

SALT OF A
SAILOR

ANNIE DIKE

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PROLOGUE

I don't care if I've heard it a hundred times, twice last week and once yesterday, every time he starts, I can't help it. I can't hide it, and I can't stop it. I smile. He often tells it as he's shoving a thick, furry wad of black tobacco under his lower lip, and I smile as I watch you watch him. I smile because I know where you're going. I know what you're going to see along the way, what you will smell, taste and feel. I know you'll hang on every word and look to me occasionally to see if I know what's coming. I do, but I won't tell you. Just follow him. He's taking you there. Go.

Dirt cakes in the deep crevices of his neck. A fat drop of sweat rolls out from his frayed gray hair, navigates its way over each crevice and soaks into the stained collar of his ragged yellow shirt. Your dirty thighs stick out of cut-off jeans and sweat on the rough, dry upholstery of the bench seat. Huge chunks are torn out in places exposing the weird yellow foam that you just can't help but pick at. If he asks you'll deny you did it, but your pockets are full of little pieces of yellow fluff. You can taste the dust from the country road. You squint into the sun, look at the crumpled papers stuck under the visor, watch the leather keychain that hangs and swings on the shifter arm. You are there. Sitting in the dusty cab of my Great Granddaddy's rusted-out blue 1942

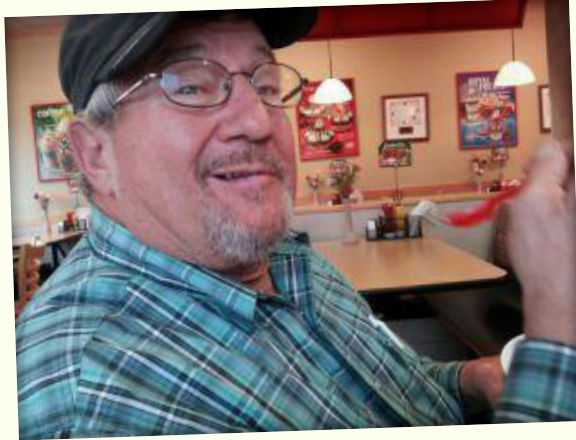
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Ford pick-up. You're somewhere around the age of eight and you're bumping along the rutted country road with Granddaddy to Willingham's feed store to pick up a sack of feed.

You're there because my dad has put you there. He has constructed this dusty, scratchy scene around you so that you can't see anything else. You have become him. You are in that truck, looking at Granddaddy's neck, picking a wad of seat foam behind your back. I've even seen some people unconsciously pick at the couch or whatever cushion they're sitting on out of instinct when he talks about the weird yellow foam, because it's such a great detail. You're picking and riding and choking on the country dust. You know you're going to get a penny candy at the store and that granddaddy's going to get a can of snuff. He pinches off a wad and packs it in his gums before he even makes his way to the counter to sign the store credit slip for Hattie Willingham, known by all the locals as "Miss Hattie." He mulls the thick wad around in his mouth as he opens the rickety door to the truck, groans his way back into the seat and then launches a thick stream of black juice out the window by the fuel pump before leaving.

"But, one time, *this time!*" my dad says. His grandfather got in the truck, slammed the metal door, slowly rolled the window up and spat a huge tobacco burst onto it. My dad will tell you it splat loudly on the glass and dripped down like coffee in cane syrup and that his grandfather said and did nothing. He didn't even flinch from the back-splash. "Granddaddy just rolled

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MY DAD

the window back down,” my dad’s arm slowly cranking down an imaginary window. Slowly. “Spat and all,” still rolling. “Like it never even happened.” *See?* The good part, the reason I smile, and the reason I never get tired of that one. It’s a great story because it’s a small event, a seemingly tiny, miniscule happening, that he crafted into a big story, pregnant with imagery, detail and, my favorite, humor. And, because it’s told by a great story-teller--”Tricky Dickey” himself, my Old Man.

