, and with relatively minor injuries, while my six-year-old child, in his top-rated booster seat, died after reaching the hospital?

I didn't want to see anyone. I didn't pick up the phone. Neighbors stopped by with casseroles, but I did not let them in. Even when Lindsey circled the house, calling at the windows, I kept silent. I couldn't imagine facing people, accepting, with grace, all their genuine sorrow for Rex and me. And when I finally did venture out again, I was careful to avoid the lakefront park, the Cup and Cruller Cafe, the bicycle path that wound along the bluff, places where, holding Evan's warm hand, I'd occasionally encountered Cindy Ann.

*Hey, you,* she'd always say, as if she'd been expecting me, and she'd give her long, blond ponytail a flip. She'd ask after Toby and my parents: I'd ask after her mom, her sisters. By then, the older man was long dead; Cindy Ann had remarried and divorced, married, divorced again. Through it all, however, she'd kept his name, as well as the house, which stood less than a mile from our own: a mansion, a showplace, the sort of home that people, even strangers from Milwaukee, drove to Fox Harbor to see. After I could drive again, I always took the southern route into town, so I wouldn't have to pass it, but Rex made a point of driving that way as he went to work in the morning and, again, as he came home at night. He reported that the shades were always up, the lights always on, as if Cindy Ann were inviting anybody to look inside and see how *her* life

hadn't changed since the accident. A fat Angora cat snoozed in the bay window; roses bloomed in the greenhouse; an American flag fluttered from a mount at the side of the garage. Evenings, you could see the blue light of the TV, and the bent, blond head of Cindy Ann as she dished out the evening meal. And, too—more than once—the outline of a wine bottle, a slender long-necked glass. Rex was certain that Cindy Ann was still drinking. Still getting into her car in the morning, regardless of how much she'd had the night before, what time she'd gone to bed.

"I hope she chokes on it," he said, sitting down to our own empty table. "Christ." He pushed his plate away.

"Stop driving past her house," I said, "if it bothers you so much."

But I didn't mean it, not really. The truth was that I, too, savored each detail Rex excised from Cindy Ann's life with a surgeon's care: the new pink bicycle that appeared in the driveway; a second cat, another Angora, napping on top of the newly repaired Suburban; the small, pale face in an upstairs window, looking out at Rex until he drove away. Just as he'd feared, the delayed Breathalyzer had worked in Cindy Ann's favor. At the arraignment, Cindy Ann pleaded guilty to involuntary manslaughter; jail time was suspended in exchange for community service, driving school, and twelve months of counseling for substance abuse. As far as Rex and I were concerned, she'd gotten away with murder. And, judging from letters to the editor that ran in the parish bulletin, in the *Harbor Pilot,* in the county paper published in Sheboygan, nearly everyone in Fox Harbor agreed.

Excepting Cindy Ann's two sisters, of course. They were quick to counter with letters of their own; this was to be expected. What we did not expect was that the worst of these letters, the most hurtful,

would come from Mallory herself. It could hardly be supposed, Mallory wrote, that Cindy Ann set out to harm anybody. Yes, she'd had too much to drink the night before, but who hasn't woken up with a hangover, taken two aspirin, jumped in the car? Who, after all, hasn't made a mistake?

> *I've known Rex and Megan Van Dorn a long time, and while I feel for the tragedy they have experienced, I don't see how they can possibly believe that destroying my sister's life—not to mention the lives of her children—will make up for the loss of their son. What happened was an accident. It wasn't deliberate. It wasn't personal.*

And then—

> *The only deliberate, personal attack was the one that took place in court.*

Sallow-faced Mallory Donaldson, with her animal rights petitions, her aggressive vegetarianism—the result, we all supposed, of growing up on a farm that raised veal. Summers, she traveled around the Midwest, selling handmade jewelry at flea markets and craft fairs. Winters, she washed dishes at the Cup and Cruller, dressed in flannel shirts and shit-kicker boots, a man's synthetic cap pulled low over her forehead. Yet, Toby had fallen in love with her. They'd been together for almost two years. Every now and then, they'd even babysat for Evan.

"I can't take sides on this," Toby said, after the letter appeared. "Not against her. Not against you."

Everything, now, seemed poisoned. Pointless. Mornings, I'd

wake up, stare out the window at the naked, gray shoreline, littered with fat chunks of ice.

What, I thought, do I do next?

The sun coming up and going down again. The clock tick-ticking on the wall.

Shortly after Cindy Ann's sentencing, I wrote my letter of resignation to Lakeview Accounting. "Take a little more time to decide," Lindsey pleaded, filling all the tape on our answering machine. "Let's talk over lunch, okay? C'mon, I'll meet you at the Shanty, my treat."

But I didn't want to have lunch with Lindsey. And I'd already made up my mind. I was going to do something else, something different, though I didn't know what that might be. I thought about starting a business. I thought about going back to school. I even thought about working for Toby at the fish store, the way I'd done in high school: keeping his books, doing his taxes, helping him with the charter fishing trips he ran on summer weekends aboard his boat, the *Michigan Jack*. But since Mallory's letter, I'd kept my distance—from the fish store and, now that I was driving again, from Toby, too—and, at any rate, I wanted to move forward in my life, not step back into the past.

My mother invited me to Florida. "A change of scene," she said. She'd stopped asking if I'd seen Toby lately; like my father, she'd decided to ignore the rupture between us. After years spent building Hauskindler Stone and Brick, they'd sold out to a Chicago-based firm. Now they devoted the same fierce attention to retirement that, once, they'd devoted to the family business. Throughout my childhood, they'd worked twelve-hour days, leaving Toby—ten years my senior—to fix my supper, help with homework, read to me, tuck

me into bed. He'd been more like a parent to me than a brother. More like a parent than my parents had been. Until recently, I'd never felt this as a loss.

"Rex could come, too," my mother said. "We'd take good care of you."

I told her I'd think it over.

But Rex was a partner at his firm; he couldn't take time now, after all he'd already missed. And I was afraid to leave him on his own, picking at frozen dinners, flipping through channel after channel on TV. Shortly after the criminal verdict, we'd filed a civil suit against Cindy Ann, as well as the city of Fox Harbor, the police department, Officer Randy Metz. This triggered a new round of letters to the editor, fresh arguments at the Cup and Cruller, where everyone, Rex said, fell silent now when he stopped in for his usual to-go. Because this time, he'd hired Arnie Babcock, a friend of a friend, an attorney who was known far and wide for exacting extraordinary damages. In the past, Rex and I had both referred to attorneys like Arnie as ambulance chasers, opportunists who lined their pockets with other people's grief. Now, Rex called Arnie a genius, and the first time I'd looked into his broad, handsome face, I, too, found myself feeling as if we'd finally found someone who cared about us, who'd fight for us, someone who understood.

Cindy Ann Kreisler, Arnie said, had robbed our home like the worst kind of thief. We couldn't ask an eye for an eye, but we could demand her assets, teach her to regret what she'd done. Of course, Arnie understood this wasn't about money; still, why should Cindy Ann continue to enjoy a comfortable life while we, the innocent party, were left suffering, uncompensated, forgotten? We could donate any funds we received to charity. Or, perhaps, start a scholarship in Evan's name. Only then would we find some kind of closure.

We'd finally begin to let go. We'd come to accept what had happened at the intersection of the Point Road and County C, where Evan's teachers and classmates had erected a small, white cross.

At last, I thought, we were getting somewhere. We had a plan in place. There would finally be justice, resolution, just the way Arnie promised.

And yet, instead of feeling better, Rex and I only felt worse. Night after night, he muttered, twisted, unable to fall asleep, while I sat reading the same page of the same book over and over again. That none of Cindy Ann's three girls had been injured! It was just so unbelievable, Rex said, so ironic, so goddamn unfair. Even if she lost her house—and she would, Arnie had promised us that—she'd have those girls long after she'd forgotten about us, and she would forget, Rex was sure of this, he dealt with people like Cindy Ann all the time. She was a drunk, she'd had those girls by different fathers, she probably hadn't even wanted the last one anyway. On and on he went, rising to pace between the bed and the big bay window overlooking the lake. Rex, who was so gentle, so elegantly soft-spoken. Rex, who'd worked as a public defender for his first five years out of law school, protecting the rights of murderers and rapists, drug dealers and thieves. Not that I didn't understand. In fact, I agreed with everything he said. Mornings, I woke with an ache in my throat, a sourness in my stomach, that had nothing to do with Evan. The truth was that, with each passing month, he was harder to remember, harder to see. I felt as if I were grasping at the color of water, the color of the wind or the sky.

And this only made me angrier. My mind returned, again and again, to Cindy Ann, to what she'd done. When I passed Evan's room, the closed door like a fist, I thought about how Cindy Ann had destroyed us. When I saw other people's children, I promised

myself that someday, Cindy Ann would pay. When I managed to get myself to mass, I always lit a candle for Evan, but as I knelt before the flickering light, my prayers were for vengeance, my words red with blood. I imagined choking Cindy Ann, beating her with my fists. I had dreams in which I walked up to her front door with a gun. I constructed scenes in which she begged my forgiveness, even as I turned my face away.