When the Captain and I set off on this quest, I knew each day and each adventure we endured, both on and off the boat, would have all the makings of a great story if only it were to fall in the hands of a great story-teller. From the smallest, most miniscule of events--a tobacco splat on a window if you

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will, to the epic, deadly tangles at sea--each experience would have the potential to capture and entertain. As long as I could expertly construct the scene, with sights, sounds and weird foam details, then you would see, smell and taste nothing else. You would be there, with us, on that salty, swaying boat, experiencing each of our glorious undertakings and our likely more plentiful mistakes. From finding our boat to making the initial harrowing trek across the Gulf of Mexico in it, we certainly gathered many stories worth telling, some truths too. These are just a few.



CHAPTER ONE

ABOUT YOUR BOAT

“**T**he police?” Phillip asked, his face a mix of worry and amusement. I mouthed it after him but shrugged it off. Surely he was just jacking me around. *The police?* I wasn’t buying it.

“Well, you didn’t tell them where I was did you?” he said with a nervous laugh. His laugh caught me. Stopped me. This wasn’t a show for my benefit. Whoever he was talking to was *really* talking about the police. They were *really* after him. I now watched Phillip closely as he asked a few more questions, paced around in a tight circle and gave me a *the-heck-if-I-know* look. Surely someone was jacking *him* around, though. *Seriously? The police?*

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We were in New York City at the time. In all of my thirty years, I had never been and, much to Phillip's delight, I imitated the Pace Picante commercial repeatedly in the weeks before the trip. Anytime anyone asked, "*Where you going, Annie?*" "*New York Si-tee!*" I would reply, with an exaggerated country drawl and bug eyes. I said I was thirty. I didn't say I was mature. Besides, it was the first time I could use that played-out commercial tagline meaningfully. Who wouldn't? We had been planning the trip for months, plotting our attack on the city, reading dozens of travel guides and books, making reservations, then cancelling those and making better ones! We were really excited about the si-tee. And, wouldn't you know it--of course, *of course!*--Mother effin

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Nature decided to drop Tropical Storm Karen on us the *very* weekend we were set to leave. Perhaps she'd been planning her trip for months too. Making reservations at the marinas down in Miami, or perhaps Corpus Christi, then cancelling those and deciding to drop right in on freaking Pensacola. It looked like she had her sights set right on our boat. *That bitch!*

Karen was a real pre-trip buzz kill. The night before we left for NYC, we spent the entire evening tying and re-routing extra dock lines to keep the boat secure. We even lashed her to city property! We wrapped extra towels and padding around the places where we thought the lines might rub (chafe guards they call them), bungeed and strapped down any material or canvas we thought might go to flapping, which meant it might go to blowing right off. We got her as secure as we could get her, lined up some buddies to check on her in our absence and left. Karen was way out in the Atlantic at the time, and we had reservations!

And, here we were, walking off two Shake Shack burgers by the Flat Iron building and three glasses of wine. One for Phillip. Two for me. They serve an exceptional red at the Shack. Goes great with the burgers. I had that half-tipsy feeling that makes you crinkle your nose up a little just to check the numbness of it and then smile to yourself because you're the only one who knows what you're doing and why. Or, so you think. But, secretly, the thought of getting called out for nose-crinkling makes you smile, too. Needless to say, I wasn't mentally prepared for this latest turn of events. *The police? For real?*

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“The police,” Phillip said to me as if he’d heard my litany of thought-questions and was answering them aloud, but his statement was still more of a question than an answer. “I have no freaking clue,” shaking his head. “I,” he started then stopped, huffed half-annoyed and started again. “I ... I don’t know. I can’t even imagine ...” Phillip trailed off, staring at his phone in disbelief. “I’ll have to make some more calls. That was Linda at the office. She called me right after they left. They said they’d been to my house too. This guy,” he said with disdain. “Some *lieutenant* and his beefed-up sidekick just showed up asking for me. He didn’t say why,” Phillip threw his hands up in frustration. “He just left a card. Said he ... couldn’t *disclose*.” Phillip was shaking his head now, punching in more numbers.

I flicked my nose back to feeling and sobered up three notches. *Holy shit. He was serious. The police!* It seemed it was a good thing we were in New York City, a far cry from home, because the heat was hot back in Pensacola. Soon, a scratchy voice came through the phone. Phillip was talking to some raspy, chain-smoking bloke, Sergeant So-and-So. The *sidekick*. Apparently he and the Lieutenant had gone out to Phillip’s house that morning and then to his office trying to find him. Phillip looked at me sort of cold for a second. I wondered if he wasn’t thinking about hanging up right then and there and making plans to stay in NYC for good. For whatever reason, the police were hot on his trail back home. The sidekick told us Lieutenant whoever was

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out of the office at the moment but that he would have him call Phillip back as soon as he got back.