I would never have guessed myself capable of hating another human being the way I hated Cindy Ann Kreisler: virulently, violently. How can I explain the sheer cathartic power of such rage? Whenever I gave myself over to its spell, I felt nothing but that one, pure thing. The nuances of sorrow, of guilt, of grief, burned away like so much kindling. I was terrible in my anger: strong, and fierce, and righteous. I could have led an army. I could have marched for days without food, bootless, euphoric, mile after mile.

"Maybe you could get some kind of counseling," Lindsey said, when, at last, I joined her at the Shanty, sliding into my usual seat at our usual table overlooking the harbor. My fish fry had arrived, but I couldn't touch a bite of it. Until then, Lindsey had been doing her best to hold up both ends of the conversation, chattering about her husband, Barton, the golfing lessons he'd gotten her for Christmas. Bart was an avid golfer, and he was always trying to interest Lindsey in the sport. Usually this amused me, but today I just stared out the dirty windows, wishing I hadn't agreed to come, wishing Lindsey would do something about the gray, puffy coat and piano keyboard scarf she'd been wearing for the past ten years.

"Why should *I* get counseling?" I snapped. "I haven't done anything wrong."

"It's *counseling*," Lindsey said. "Not punishment. I just think it might help you feel better—"

"Feel *better*?" I said. "When the person who murdered my child is walking around, free as air? When *we* have to face the rest of our lives in this *prison*, this—"

I was too angry to finish.

"I'm sorry," Lindsey said, quietly. "It was just a suggestion." She began looking for her keys, digging around in her oversize purse. "I hate to see you suffering, that's all."

Early in May, on our first warm day of the year, I saw Cindy Ann and her oldest girl, Amy, in the grocery store. Five months had passed since the accident. There they were, standing in front of the dairy case, picking out a carton of ice cream. *Ice cream*. It seemed inexcusable, unbearable, that they should indulge themselves in such pleasures, that they should enjoy themselves, in any way, ever again. I took a step toward them, and with that, Cindy Ann saw me. There was nothing in her face, not sorrow, not guilt or fear. She simply stared at me, hands at her sides, waiting for whatever it was I might say.

"You—" I began, the word squeezed from my throat, and then I was running out of the store, into the parking lot, the asphalt spinning beneath me. I got into my car, another Taurus—it still smelled of its awful newness—and sat for a moment, gasping, gripping the steering wheel with both hands. I could see the double doors leading in and out of the store; Cindy Ann would emerge at any minute now, Amy beside her, the ice-cream carton swinging in its plastic bag. All I'd have to do was wait until she entered the crosswalk, and then—

I blinked. I was sweating hard. There was still no sign of Cindy Ann. I pulled out of the parking space slowly, cautiously, making sure to signal when I reached the end of the row.

That night, I did not tell Rex that I'd fantasized about running Cindy Ann Kreisler down with my car. Instead, I told him about the ice cream, about the way Cindy Ann had looked at me: without remorse, blankly, indifferently.

"Oh, she'll be remorseful all right," Rex said. "Her days are numbered, believe me."

Arnie had hired a private investigator to find out if she was, in fact, still drinking; if she ever raised her voice to her kids; if she drove within the speed limit. This guy was the best, Arnie'd worked with him before, and if Cindy Ann so much as sneezed, we were going to find out about it. By the time Arnie was done with her, Rex promised, she'd wish that *she'd* died in the crash.

And I said: "That isn't good enough."

And Rex said, "Nothing could be."

The ugliness of those words. I stared down at my hands, horrified, as if they were not my own. At that moment, I began to suspect the truth: we would never be satisfied. We might tear the flesh from Cindy Ann's limbs with our teeth, strip by bloody strip, and still, it would be insufficient. In the end, we'd be animals, worse than animals. I thought about how I'd felt, sitting in the parking lot of the grocery store, my hands gripping the wheel like talons. I thought about how, whenever I tried to remember my son, I wound up thinking of Cindy Ann's daughters instead, hating them simply for drawing breath. I thought about Randy Metz, the way he'd looked at me in court.

"I can't live like this," I said.

The following morning, I told Rex that I wanted to let the civil suits go.

"You don't mean it," he said, scraping butter onto his toast.

"You're tired. So am I. But it's important that we follow this through."

There were lilacs in water on the table, bunches of red and yellow tulips on the counter. In the window, the last of my hyacinths were just past their peak, releasing their sweet, sweet smell.

"Since when," I said, "are you the sort of person who tells other people what they do and do not mean?"

He got to his feet, drained his coffee in a gulp. "We'll talk about this later."

I got up, too. "Call Arnie," I said. "I mean it, Rex. I'm finished."

"And what should I tell him? That we're letting a murderer off the hook? That we're sorry for wasting his time?"

"Tell him I won't participate. Tell him I'll refuse to testify."

Rex stared at me. "You'd sabotage the case. You know that."

"I do."

He pushed past me into the hall, grabbed his briefcase from the stand, stood before the mirror to adjust his tie. On the opposite wall hung a framed photo of Evan, bundled into a red snowsuit, laughing. I thought of my father's belief that the dead were always with us, always watching, and I hoped with all my heart that he was wrong.

"Fine," Rex said, abruptly. A pale blue vein divided his forehead.

"What does that mean?" I said.

"It means *fine*." He pounded his fists against his thighs, hips, chest; it took me a moment to realize he was looking for his keys. "It means that I don't want to argue with you right now, okay? It means that I don't fucking want to argue."

"They're on the stand," I said.

He snatched them up in a clatter. "Only think about what you're saying," he said. "I'm pleading with you. Because we're going to have to live with this for the rest of our lives."

"We're going to have to live with it anyway," I said.

"Not if we win."

"It doesn't change anything."

"Of course it does," Rex said. "We live here, Meg. In this town. With people who know everything about us, who will always be looking at us and saying, Remember when their kid got killed?"

I laughed, bitterly, bitingly. "Right. And remember how they sued us because of it?"

"Remember," Rex said, landing hard on each word, "how they just lay down and took it? How they didn't have the stomach to make certain the same thing wouldn't happen to somebody else?"

For a moment, neither of us said anything.

"I don't want to live here anymore," I said.

I hadn't known I was going to say it.

Rex looked at me. "You mean it?"

I nodded.

He nodded, too. "Okay, then," he said. "Okay."

We studied each other in the mirror, a middle-aged man and woman, each sallow-skinned with exhaustion. Shadows like bruises beneath the man's eyes. Abruptly, he reached for the woman. The woman's hands rose to rest lightly, uncertainly, on his broad, shaking back.

"Okay."

Later, I put on a pair of old jeans and a T-shirt and went out into the garden. The cool mud rose between my bare toes; I bent to clean out the choked iris beds, the daffodils and peonies. But I felt nothing, cared for nothing. I could not concentrate. Inside the house,

on the answering machine, there were messages from Lindsey, from Toby, from St. Clare's—would I chair the festival committee again this year?—and I knew that I needed to call people back, get out of the house, make a life for myself. Instead, I sat back on my heels, staring out across the bluff at the water. My ankle ached, but I didn't change position. It seemed right to me that it should hurt. A single sailboat tacked to and fro, following the outline of the coast, and suddenly, I wished with all my heart that Rex and I were on it, far away from everyone and everything we knew.

Evan was gone. Living with that knowledge was like living with the sound of someone screaming inside my head. By the time we left Fox Harbor, seven months after the accident, I couldn't imagine silence anymore. It was as if the screaming sound had always been there.

# *Two*

*We left Portland harbor on the* Fourth of July, entering the Gulf of Maine in fog so thick that Rex sent me up to *Chelone*'s bow to watch for channel markers. The markers were equipped with bells, in addition to flashing lights, and whenever I heard something, I'd turn my head, shout back to Rex's gray shape at the helm, and he'd slow us down and down until, at last, the marker materialized. Hunched as a demon. Blinking red eye. The fog warped every sound, transformed the tolling bells into distinctly human cries. As the day passed into evening, we heard the muted thump of fireworks, but we saw nothing, just the gradual seal of dusk, the visible world dwindling close, closer still.

*Chelone*. Rex had found the name in a book of Greek mythology: Chelone had been one of Zeus's many nymphs. When she refused to attend his wedding—out of jealousy, out of grief—Zeus punished her by turning her into a giant turtle. From then on she was homeless,

forced to roam the world without rest, carrying everything she owned upon her back.

"Isn't it unlucky?" I'd asked. "Naming a boat after someone who was cursed?"

By then, we'd found someone to rent our house. We'd sold Rex's car and put mine on blocks, cashed in our mutual funds. We'd hired Lindsey Steinke to deposit checks, pay bills, keep an eye on our finances. Our personal items sat boxed in the attic, the flotsam and jetsam of twenty years of marriage: photo albums and clothing, a celadon vase from our trip to Korea, the tumbleweed that Rex had carried all the way home from New Mexico. Evan's baby toys, folders of drawings. The story he'd been writing on the day he'd asked me to spell *marsupial*.

"Maybe it was a curse in the beginning," Rex said. "But, think about it, Meg. Suddenly she's free to do whatever she wants."

Tears stung my eyes. We were on our way to the bank. In the morning, we'd carry the certified check to the airport, get on a plane, taxi to the marina where our new life waited for us.

"I don't want to be free," I said.

It took us hours to creep through the channel. By the time the fog finally lifted, the lights of the coast were out of sight. It was dark now, and cold. Rex was on watch. I opened my sleeping bag and lay down in the cockpit, too queasy to go below. The stars came out in misty sheets. Long, thin clouds trapped the moon's narrow eye. With each tall swell, its pointed chin bobbled, nodded, until it seemed close enough to touch. Suddenly, I was a child again, staring up at my mother, who was bending over me. And then, I was a mother myself, looking down at Evan as he slept. The fine, downy hairs on his cheeks. The coffee-colored birthmark inside his elbow. A pane of clear glass stood between us; I reached out to push it aside—

—and there were Cindy Ann Kreisler's girls, sitting by the highway in the frost-covered weeds. In the distance, Cindy Ann was screaming, telling the officers she'd done nothing, I was the one at fault. The sky filled with purple clouds, arranging and rearranging themselves, spectacular and strange. I thought it must be a message, but when I tried to understand, something seemed to press down on my chest, and then there was the lurch of being lifted into the ambulance.

My baby, I said.

Don't worry, the paramedic said. Jesus loves us all.

I blinked up at him: had I heard him right? Black bits of razor stubble peppered his chin. A gold cross ticked at his throat.

I awoke to see Rex's dark shape at the helm. For a moment, I didn't remember where I was. Then a wave splashed up against the bulwark, misting my forehead and cheeks. *Oh,* I thought. *This.*

"What is it?" I said, wriggling out of my sleeping bag.

A clean, white light shimmered on the horizon.

"Tanker," Rex said. "It'll pass off our port side. Were you able to sleep?"

"A little," I said. The light seemed to be getting closer, but it was difficult to say. Above us, clouds hung in a loosely woven net, backlit by the waxing moon. "Do you think they can see us?"

"Doubt it. We're too low in the water to show up on their radar."

"I was dreaming about Evan," I said.

He looked at me. "A good dream?"

I tried to decide. "Better than nothing," I said.

Lying in bed shortly after his death, flipping through channel after channel on TV, I'd discovered a cable show in which a man communicated messages from the dead to members of an audience.

*Is somebody here in this section,* he'd say, *who has a relative, an uncle? A father? Yes? I'm getting something about Andrea, Amelia . . . Angela? Are you Angela? Yes? Your father wants you to know about the kitchen door—does this make sense? Yes? He's telling you everything's all right now, you shouldn't worry. Do you understand this message?*

I'd been raised on stories about the saints, visions of angels, the literal voice of God. After the funeral, after my injuries healed, after my parents returned to Florida and Rex went back to work, I'd been stunned by the mounting silence that followed, day after day, in which I saw nothing, sensed nothing; in which even my dreams were meaningless, gray. One moment, I was a mother, driving her son to school. *A gulp,* he'd said, and I was stripped to the waist, unable to turn my head. Somewhere else, someone else. Completely.

*Do you understand this message?*

Rex was squinting through the binoculars again. "Would you take a look at this thing?" he said. "Now it doesn't seem to be moving at all."

I took the binoculars, forced myself to concentrate. It took me a moment to find the light, which was not a single light at all, but two lights, one red, one green. The green light shimmered on my right. Which meant—

"Start the engine," Rex said, in a strange, calm voice. "They're heading right toward us."

Everything seemed to be happening very slowly. I climbed down the companionway, fumbled the key into the ignition. The motor coughed, caught. Even before I got back into the cockpit, *Chelone* was moving faster, sails snapping in the artificial breeze. By now we both could see the tanker clearly; it was cutting through the waves with remarkable speed. Moments later, it passed less than a hundred feet in our wake, its own wake rocking us violently. Then, it was

behind us, a dwindling pair of lights. A single light growing smaller and small. A blip on the horizon.

Gone.

I turned to Rex, and he put his arms around me; I buried my nose in his neck. We stood that way for a long time, not speaking. His body against mine was both familiar and strange; he smelled of the ocean and, inexplicably, warm bread.

"Kiss me?" I asked Rex, and then his mouth was on mine, salty, his chin stubbled and rough. We reset the autohelm and lay down together on my wet sleeping bag, carefully, trying to move with the waves, but it was a clumsy business, and we knocked elbows and foreheads and knees before finding a soft, slow rhythm all our own. Looking up into Rex's face, I was struck by his beauty, his high cheekbones and almond eyes, as if I were seeing him for the first time. It wasn't that we hadn't made love since Evan's death, but we'd done so perfunctorily, efficiently. It was like the meals we cooked and ate together, night after night, without appetite. The body had its needs and you met them. You put one foot in front of the other. You kept going, out of dumb, animal habit.

Afterward, Rex pressed his lips to my nose and cheeks, my forehead, my eyelids, one by one. "What are the chances," he said, "that two vessels should cross paths like that in the middle of all this space?"

I shook my head to silence him.

"I mean, if we'd started the engine even thirty seconds after we did—"

"You can't think that way," I said.

But of course, that wasn't true. I knew it, and Rex knew it, too. The mind is built to think exactly that way, to move, serpentine, through every shadow of what might or might not have been.

If only we'd charted a course one mile to the east, or to the west.

If only Cindy Ann Kreisler had gone to bed early, if she hadn't stayed up hour after hour, drinking wine.

If only I'd kept Evan home from school one more day. If the power hadn't gone out. If we'd left the house on time. If only I'd let Rex take him to school, for Christ's sake, he'd even offered to! If only I'd kept my eye on the Suburban for just a few seconds longer.

Or else, if I'd awakened five minutes sooner. One minute sooner. Even thirty seconds. You simply can't bear not to think about it. Because the truth is this: it could have been enough.

The days passed. The first week. The next. Twice a day, at dusk and dawn, we walked to the bow and back again, checking the condition of the sails, the sheets, squinting up at the mast. By now, the muscles in my upper arms and shoulders had knotted into a single steady ache; Rex groaned whenever he sprawled on the settee, one bent knee in the air. He was fifty years old that summer. I'd just turned forty-eight. We were physically fit, or so we thought, but we hadn't expected how the constant motion would affect our backs, our knees. The damp salt air settled deep in our throats. We developed strange rashes under our arms, on the backs of our knees. Bucket baths, dipped directly from the sea, only left us feeling itchier, greasier.

Mothlike holes peppered our T-shirts, collars and hemlines unraveling.

I thought of our claw-footed tub back home, the master bath shower with its twin showerheads, the stack of soft towels in the closet. I imagined slipping into my good silk nightgown, walking barefoot through the house and out onto the lawn. The cool evening dew

against my sun-toughened feet. Evan and Rex filling jars with fireflies. Perhaps that very evening, Toby would stop by—without Mallory, as he sometimes did—to sneak a forbidden hamburger, watch a little TV. All of it seemed unreal to me now, like something I had dreamed. Like traces of a life I'd lived as someone who was not me.

Hour after hour, I stared out at the swells, hoping to see something, anything at all. Whales, seagoing turtles, even the slice of a shark's dark fin. For a while, there'd been schools of dolphins, surfacing so close to *Chelone*'s hull that I heard their little wet gasps of amazement, saw their expressions, which were strangely human: expectant, curious, kind. Like saints, I'd thought, remembering my childhood collection of intricately painted figurines. St. Francis had had those same kind eyes, brightly colored birds perched on his shoulders. But Rex and I had seen nothing living, aside from each other—and, inexplicably, a swarm of red-eyed biting flies—since leaving the Gulf of Maine and bearing southeast, into the open Atlantic.

Once, something hit the fishing line we'd trailed behind the stern, but by the time I worked the rod out of its mount, there was nothing on the other end—not even the ten-inch lure.

Once, as Rex fiddled with the single sideband radio, he tuned into a terse conversation in a language we did not recognize.

Once, I spotted something in the water that turned out to be a jerry can, the red plastic faded to a valentine pink. I watched it through the binoculars, tracking it for as long as I could. When it finally slipped out of sight, I was ridiculously disappointed.

Still, every day, I learned something new. How to drink from a glass without spilling. How to walk without falling down. How to cook simple meals on a propane stove. How to eat those meals when *Chelone* heeled over and our table became a forty-five-degree in-

cline. It was as if we'd stumbled upon a strange, magical kingdom, a place where down was up and up was down, where the ground flexed and trembled while the sky appeared solid, fixed. Even our vocabulary changed. At first, I fumbled with the correct names for things: *port* (left) and *starboard* (right); *bow* (front) and *stern* (back.) Down the stairs (*companionway*), there was a kitchen (*galley*); a toilet (*head*); a main room (*salon*). We didn't sleep in a bed, but rather, in a *berth,* which was located in a *stateroom*.

"It's like a foreign language," I said.

"Don't sweat it," Rex said. "Another few weeks, and you're gonna be a regular Jack Tar."

"A who?"

"A seasoned sailor, matey," he said, giving me a fierce pirate scowl. "Salt water running through your veins."

But what ran through my veins was good, old-fashioned blood: I knew because I saw it constantly. My bare thighs were covered with bruises. I knocked my head on the hatch covers, stubbed the nail off my littlest toe. And then, one night, the barometer dropped. The healed-over break in my ankle seemed to glow, red-hot, beneath my skin.

The following morning, we encountered a line of squalls that hit very rapidly, one after the next. Rex was trying to put a second reef in the mainsail—lowering it partway, then tying it off—when the boom swung free and knocked him off the cabin top. He hit the safety lines hard before tumbling to the deck. I started forward, but he got up again, waving me back.