We couldn't wait that long.

"Sergeant," Phillip waded in, "can I ask what all of this is about?" We waited in a moment of silence while the Sarge did something, probably swallowed the last bite of a greasy McSomething and wiped his mouth. Finally, a shuffle and rattle, and he responded.

"It's about your boat."

Your boat, the words seemed to fall sickening thoughts started running through my mind into recognition. *His boat? Wait. Did he mean our boat? The sailboat? Our boat!?*

Sickening thoughts started running clumsily through my mind. I imagined the boat had come untied in the storm winds, knocked out half the docks in the marina and ended up speared through the hull Catamaran in the last slip. Phillip cupped his hand over the phone, pushed it away from his face briefly and whispered to me, "*the rails?*" his shoulders up in a shrug. *The rails.* In an effort to secure her as best we could before leaving, we *had* tied the boat to the rails along the public seawall next to our dock. Perhaps the city was going to have to untie them with the coming storm? Or worse, perhaps they already *had* untied her, and they were calling to let us know when they did she rocked and swayed and came crashing into the city seawall. *Those bastards!*

"My, my ... boat?" Phillip finally stammered, jolting me back to reality, back to New York, back to the phone and

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Sergeant So-and-So's voice on the other end of the line. "What do you mean my boat?"

"I'm sorry Mister, that's all I can disclose right now. You'll need to speak to the Lieutenant when he gets back."

All he could disclose. *Disclose!*? Like it was some big matter of national security or something? What the hell had our boat run into? A top-secret nuclear missile shaft? *Disclose*. That word really pissed us off. As if when a *cop* has something to say, it no longer becomes "tell" it magically transforms into the utterly-important "disclose."

Phillip and I wandered around the park by the Flat Iron aimlessly, staring at his phone, trying to will it ring with our minds while we waited for Lieutenant Whazzisname to call us back. We were offering up possible not-so-bad scenarios, but internally suspecting the worst--the crashed, cracked versions. We kept turning his words over and over in our minds. "*It's about your boat.*" How worried we were, I simply cannot *disclose*.

But, forgive me. I've gotten way ahead of myself. This was months later. This was New York in October. We'll get there, don't worry. In order to get a call "about our boat," we had to first *have* a boat, which required we find her, buy her and sail her home across the Gulf of Mexico. Where did all of that mess begin? Where most promising messes do. Late one night at a bar.



CHAPTER TWO

ROUGHING IT

“The Grenadines,” Phillip said. Casually, as if it was like going to the movies or out for a bagel. The way he said it made it *sound* closer. He made all things far sound closer.

“For how long?” I asked, kicking myself immediately right after I did. Like I was some lovesick school girl. *Summer camp? How long will you be gone Billy? Will you write?*

“Ten days,” he replied. *Ten days*, I thought. And, just like some lovesick schoolgirl the thought made me want to pout. I had *just* met the man and I could already tell that ten whole days without him was going to feel like a small form of torture.

“Ten days,” I repeated, not knowing what else to say. I had never met a man who had been to the Grenadines. I had

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never met a man who ‘traveled’ at all, really (other than up to the hunting camp), much less a man who did it consistently and to such faraway places. Frankly, I had never met a man quite like him and, trust me, in those reckless months, I met plenty. He was curious, but a bit dismissive, of me. Me, the leggy blonde who lorded over the fraternity brothers and navy boys at the bar. Like a cat, his coolness made me crave his attention even more. Among the dopey, bounding dogs that often circled, he stood out. Phillip was educated, put-together, capable of conversing about things *other than* the Alabama game. The man exuded so much confidence, it rubbed off on you. The phrase, “*I’ll have what he’s having,*” first came to mind when he walked up, but after only a few minutes of focused conversation, that evolved to “*I’ll go where he’s going.*” Phillip had been to Kuwait, Somalia, Singapore, now the Grenadines? I couldn’t point these places out on a map, but I certainly didn’t want him to know that. I didn’t want to risk asking a question that would reveal my lack of knowledge of what hemisphere, or what ocean even, in which the Grenadines lie, assuming it was an ocean, not a sea or a gulf or whatever other rare bodies of water exist out there in the great beyond. *The Grenadines*. For some reason, an image of Desert Storm came to mind--dust, tents in the desert, chickens clucking around--and I knew instantly it had to be wrong. So very wrong.