"Stay at the helm!"

I could barely hear him over the roar of the rain, the crack of the flapping sail. A white crest of wave detached itself, and suddenly

I was standing in water. The lenses of my glasses were drenched; I couldn't see a thing.

"You okay?" I hollered, feeling another wave crack against the back of my foul-weather jacket. It was like being shoved by a human hand.

"Keep the bow into the wind!"

By the time I'd wiped my glasses clear, he'd already returned to the cabin top, where he finished tying down the sail. A few minutes later, he crawled back into the cockpit, right arm tucked against his side. Another wave broke over us, achingly cold, replenishing the water that had drained away.

"It could be worse," he said. He was panting. I slicked my hair back from my forehead.

"Worse how?"

He forced a grin. "We're making good time."

Almost as he spoke, a watery light broke through the clouds. The squall line passed to the east, slipping across the surface of the water like the shadow of some great, dark bird. The wind gusted lazily now: twenty knots, fifteen, ten. Above us, the sun swelled like a blister. Steam rose from the cockpit benches as Rex, moving slowly, took the reefs out of the mainsail. A raggedy clatter came from below; I pushed back the heavy hatch cover. Books and plastic dishes covered the floor, canned goods rolling to and fro, apples and potatoes scattered everywhere. We'd gotten careless, leaving things out, neglecting to secure locker doors.

"That'll teach us," Rex said. One front tooth was chipped.

"Your mouth," I began, but he shook his head, peeled his wet T-shirt away from his shoulder to reveal a red and purple bruise the size of an open hand. I stared at it, appalled. It seemed to be getting

larger, angrier, spreading from within, and I remembered, suddenly, horribly, seeing my face for the first time after the accident: two black eyes, a bridgeless nose, a protruding tongue. I hadn't been able to recognize it.

"It popped out of the socket," Rex said, "but then it went back in. We've got some of those instant ice packs, don't we?"

"In the first aid kit." I was already scrambling down the companionway. Rummaging through the mess, I couldn't stop seeing, again and again, the arc of Rex's body as it fell. Only this time, it missed the safety lines and landed in the water like a sack of grain. What could I have done to save him? Thrown him the life preserver we kept in the cockpit. Turned on the engine. Lowered the sail the rest of the way, secured the boom, brought the boat around. All the while keeping him in sight, because once you lose sight of something in the water, you're not going to find it again. Especially in the midst of a squall, when you can't see as far as the bow.

The large, orange duffel with our medical supplies had been flung from the locker above the forward berth all the way to the aft chart table. I thought of the force it must have taken to hurl such a heavy bag thirty-odd feet, and then I sat down, covered my mouth with my hands. I remembered thinking, after Evan's death, that I'd never be afraid of anything again. Suddenly, I understood how ridiculous that was, how childish, how petulant. We were still roughly four hundred nautical miles northwest of Bermuda. We might meet another tanker. We might be faced with more storms. We might strike a floating barrel or some other piece of rubbish, knock a hole in *Chelone*'s hull.

"Why are you doing this?" people had asked in the weeks before we left Wisconsin: Toby, my parents, Lindsey Steinke, the parents of Evan's school friends. Because there's no reason not to, I'd say.

Because this is something we talked about doing, years ago, before Evan was born. Because we want to escape all the things that remind us of what we've lost. At the time, each of these explanations had seemed perfectly reasonable. Now, I was asking myself the same question, and none of the answers I'd given made sense. At that moment, I wanted nothing more than to turn the boat around, head back home.

Instead, I cracked open two packs of instant ice, carried them back to the cockpit, held them against Rex's shoulder. As it turned out, we were lucky. The bruise didn't get any larger. He was able to move his arm. Soon it was clear that the bleeding had stopped.

Still, Rex spent the afternoon slumped in the cockpit, shifting painfully, while I reorganized our supplies, stowed everything back inside lockers and hatches. Gradually, the winds died down, dwindling away into random, lazy puffs. Without a breeze, the sails luffed; the bow swung to and fro. Water gurgled in and out of the through-hulls—the small, round openings at the waterline—and the sound was like a deep, plucked string, a hollow pop-pop-pop. With each rise and fall of *Chelone*'s hull, our canned goods settled and rolled.

Thump, scrape, *thump*.

Bang, luff, *bang*.

At last, I lay down across from Rex, but it was too hot, too noisy, to rest. The ocean a molten circle around us. The very air shining, as if each molecule had caught fire. We had always been here, would always be here, in this small teak cockpit, the slow swells lifting us, dropping us, lifting us again.

Thump, scrape, *thump*.

Bang, luff, *bang*.

A discordant waltz that went on and on. Like a heartbeat. Like the slow, steady pulse of grief.

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"Are you sure this is the hill you want to die on?" Toby said. He paused before a tank of angelfish, selected a net from the wall, and began to push it slowly, deliberately, through the water.

"Nobody's going to die," I said. "Besides, lightning doesn't strike twice."

Toby cornered the angel he wanted, trapped it against the glass.

"Actually, it does."

It was early June, the first time I'd been to the fish store since Mallory's letter had appeared in the *Pilot*. Toby didn't let on that he was surprised to see me, but I knew, as I perched on an overturned bucket, that he, too, was considering just how long it had been. He was, and is, a bear of a man: broad-shouldered, heavy-boned, his face partially, deliberately, concealed beneath a lion's tawny beard. When Evan was alive, we'd visited several times a week—Evan had loved the African fish, the piranhas and Jack Dempseys—and it was difficult, now, to look across the tank room and not see his determined little baseball cap gliding between the long rows. To keep myself from dwelling on this, I told Toby what Rex and I hadn't told anyone else, not yet: that we'd found a tenant to rent our house. That we'd just signed a contract on a sailboat in Maine. That, if everything went according to schedule, we'd be living aboard by the end of the month. I also told him that Rex and I were withdrawing the civil suits we'd filed, including the one against Cindy Ann.

"Rex said it was okay to let you know," I said. "If Cindy Ann hasn't been contacted yet, she'll be getting a letter soon."

To my surprise, Toby shook his head. "Rex will never withdraw that suit," he said.

"I told you he just did. We did." I was annoyed. I'd expected—

what? Not thanks, exactly, but some kind of acknowledgment. The decision, after all, couldn't help but affect his relationship with Mallory, ease what I could only imagine was an awkward situation for them both. "Look, we're leaving Fox Harbor," I said. "We just bought a sailboat. Didn't you hear what I said?"

Of all people, I'd assured Rex, Toby will understand. After all, whenever he wasn't in the fish store, he practically lived aboard the *Michigan Jack:* trawling for coho and sturgeon, netting smelt in season. He traveled to national breeders' conventions, fish shows, tournaments. He'd been on snorkeling and scuba-diving trips all over the world. He also knew what it was like to stand out, to hear people whispering in your wake. He'd been born with a birthmark that covered his cheek, pinned his ear to the side of his head. His eye didn't open fully. His left nostril didn't match the right. It was, I'd often thought to myself, the reason my brother lived the way he did, drawn to things that lived silently, simply, under water.

"Tell me you're kidding," Toby said, now.

"Do I look like I'm kidding?"

"Jesus." He carried the angel, dripping, to the counter, where he held it beneath a UV light. Rough white patches appeared along its sides. "You've got no offshore experience, and Rex is hardly any better off."

"Rex has experience—" I began.

"Working on a cruise ship? Sailing with his dad? Come on." Toby flicked the angel into the sick tank, where a stunned-looking molly already swam in circles. "This is the big, bad ocean, Cowboy. People die out there."

I glared at him, the age gap between us swelling—a deep, dividing stream—from a trickle to a roar. He wasn't taking me seriously. He wasn't being fair. As a child, I'd idolized him, longed for his

approval, blushed helplessly at his rare, lasting compliments. *Cowboy,* he'd called me then, called me now whenever he wanted my attention, and the sound of his voice gliding over the word made me long to curl up again, young and small, swinging in the strong, snug V of his arm. Always, I'd been secretly, shamefully happy that Toby never dated, never seemed to have friends, beyond the distant correspondence of his breeding clubs and dive teams. Even after Rex and I were married, I'd often walked over to the fish store after work, joined him for a snack of summer sausage and cheese from a refrigerator crowded with fish heads, bone meal, bait. It was actually cleaner—and more wholesomely supplied—than the ancient, leaking fridge in his apartment over the mill. There he'd lived, alone, since he'd left my parents' house at twenty-five, accumulating miles of plastic tubing, broken aerators, aquarium pieces, artificial grasses, stacks of fishing bulletins, brochures, magazines. A table saw stood in the dining alcove. The bedroom held buckets in which he bred mice, mealworms, brine shrimp; the kitchen housed his dive gear and assorted boat parts. Somewhere beneath all the rubble was the broken-backed couch where he slept. The landlord, Mr. Dickens, turned a blind eye to the lifestyles of his tenants, provided they turned a corresponding eye to the boarded-over windows, the broken appliances, the fact that the temperature seldom rose above sixty degrees in winter.

*That hellhole,* my mother called it. I myself hadn't seen the inside of it, now, for several years.

But I'd always loved spending time at the fish store, watching Toby putter about with his tanks, traffic passing by outside the window. "How about a splash of something?" he'd say, pouring us each an inch of Maker's Mark. The two of us sipping that good amber fire. Feeling myself to be first and always chosen. The truth was that

Toby knew me better, loved me better, than anyone, even Rex—Rex, who'd accepted this from the start, with remarkable, generous grace.

All of that had changed after Evan was born. And then, the year before Evan started kindergarten, Toby had begun seeing Mallory. She'd rented, it turned out, the efficiency across the landing from his place, four hundred square feet that had stood, unoccupied, for as long as I could remember. Through the open door, I'd seen the cracked walls, the ancient gas stove, the bathtub sitting in the middle of the kitchen, and I worried about her—or anyone, for that matter—trying to make the place habitable. Though Mallory, it turned out, was remarkably resourceful. She borrowed Toby's hot plate while she, herself, refurbished the stove, stored goat's milk in his fridge while she scoured the dumps for an antique ice chest. Soon there were reports that he was dropping her off for work at the Cup and Cruller. Shortly after that, Anna Schultz—my parents' former neighbor—phoned my mother, in Florida, to let her know she'd seen them at the Dairy Castle.

*Together, you know,* Anna had said.

I figured it was time to ask.

"I've been helping her out, that's all," Toby said. "I suppose the grapevine has us married."

"No," I told him. "Just sleeping together."

To my amazement, he'd blushed, blood rushing into his birthmark, leaving the other side of his face as pale as naked bone. I phoned my mother immediately.

"Well, you've got to admit, she's brave." My mother spoke in her usual matter-of-fact way. "Tackling a seasoned bachelor at her age. What is she—thirty, thirty-one?"

"Thirty-six," I said. "It isn't quite that bad."

"Which makes her twenty years younger than your brother."

"Nineteen."

"Somebody's doing her math."

"I'm an accountant. Math is my job."

"Of course, it is," my mother said.

Now, I turned to face Toby slowly, deliberately, keeping my voice steady. "People die anywhere and everywhere," I said. "Driving to school at eight in the morning, for instance."

"It wasn't your fault, Meg."

I bristled. "You're damn right, it wasn't my fault!"

"So why *do* this? It's as if you're trying to punish yourself. I'm just trying to understand why."

It was like being fed a precise, round pill. Tears filled my eyes, but I swallowed it down, swallowed and swallowed until the ache in my throat was gone.

"If I really wanted to punish myself," I said, "I'd be trying to figure out what you see in Mallory Donaldson."

"Okay." His voice, unlike mine, had stayed even. "I guess it's none of my business what you do."

"It's none of my business what you do, either," I said, staring at the chunky silver ring on his third finger. It was one of Mallory's peculiar designs, something she'd hammered and soldered into being. It surprised me, surprised my parents, too, that Toby would actually wear it. Then again, nothing about the relationship made sense, unless you considered—as Rex pointed out—that, before Mallory, Toby had always been alone. He'd seemed self-sufficient to me, perfectly complete, but perhaps this had never been true. After all, I'd seen the stares people gave him, women gave him, not to mention kids my own age when he'd pick me up at school. Arriving home from Madison on fall break, freshman year, I myself had been

startled by the sight of his face. Try as you might to pretend otherwise, it would always be the first thing strangers noticed.

Suddenly, I was tired. I'd spent the whole day working on the house, steam cleaning rugs, recaulking the bathtub, getting the place ready to receive a tenant. Evan had been dead six months. Driving into town, I'd seen Cindy Ann's three daughters bicycling along the J road in tank tops and bright, summery shorts. *Amy*, *Laurel*, *Monica*. Each of those names a poisonous flower.

"Can't you understand," I said, "how hard it is to be here without Evan?"

Toby's hair had fallen in a tangle over his eyes. "Won't it be just as hard somewhere else?"

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Well, for one thing," I said, "we won't have to deal with Cindy Ann anymore." I waited for him to nod, agree. "I mean, seeing her. Seeing her kids. Watching her going about her life as if nothing even happened." Again, I waited. "For Pete's sake, Toby, she's driving the same damn car. She killed someone, a human being, and it hasn't made the least bit of difference. She's still a reckless drunk."

"Mallory says she's not drinking anymore."

"Mallory would say that."

"She says there are days Cindy Ann doesn't get out of bed."

"I've had some of those days myself."

The bubbling sound of the aerators filled the silence between us.

"But you *knew* her, Meg," Toby finally said. "You knew all those girls. You, of all people, know how hard it was for them, growing up in that house."

Now I was angry. Of course I knew, as everyone else in town knew, that Cindy Ann's stepfather had shot himself in the shed

behind the veal pens. It was the excuse people always gave: for Cindy Ann's failed marriages, for Mallory's shrill politics, for the middle sister, Becca, going door-to-door for the Jehovah's Witnesses. Cindy Ann's mother was barely in her sixties, and yet she was living in a nursing home, disabled by early Alzheimer's: hunched, forgetful, smiling. The only child she'd had with Dan Kolb—born when Cindy Ann was twelve—had been what was then called *mentally retarded*. He'd eventually died in his early teens. This, too, was blamed, implausibly, on Dan Kolb's suicide.

"So the family had problems," I said. "So what. That doesn't give Cindy Ann the right to drink however many bottles of wine she drank and then get into her car, the hell with everybody else." I wanted to shake my brother, slap him; my neck and shoulders actually hurt with the effort of restraining myself from doing it. "*She* had a choice in all this, remember? Rex and I had no choice. Evan had no choice."

"I know, I know all that," Toby said, and at last, he was angry, too. "Evan was my nephew, remember? You think it doesn't matter to me, too? You think I don't wake up every single day and think about how awful it is? I'm just saying I feel sorry for her, that's all."

*"Sorry?"* I spat the word from my mouth, and then I told him what I'd told no one else: how I'd sat in the Piggly Wiggly parking lot, hands gripping the wheel, waiting for Cindy Ann and her ice cream.

"Maybe," I said, "you'd feel sorry for *me* if I'd actually run her over."

"I would feel sorry, Cowboy," he said. "Sorry for you both."

I turned, walked out the door. Hurrying past the front window, I caught a glimpse of him standing between the tanks: one side of his face stricken as my own, the other half lost in darkness. The neon

dartings of the fish all around him seemed like sparks flying out of his body. I understood I was losing something else, someone else. Someone precious.

I didn't go back.

And then.

Crossing the parking lot toward my car, the sky growing dark over the lake, I saw—not Cindy Ann Kreisler, but Cindy Ann Donaldson, sixteen years old. Hurrying straight out of our childhoods, out of the single, charmed summer we'd been friends. There was her Dairy Castle uniform. There were her regulation shoes, the white bib, the hairnet and curved paper hat. I'd often met her at closing time, and together, we'd walked to the beach, where we sat on a slab of pale sandstone, sharing still-warm burgers she'd crushed into her purse. Looking up at the stars, the moon. Wisps of her hair flickering, soft, against my cheeks. Abruptly, I remembered the smell of her uniform: tomato ketchup and grease. I remembered, too, the odor of the shampoo she used to lighten her hair. She was struggling to pin her hat into place. One earring dangling, the other hung up in her hair.

*Want to come to my house sometime?*

Ducking our heads to step up into the attic. A double mattress in the center of the floor, a twist of pink sheets, a floral comforter.

*I get the whole attic. It's because I'm the oldest.*

I'd forgotten about the attic. They were dirt-poor, the Donaldsons. At the time, I thought it was cool. Shirts and dresses on a clothesline strung between the eaves. A cardboard box for underwear, socks. The thrum of Dan Kolb's voice from below, affectionate and warm, roughhousing with Cindy Ann's younger sisters. The slow, strained sound of Ricky Kolb's speech, incomprehensible to anyone outside the family. The smell of the veal pens behind the shed where,

eventually, Mr. Kolb would fire two shots: the first opening a hole in his chest, the second passing through his head.

I blinked. It wasn't Cindy Ann Donaldson, of course. It was Cindy Ann Kreisler's oldest daughter, Amy, late for work at the same Dairy Castle where her mother had worked thirty-five hours a week during the school year, fifty-hour weeks in the summertime. Same swing shift. Same wheat-colored hair. Why was a girl like Amy Kreisler working at DC? Amy was the daughter of Cindy Ann's first husband, the older man, the one with all that money. It was said that she'd never have to work a day in her life, if she didn't want to.

I knew the moment Amy recognized me because she lost her grip on the paper hat. It kited away in the cool lake breeze. She turned, hesitated, let it go.

We passed each other in silence.

When I was pregnant, I took a course on hypnosis, in which we learned to say *surge* instead of contraction, *breathe* instead of push, *pressure* instead of pain. Once a week, we met at the hospital, in what was clearly an unused supply room: four pregnant women plus the instructor, an older woman who positively glowed with her good wishes for us all. Her low, beautiful voice led us through scene after imagined scene. *You are in your mother's kitchen, there's a warm, baking smell in the air. You are at the beach, the sun in your hair, the sound of the water like a song. You are breathing your baby down out of your body, and each surge fills you with excitement and strength.*

My favorite exercise involved imagining everything we'd ever heard about childbirth, all the images, positive and negative, as if they were painted on a tall, wide mural filling the walls. In our hands, we held a paintbrush and a bucket of black paint. Our job was

to blot out the negative images, one by one, then fill the black spaces with whatever we pleased: an easy delivery, a healthy baby, our hopes and dreams for the future. I painted a baby with dark brown eyes, a thicket of curls like my own. I painted a bowlegged toddler, riding on Rex's shoulders, shrieking with delight. I painted family sailing trips, picnics on Lake Michigan aboard the *Michigan Jack*, birthday parties, Christmas dinners, high school graduation. College and career—what would it be? Maybe some travel before settling down. A wife and children. Grandchildren. Rex and I blustering through the door, arms filled with overpriced gifts, just as our own grandparents had done.