“Well, probably seven days on the boat. Ten days total for the whole trip.” Thankfully he brushed the desert dust away and brought me back to the bar. I was hoping the more he spoke,

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the more I would become enlightened, but now I was only further confused, intrigued, enraptured. *On the boat? What boat? Whose boat? What kind of boat?* Desert Storm flashed again, and I stabbed in the dark, hoping somewhere beneath the thick froth of my confusion would emerge an intelligent question.

“Your boat?”

“No, a friend’s. I’m going to stay with them on their boat for about a week in the Grenadines.” *When, a relevant inquiry, don’t blow it Annie.* But, as hard as I was trying to focus on our exchange, to say the right things, ask the right questions, I was swept away again by the words tumbling off his lips. *The Grenadines ...* They felt so exotic. How could I carry a conversation with this man? I was a lawyer, sure. I had a degree and what-not and had clawed my way up from dirt-poor beginnings, but I still had the dirt still under my fingernails to prove it. Among my haughty taughty peers I often felt that I only knew enough to pretend to know a lot. A quick wit and disarming personality can be just that--disarming. As you scramble to get your armor back together, you’ll forget to peek under mine. When it came to dirty, rugged life experiences, I was rich, but as for actual world travel, real out-there, beyond-the-great-beyond type stuff, I was still dirt-poor. I knew nothing of these foreign places, these remote adventures, these ...

“Another martini?” Thankfully, I was rescued again. This time it was the bartender.

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“Yes, please, and a cosmo as well, extra lime.” The words came out before I even had time to think about it.

Phillip eyed me curiously. Watching me as I knocked the last splash of my first martini back and met his gaze. My eyes squinting ever so slightly. *What?* they said.

“A cosmo *and* a martini?” he asked, now seemingly intrigued by me. Me? The one imagining chickens pecking at dirt when he said the Grenadines. *Good*, I thought. Finally, back on familiar turf. Booze and sultry flirting from a pretty blonde at the bar. Since the divorce, I was the queen of that realm. I didn’t know how to compete with the Grenadines, with ten days abroad, friends with sailboats, remote, exotic locations, anything of that kind. But, I did know I liked this man, and I now had his attention, in my arena, on my turf. Time to break out the cat nip.

“Sure. Salty *and* sweet,” I quipped easily. “I like everything,” I said suggestively, a delicious gleam dancing in my eyes. “You ever find yourself in need of a hot blonde number to start making these trips to the ... *Grenadines* and what-not with you, you know where to find her,” I said as I brushed my body against his, reaching for my fresh martini and licking a few flakes of salt from the rim before taking my first sip.

I watched him watch me, thinking he wasn’t sure exactly what to say. What the appropriate response would be. Or so I imagined that’s what he was thinking. But, as the seconds passed, us eyeing each other easily, in comfortable silence, I could tell he wasn’t worried at all about what was *appropriate*. He was simply

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enjoying the moment. Pondering me. He smiled. A genuine, sexy smile, raised his own glass, some dark liquor with a sliver of lemon, and tipped it at me with a regal nod of the head. *Touché*.

I kid you not that was our first exchange. The night we met there was mention of a sailboat and the Grenadines. Our relationship was poised to set sail to southern climates and salty, sweet adventures long before it was ever really formed. I was twenty-nine, freshly divorced and running like a wild stallion when Phillip met me, jumping and bucking in the vast bounty of freedom in which I had recently found myself and unsure what to do with it all. Molding it into a boat and sailing it down to the Grenadines sounded like a great start.