Again and again, during the course of my labor, I returned to this exercise, forcing myself to open my eyes, to concentrate on my mural. Even when faced with the physical fact of my pain—which was, indeed, pain, and nothing like pressure at all—I was able to step over it, again and again, the way, walking along a city sidewalk, you step over patches of broken glass.

I boarded *Chelone* believing it was possible to step over Cindy Ann the same way, given enough distance between us. To blot her from my thoughts with imaginary paint. I did not yet understand that we'd been forever bound to each other like sisters, like lovers, like people who have known each other in the glimmer of some otherworldly life. That Cindy Ann had been woven into my heart like a violent act, or a secret child. That she, in her turn, carried me: a bumping beneath her ribs, a fluttering deep in her abdomen, an acid burn that bubbled up after meals. This, despite the old sleeping pills, the new high-tech antidepressants. Despite the drone of the court-appointed therapist's bored voice. Despite the guilty bottles of wine she still downed in the evenings, defiantly, helplessly. Or so she would admit to me later, much later, when I was able to hear.

Her beautiful face twisted, transformed. Stricken with utter self-loathing.

The face from which, at sixteen years of age, I'd turned away.

One morning at dawn, a warbler fluttered into Chelone's cockpit, perched on the rail, then slid, exhausted, onto the bench. It was my watch; I called out to Rex, who poked his rumpled head out of the companionway.

"What?"

Then he saw it, too.

For a moment, we just stared at it, stunned, disbelieving. We were hundreds of nautical miles from the nearest piece of land. I don't think we could have been more surprised if an angel had appeared.

Rex tipped freshwater into a bottle cap, nudged it as close as he dared. To my surprise, the bird drank immediately, lustily, tilting back its head to reveal its yellow throat. Within a few hours, it had revived completely, and by the following day, it flitted comfortably between us, pecking crumbs off the cockpit floor. We assumed it would stay with us, our mascot, our darling—after all, where else would it go? But all of a sudden, without any warning, it simply took off.

It was gone.

A small loss and, yet, how easily it swelled to fit the exact dimensions of each familiar, empty place. I sat in the cockpit, hugging my knees. Rex paced the deck, oblivious to the sun.

"What was the point?" he finally said.

"There's always a point," I said.

He passed a hand across his eyes. "I wish we'd never seen the goddamn thing," he said.

# *Three*

*For the first days after the squall line* passed, Rex and I were grateful to find ourselves becalmed. The ocean barely breathed beneath us, a dreaming animal, rumbling with content. We huddled beneath the shade of the bimini, slathered ourselves in sunscreen and zinc. We played cards. We read books. I polished all the ship's brass—pump handles, grab rails, the post supporting the mast—while Rex oiled the teak hatch covers, rubbed down the engine with grease. He was still moving slowly, babying his shoulder, taking prescription painkillers from the medical kit. The dark bruise had transformed itself into a bright tropical flower: a whorl of lavenders and purples, burnt umber, pale green.

After a week of stillness, we began to grow uneasy. We ran our refrigerator thirty minutes a day, just enough to keep things cool. Ice, of course, was impossible. We were out of fresh fruit and vegetables. We were down to six eggs, a stick of butter, a half block of hard cheese. Plenty of rice yet, thank goodness. Plenty of chickpeas,

black beans, kidney beans. I knew, exactly, what we had left, balances ticking inside my head. The last of our bread had sprouted an extraordinary halo of bright, blue mold, and though I'd brought along flour and yeast, it was too hot to think about baking fresh loaves. Besides, operating the stove—like running the refrigerator—drained power from *Chelone*'s batteries. Charging the batteries required running the engine. Running the engine required fuel. Already, we'd used roughly half of the one hundred gallons we'd brought on board, we agreed it was best to conserve what remained. We started using hand pumps to empty the bilge, the toilet. We switched from DC lights to kerosene.

Still, every afternoon, we turned on the single sideband radio. I'd discovered, by accident, a call-in show for offshore vessels, run by a slightly impatient-sounding man who called himself Southbound Two. One by one, captains across the Atlantic radioed in their *lats* and *longs,* then stood by, waiting for Southbound Two to advise them about potential storm systems, wind patterns, fluctuating currents. Despite repeated hailings, we were never able to make contact ourselves, but we overheard other vessels in our vicinity, all of them becalmed, all of them asking pretty much the same question: when can we expect wind? Southbound Two's response was not encouraging. We'd been caught within a sprawling high pressure system. Calm, clear skies reigned for over two hundred nautical miles. Rex marked our locations on the master chart with a lightly penciled *X* and, as the days passed, we kept track of everybody's progress—or, lack thereof. In a strange way, the people aboard these boats became our friends, though we knew them simply as disembodied voices, identified them only by the names of their vessels: *Reflections*, *We Did It*, *Clear Sailing*, *Easy Street*. We talked about them obsessively. We gave them nicknames, invented personal

histories. We listened hard for background noises that suggested the slightest details about their lives.

One afternoon, a new vessel, *Rubicon,* hailed Southbound Two with *lats* and *longs* that were nearly identical to our own. The man's voice was distinctive, rough. "Popeye the Sailor!" Rex said, looking up from the chart. That morning, he'd been back in the medical kit, rummaging about for more codeine. Now, his pupils were huge.

Popeye hailed again, crisp and clear, as if he were sitting between us. A series of high-pitched squeals rose and fell behind his words.

"They've got a dog aboard," I said, emptying a can of chickpeas into the three bean salad I was making.

"Either that, or it's Olive Oyl," Rex said, and he laughed at his joke a little too hard.

"I wish we could contact them, let them know they've got neighbors."

"I'll try hailing after the broadcast. You never know, maybe we'll get through." Rex scratched another faint *X,* representing *Rubicon,* onto the master chart. "Seriously, that guy sounds like Popeye. Remember that show? And the one with the moose. Bullwinkle. Did you ever see Bullwinkle?"

Codeine made Rex chatty, nostalgic, the same way he got whenever he drank scotch whiskey. Which he'd been drinking a lot of, lately, after his evening watch was done. It helped the codeine, he said. It soothed his shoulder so he could sleep.

I covered the three bean salad, wiped down the counter with salt water. "Do you think," I asked, "we could see them if we climbed the mast?"

"I'm in no condition to go up the stick."

"Well, I am." I grabbed the binoculars from their hook, slung them around my neck.

"You?" Rex said. "You get dizzy going up a stepladder."

His offhand laughter annoyed me all the more.

"Good thing this isn't a stepladder, then."

"Meg," he began, but I hurried up into the cockpit, worked my feet into my salt-stiffened shoes. I could hear Rex clambering after me, but I'd already scrambled forward, mounting the first of the narrow mast steps, trying not to consider what would happen if I slipped. Three-quarters of the way up, I stopped, raised the binoculars. There was no one else out there, nothing else, aside from our shadow like a dark slick of oil, floating lightly on the water.

"Anything?" Rex called. Looking down, I saw he was cupping his right elbow, relieving his shoulder from the weight of his arm. For the past few nights, despite his extra nightcap, he'd moved uncomfortably from the cockpit to the V-berth, from the V-berth to the settee, from the settee to the double berth. Suddenly dizzy, I pressed my cheek to the mast, hugged the firm bulk of it against my chest. I was worried about Rex's shoulder, what was clearly a constant, grueling pain. I was worried about the weather. I was worried that, along with *Rubicon* and all the other vessels, we were doomed to remain exactly where we were, drifting for the next hundred years in a kind of Twilight Zone. We were, after all, on the edge of the horse latitudes, the Atlantic's notorious dead zone. Named in the days before steam, when becalmed sailing ships ran low on supplies and jettisoned their cargo of horses, cattle, whipping them up out of the holds, driving them into the sea. Farther south, the slave ships languished, generations of Africans dying of hunger, thirst, disease. Suddenly, I imagined all those skeletons below, an entire lost civilization: women rocking babies, men building shelters, livestock

moving in slow, deliberate herds, picking their way across the ocean floor.

"Meg?"

I forced myself to scan the horizon one more time, careful not to squint, keeping both eyes open. The edge of the sea blended seamlessly into the edge of the sky, leaving no sense of where one ended, the other began.

"Nothing," I said, and I started climbing down.

"You sure?"

I stopped. "I *know* how to look."

*"Sorry,"* Rex said, in a tone of voice that told me he wasn't.

I wished we had a crow's nest. I wished I could climb into it, curl up in a ball, out of sight. I wished I didn't have to continue my descent, which, of course, I did, one reluctant step after another.