It didn't take long for Phillip and me to get serious about it. And, I do mean *it*, not each other. I'm not sure, still, if what we have could or *should* be called serious, or called anything for that matter. What we got serious about was this sailing stuff. The Grenadines only fueled a fire that was already smoldering in Phillip. He had wanted his own boat for years. Not just any boat--a sailboat--a comfortable, dependable blue water cruiser that would take him anywhere he wanted to go. He didn't want to wait until he got old and arthritic to get out there. The right time to go was now. Phillip also wanted a comfortable, dependable mate that would go with him. Wouldn't hurt if she was pretty to boot, but that wasn't a requirement.

Now, what did I want? Everything, in a sense, but not the usual one. I had just clawed my way out of a consuming marriage

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and I wanted to be free, free to go, write, and travel. I wanted to see the world, and have a kickass time doing it. I wanted to ski, climb, kiteboard, scuba dive. And, sail? Sure sail! That, too. Anything, too. I wanted to do it all, to immerse myself everyday in the new, the now and the never-before seen. And, Phillip, with his equally insatiable thirst for adventure (and, okay, his devilishly good looks), did not just “step into my life” at that time. He hit it, full on, with the force of a Mac truck, crashing into me at the perfect time and sending me skidding and careening onto a new road paved with adventure. I gripped the wheel, gripped the asphalt, shifted gears and took off. After a year or so of various escapades and non-sailing trips together, Phillip finally began to suspect what I had known that night over margaritas and talk of the Grenadines. *She could be the one.* Not *that* one--a *way better* one--that “hot little blonde number” who would accompany him to “the Grenadines and what-not.” His Travel Mate! *Hadn't I told him that, night one? What more did he need?*

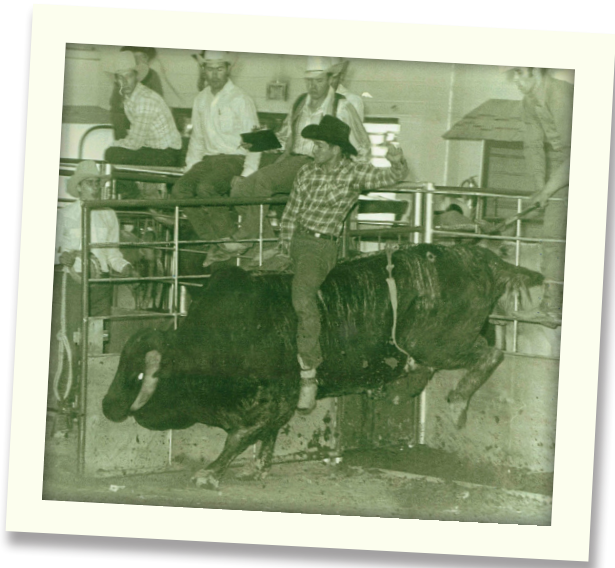
Proof, apparently. It seemed Phillip wanted some empirical evidence. He does like to test me, and for good reason. If you're going to travel the world with someone, you want to be sure they can hack it. After his series of so-called ‘test trips,’ Phillip was finally starting to think I might fit the bill. I traveled well, packed light and went with the flow. But, this whole sailing business was new territory. There's just really no way to know what kind of sailor you'll turn out to be until you actually get out there and start doing it. I didn't even know how to sail. I'd

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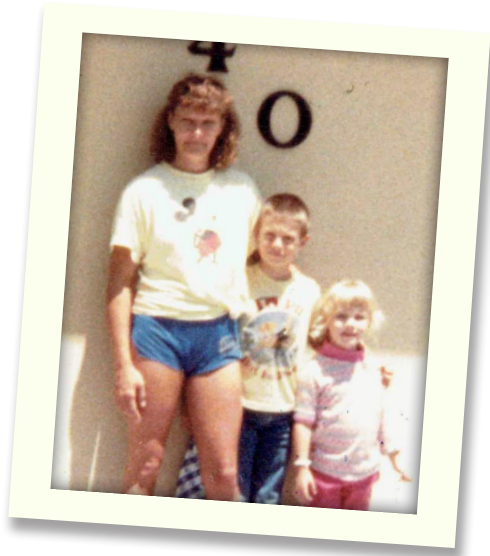
never done it. What if I got violently seasick? I had been out a time or two on a deep-sea fishing trip and had no problems, but that was it. And, that was as a passenger on a motor yacht, not a deckhand on a swaying, to-and-fro sailboat? And, cruising was a whole-nother matter, Phillip would tell me. Like camping, but on the water. Cruisers had to be ready to get their hands dirty, to endure some, or perhaps a lot, of discomfort, to “rough it” as some might say. It could be hard, painful and exhausting. You had to be resourceful, rough-and-tumble, decidedly not dainty--was the gist I got. *I'm all of those things*, I told myself. *Hell, I'm the poster child for those things*. I had to smile when Phillip would show me pictures, have me read articles and try to recreate sailing conditions or situations that he thought might help prepare me for this “tough” world of marine camping. They paled sadly in comparison to my already-experiences, my tomboy resume if you will, my own “roughing it” days.