This was the hardest part of each day: the hours of light remaining after we'd shut down the single sideband, after Rex had attempted, in vain, to hail any one of the half-dozen vessels all around us. The sudden silence—augmented by heat, confinement, monotony—left us irritable, snappish. We picked at each other, sulked, avoided each other's gaze. Below, in the cabin, the temperature rose past one hundred degrees; topside, the teak decks licked our heels like flames through the thin, rubber soles of our deck shoes. There was nothing to do but wait for dusk beneath the thin shade of the cockpit bimini, sipping tepid bottles of powdered Gatorade, sopping ourselves with seawater. Later, in the relative coolness of evening, we'd emerge, hunched and stiff, like bears from a cave. We'd apologize wearily, sheepishly. We'd put on our nightshirts, nibble trail mix and dried fruit. We'd nose through the galley lockers, the salon bookshelves, looking for an unopened package of crackers, a fresh magazine, the least thing we might have missed.

"Are you happy?" Rex asked, surprising me one night. "Happier, I mean?"

The truth was this: I was thirsty. My tongue lay thick in my mouth. Hours often passed during which I didn't think of Evan even once.

"I'm all right," I said.

Rex bit his lip. "I don't miss him as much, out here."

Had I wanted to weep, it wouldn't have mattered. My dry, burning eyes were incapable of tears.

In college, I took a public speaking seminar in which we studied mnemonic devices used by the Greeks. How had the great orators been able to remember long histories and speeches, seemingly endless panegyrics, without writing anything down? The professor explained that, instead of composing pages of words, the speaker created an architectural structure within his mind, then walked through the rooms and corridors, placing key points he wished to remember in windows and doorways, on ledges and hearths. Later, while giving his speech, he'd simply retrace his steps, collecting each item from its place, until he'd reclaimed them all.

Even at the time, this made sense to me. If I wanted to remember my tenth birthday party, I simply returned, within my mind's glassy eye, to Ooster's Restaurant and Ribs, inhaling its odor of popcorn and barbecue, peering into the display case with its assortment of sweet, frosted cakes. If I wanted to remember my grandmother, I imagined myself at St. Clare's, settled into the pew beneath the statue of St. Augustine, the place where she'd always sat. I'd kept Evan alive in the overstuffed chair where we'd read bedtime stories; in a spatter of stains on the living room carpet, where he'd managed

to open a pen; in the garden, where he'd knelt to pat damp earth around the roots of trembling seedlings. Melons sprouted in egg-shells. Pepper and tomato plants purchased from Wassink's Nursery. Marigolds to ward off rabbits and gophers and deer.

Now here I was, adrift in a place where he'd never lived, lost within a landscape that, during his lifetime, neither one of us could have imagined. A seascape, in fact, free of ledges and doors. Without angles, definition.

Without history.

That night, while Rex was on watch, I wriggled my way into the V-berth with a flashlight, opened the locker where I'd stowed the small, waterproof box that contained our passports and traveler's checks, cash, prescriptions, emergency numbers. At the bottom of the box was a plastic sleeve of photos: I slid them out, studied them deliberately, guiltily. My parents, arm in arm, on a Florida golf course. Toby at the fish store, grinning. Our house with its fieldstone walls, its watercolor views. And, finally, a single picture of Evan, taken a few weeks after Halloween, dressed up as SpongeBob SquarePants. He'd caught me out in the garage, slipping the costume into the Goodwill bag.

"I want to wear it next year!" he howled.

"But you'll be too big for it by then," I said. "And you might not even like SpongeBob SquarePants anymore."

In the end, we'd agreed that he could put it on one last time. I would take his picture. If, by next Halloween, he still wanted to be SpongeBob SquarePants, I would travel to the ends of the earth, if necessary, to find him a costume just like it. Now, studying his face, enclosed by a corona of bright yellow cloth, I could see everything that had always amazed me most about his character: his determination, his methodical persistence, his insistence on the justness, the

validity, of his ideas. If I told him "We'll do it tomorrow," he'd remember. If I said "Let's save that for next week," he'd never forget. He would have reminded me, come October, about this photograph. He would have considered earnestly, leisurely, all sides of the question of whether or not he still wanted to be SpongeBob SquarePants.

No photos, Rex and I had agreed before setting sail from Portland. No sentimental charms or mementos. Why subject ourselves to the inevitable questions? Why re-create, wherever we went, the same painful circumstances we'd hoped to leave behind? If anyone asked if we had children, we'd tell them the truth.

We'd tell them no.

On our twenty-first day becalmed, something white flashed on the horizon. Gradually, a ragged-looking motor sailer, single sail luffing, chugged into view. She was nearly twice the length of *Chelone,* though not much beamier, giving her the scrawny, raw-boned lines of an alley cat. Jerry cans of fuel formed a gypsy necklace around the edges of her deck. Two solar panels gleamed above the cockpit like dark, expressionless eyes.

*Rubicon*.

Rex eyed the vessel doubtfully. "Looks a little like a plague ship," he said.

Still, he hailed, first on the VHF and a few minutes later, when we got no response, on the single sideband radio. Nothing. Hurrying below, I found what had once been a white T-shirt. This I carried out onto the bowsprit, waving it like a flag.

"Are you trying to surrender?" Rex asked.

I ignored him.

"Even if they're looking our way, they won't be able to see you. They're too far off."

"So let's motor after them."

When Rex shook his head, I wanted to throttle him. Here, less than a mile away, were real, live human beings, people other than ourselves. Maybe he didn't care, but I certainly did. I was sick to death of talking about Bullwinkle.

"C'mon, how much fuel can it take?"

"It isn't only that, Meg. What if they don't want company?"

"Who wouldn't want company in the middle of the Atlantic?"

"We're not in the middle," Rex said, and there was a weary edge to his voice. "Nowhere near the middle, believe me."

With that, our VHF began to crackle, and *Chelone*'s cockpit reverberated with the cartoon voice of Popeye the Sailor:

"Chelone, Chelone, *that's one helluva name, hope I'm sayin' it right. This is sailing vessel* Rubicon, Rubicon. *Come back,* Chelone."

To my surprise, Rex lunged for the microphone, sore shoulder and all, and I realized he'd been just as eager as I was for contact.

"Gotcha, *Rubicon*. You're a sight for sore eyes."

"Ain't that the truth. How you doin' on freshwater?"

"Fine. You in trouble?"

"Just a minute." There came that high-pitched barking sound, followed by a series of squeals, then the shush of a woman's voice. "Sorry, our little guy gets excited. The membrane on our water maker's fouled."

"Can't you clean it?" Rex asked.

Rough laughter filled the frequency. "Problem is, you need the cleaning solution to do it. Wife tidied up a few weeks ago, and now we can't find a goddamn thing."

There was a mild scuffling, followed by a woman's good-natured

voice. "Not that we could find anything before. I don't suppose you have a water maker?"

"Plenty of cleaner, too, I believe." Rex glanced at me to confirm this; I nodded. "Love to help you out."

"I'll tell you what, *Chelone*." Popeye was back on the air. "We've got two pounds of ground chuck we've been saving for a special occasion. Come aboard with that solution, and we'll cook you up the best damn burgers you've ever tasted."

Meat that did not come out of a can! Even now, I can't recall another invitation I've accepted with such eagerness, such gratitude. While Rex and Popeye (whose name, it turned out, was Eli Hale) worked out the logistics of rafting our boats together, I dug *Chelone*'s fenders out of stowage, and by the time I'd dragged them onto deck, *Rubicon* was already closing in. There'd be no time, I realized, to clean myself up, to change out of the filthy shirt I was wearing and into the less-filthy shirt I'd been saving. Dark crescents of dirt frowned beneath my nails. I glanced back at Rex, who was at the helm. He was bare-chested. The waistband of his shorts had rotted through, revealing a gray strip of elastic.

We're the ones, I thought, who look like a plague ship.

But my first glimpse of the Hales put me at ease. Like Rex, Eli was standing at the helm, bare-chested. Like Rex, the shorts he wore had seen happier days. Unlike Rex, however, he was short, heavyset, with dirty blond hair twisted into a thicket of tattered dreads. His belly was spangled with tattoos. Moments later, his wife burst onto the deck in cutoffs and what looked like an old brassier. She was full-chested, freckled, with long red hair pulled back into braids. I liked her instantly. A tangle of fenders fanned out behind her; she flashed me a grin before working them free, expertly tying them along *Rubicon*'s hull.

"That should do, don't you think?" she said, eyeing my own row of fenders. Without waiting for an answer, she perched on the combing, legs extended, to fend off the impact of *Chelone*'s hull. "I'm Bernadette."

"Meg. My husband, Rex."

"Christ almighty," Eli called, jutting his chin at Rex's shoulder. "What the hell did you do to yourself?"

Rex laughed. "Bet it didn't hurt as much as those tattoos."

"Can't tell you if they hurt or not," Eli said. "Drunk as a skunk when I got 'em."

Our hulls kissed. Bernadette and I traded lines. Five minutes later, I followed Rex aboard, clutching the bottle of cleaning solution like a housewarming bouquet.

"You're a couple of funny-looking angels," Eli said, "but we're awful glad to see you anyway."

The Hales, we learned, had been living aboard *Rubicon* for nine years. At the end of each summer, they headed south to the Caribbean; in spring, they made their way north again, eventually arriving in New Bern, North Carolina, where they owned some property. This year, their departure had been delayed by a medical appointment, but Bernadette was still hoping they'd make Houndfish Cay—another four hundred miles to the south—before hurricane season started in earnest. Nearly a hundred cruisers wintered there—Americans, Canadians, a smattering of South Americans and French—anchored in a series of small, sheltered bays. Together, they homeschooled their kids, organized book clubs, participated in talent shows, fishing trips, dine-arounds. There was a pageant at Christmastime, an Easter-egg hunt in April. The Hales had been lots of places, but Houndfish Cay was their favorite.

And of course, their little guy loved it there.

Rex and I exchanged the tolerant glances of people who don't keep pets.

"Where are you folks headed?" Eli asked.

I looked at Rex; he shrugged. "Bermuda, for now. After that, we'll see."

"Now that's the cruising spirit," Eli said. "Go where the wind decides to take you."

Bernadette laughed. "*What* wind?"

Like farmers, the four of us stopped talking for a moment, stared reverently, beseechingly, at the sky.

"Well," Eli finally said, "I better take a look at that water maker."

"Need a hand?" Rex asked.

"Won't say no." He was already in the cockpit, tossing aside cushions and hatch covers, lifting the bench seat to reveal a wide access hole. With amazing agility for a man his size, he slithered down into it. Rex followed, moving deliberately, holding his right arm close to his side.

"Looks like he messed up that shoulder pretty good," Bernadette said.

Up close, I saw she was younger than me, her pretty face weathered by wind and sun. Eli, on the other hand, seemed ageless. He could have been thirty-five, or sixty. The dreads, the tattoos, the excess weight: each was its own disguise. He reminded me, a little bit, of Toby. It made me like both of them all the more.

"Might have been worse, I guess."

"Yes." She responded seriously, as if I'd said something insightful, unique. "No matter what it is, it can always be worse." She glanced at the sky. "I'm baking. Let's get into the air-conditioning."

I must have looked surprised. "*Rubicon* has air?"

"You bet," Bernadette said, unlatching the doors to the companionway. "I told Eli from the start, I'm not going anywhere without AC." A puff of cool air hit my face, along with the faint, familiar odor of bilge, and something else, something I couldn't quite place: pungent, fruity, unpleasant. Immediately I thought of the dog. But there was no sign or sound of any animal as Bernadette led the way down the stairs.

Despite *Rubicon*'s rough-looking exterior, her salon was comfortable, homey, fitted up with custom cupboards and shelves. There was a teak dining table, a desk with a computer, satellite TV. The couch was crowded with homemade pillows and stuffed animals. Framed watercolor island-scapes, signed by Bernadette, were affixed to the bulkheads. Somewhere aft of the galley, a generator hummed, powering the blessed air conditioner. If it weren't for the sounds of Rex and Eli at work—the growl of the water maker, dropped tools, muffled curses—I could have imagined I was back in Fox Harbor, sitting in the living room of somebody's ranch house. That, and the slight gliding feeling of the hull.

And the peculiar smell.

"Have a seat," Bernadette said, heading for the galley. "What would you like to drink? Apple juice okay?" Again, that flash of grin. "We seem to be low on water."

"Apple juice would be great."

I sank onto the couch. The smell seemed stronger here. I could almost place it; I fought the urge to squint, as if that might help me see. And then, there it was: Cindy Ann Kreisler's house. Not the grand place where she lived now, but the farmhouse she'd grown up in, four square rooms off a shotgun hall, divided by stairs that led to the second-story bedrooms, the attic. At the back of the kitchen

was a pantry Dan Kolb had converted to a room for four-year-old Ricky, who couldn't climb stairs, who couldn't walk, in fact, without holding on to a walker. Shelves lined the walls above a chipped countertop; below, there were cupboards, overstuffed with clothing, toys, stickered with Tiggers and Winnie-the-Poohs. A wall-mounted can opener still jutted from the space to the right of the doorway.

"How about crackers and cheese?" Bernadette called.

It was then that I noticed the wheelchair, secured behind the table with floor locks.

"Juice is fine," I said.

It was smaller than any wheelchair I'd ever seen, with a strangely torqued back, a single footrest. A complicated web of embroidered straps formed a makeshift harness attached to the seat. Beside it sat a teak chest, high as a bench, roughly the size of a coffin. It, too, was affixed to the floor, its cover sealed with latches, a blue and white cushion resting on top. I was leaning forward to study it more closely when Bernadette came with our drinks.

"It's a bathtub, actually," she said, and she tapped the box with her toe. "Though it doubles as a bench. Eli built it that way. He built all these shelves and our table, too. He even built Leon's wheelchair."

"Leon?" I was beginning to understand.

"Our little guy," Bernadette said. "Our son." She gestured toward a closed door. "He should be up from his nap pretty soon. You folks have kids?"

Perhaps for the first time since Evan's death, the question caught me off guard. I felt my face flush. "Not really," I managed; then: "Not now. No. No kids."

If Bernadette thought this was odd, her expression revealed nothing.

"Leon's eleven," she said. "He nearly died at birth. He can't hear, but he feels vibrations. If the engine isn't running right, he's always the first to know. Actually, I'm surprised he hasn't noticed you're on board."

With that came the sounds Rex and I had heard over the VHF, followed by a series of scuffling thumps against the bulkhead. Bernadette laughed. "What did I tell you?" She got to her feet, then paused, considering. "It takes awhile, getting him up. You want to come and meet him?"

I was surprised to discover that I did. Back in Fox Harbor, I'd gone out of my way to avoid other people's children. Now, after so many weeks of isolation, the thought of seeing a child, even the child of a stranger, filled me with tenderness. Already, I was regretting the lie I'd told. Already, it seemed too late to take it back.

"It won't upset him?" I asked. "Seeing someone he doesn't know?"

Bernadette shook her head. "He loves people. Especially kids." More thumps against the bulkhead; she crossed the salon, motioned for me to follow. "That's why we want to make Houndfish Cay. He's got friends there, real friends, boys his age. They come over on their parents' skiffs, hang out with their Game Boys, listen to music. Boat kids, you know, don't judge like kids onshore. I guess they've seen enough of the world to accept when someone's different."

Her steady blue eyes found mine.

"Everyone's accepting out here," she said. "Everybody has their story."

Before I could feel the need to reply, she opened the portal to Leon's stateroom.

I remembered Ricky Kolb, the smell of his room off the kitchen, close-walled, dark. Leon was naked, except for a diaper, lying on his

side. Not much bigger, at eleven, than Evan had been at six. His skeletal limbs wrapped around themselves as if he were made of a single muscle, everything clenched into a fist. Thick blond dreadlocks, like his father's, covered his head, but the wide-set eyes were Bernadette's. When he saw me, tremors of excitement nearly jolted him free of the thick foam wedges that propped him up, supporting his chest, cushioning his knees. It occurred to me that I was looking at the child Evan might have been, had he survived the accident. *Your son would not have been himself.* Doctors had stressed this, family and friends had alluded to it, Rex and I had repeated it to each other like a prayer. Better for him to be at peace than endure a lifetime of disability and pain. You grasp at such comforts the way a drowning person might reach for a piece of barbed wire. Because it is there. Because it is all you have.

"Sweetheart," Bernadette said, leaning forward so the child could see her mouth. "I've got a surprise for you. This is Meg."

"Hi, Leon," I said, leaning forward, too, and then, to Bernadette. "What incredible hair."

She nodded, sweeping it off his forehead with the flat palm of her hand. "It was like that from the moment he was born. Just as thick."

I wanted to tell Bernadette about Evan's hair—dusty-blond fuzz that had all fallen out, then grown back in, months later, darker than my own. I swallowed the words, tried again.

"He must have been a baby, still," I said, "when you and Eli went to sea."

Bernadette had already changed Leon's diaper, flipped the wet one into the diaper pail. Here, then, was the smell I'd remembered: hand-laundered diapers, hand-laundered sheets. A flushed, wasting body like an overblown rose.

And, in this case, a broken water maker.

No rain for weeks.

What would have happened, I wondered, if Rex and I hadn't drifted into view? But I was learning you simply couldn't think that way. Not out here, where everything, it seemed, was a matter of chance, random luck.

"He wasn't quite two," she said, tugging a T-shirt over his head. "Everybody thought we were crazy."

I couldn't imagine it myself. "Weren't you scared?"

"I'm always scared," she said. "But he's outlived every prediction. And he's happy. That's what's important. Right, guy?" She bent to face him again. "You're a survivor, isn't that so?"

Leon jerked his head. Once again, tremors ran, like ripples, through his body. I glanced at Bernadette, concerned, but she was smiling broadly.

"Didn't I tell you?" she said, jutting her chin at the portal overhead. "He always knows."

She pulled the thick curtain, revealing Eli's sweating face. He gave us a thumbs-up through the salt-spattered glass, mouthed a single, jubilant word.

*Water.*

# About the Author

**A. MANETTE ANSAY** is the author of five novels, including *Vinegar Hill,* an Oprah Book Club Selection, and *Midnight Champagne,* a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, as well as a short-story collection, *Read This and Tell Me What It Says,* and a memoir, *Limbo*. Her awards include a National Endowment for the Arts Grant, a Pushcart Prize, the Nelson Algren Prize, and two Great Lakes Book Awards. She lives with her husband and daughter in Florida, where she teaches in the MFA program at the University of Miami.

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