I really do think it was in my blood because it all started with my dad--a real-life, no-shit professional bullrider back in his day, twelfth in the nation at one point, or so I was told--but a true grit-and-gristle cowboy to the core. His daddy was a Church of Christ preacher and his momma, Big Mom, was the most stubborn, cattle-driving, child-rearing Southern stickler I've ever met. She was far tougher than dad, far tougher than any of us. As a child, I spent my summers in the Alabama backwoods as dad's shadow, stumbling behind his spurs everywhere he went. And, going everywhere my dad went often meant squeezing into

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hay trailers, climbing fences, holding onto the horn, holding on for dear life and, basically, just clawing the dirt to keep up. I did what he did, whatever that entailed. The rest of the year, my brother, John, and I spent in New Mexico with my Mom, the



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most stubborn, bus-driving, child-rearing *non*-Southerner I've ever met, not quite as tough as Big Mom, but twice as mean when she needed to be.

With dad granted the fun summers-and-holidays role, my mom was left with the job of actually raising my brother and me, day in, day out, mostly alone and mostly broke. She was a hard core disciplinarian, a great whooper and, despite the daily frustrations of raising two snot-nosed kids, a stern teacher and constant provider. Complaining was not tolerated in our little flat-top orange house in New Mexico. Gripe about mom not buying the sugary "Tiger" cereal you got at So-and-So's house and you spent your Saturday morning chained to the kitchen table, swallowing tasteless lumps of Malt-O-Meal, with

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absolutely no sugar or butter in it, until every last malt morsel was gone. “*Some kids don’t get breakfast at all,*” she would say. And, she was right. But, having little forced John and I to be creative, to construct our own worlds of entertainment, to build things we couldn’t buy, to fix things others would throw away and learn to appreciate and save the seventy-five cents Mom would give us for cleaning the bathroom (yes, *the* bathroom--in our house growing up, there was only one).



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If I cursed her at the time--and believe me, thanks to my brother, I started cursing at a ripe, young age--it's only because I was ignorant. I was young, naive and stupid, and I didn't know the valuable life lessons my mom was teaching us. Her tough love laid a thick salt base that enabled my brother and me to grip and grow in the face of adversity, poverty and sometimes insurmountable odds. With this foundation, I was able to endure a young life full of experiences that humbled me, taught me, and excelled me to this poster-child exemplar I thought that I was, this pre-seasoned storm-trooper who could handle any nautical dilemma. Now, had I ever sailed? No. Did I think that mattered? No. I had endured many painful, uncomfortable, arguably dire situations that I felt gave me whatever grit and guile the Captain thought I needed to handle this silly sailing stuff. The more Phillip kept trying to impress upon me how *tough* it was going to be, the more I kept reaching back to the rough-and-tumble memories of my youth, some of which Phillip knew about, most he did not.

But, they were mine. They were logged in and itemized, lined up on a mental shelf, standing ready at any moment if I needed to pull one down, roll it around in my mind and embrace, once again, whatever valuable lesson I had learned in that moment. Big Mom, holding me down in a vat of hydrogen peroxide, my skin literally sizzling off, had taught me no matter how awful things may seem, if they're not going to kill you, they're not really that bad. "*Awww bush,*" she'd say. "*You're alive*

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ain't ya?" My dad, a wad of my hair in one hand pulling my head back and a pair of greasy pliers in the other pulling my wiggly, bloody tooth out of my mouth, had taught me "it might hurt at the time, but sometimes you gotta cut things loose, if they're wanting to go." My brother John, punching holes in canned biscuit dough and dropping them in the Fry daddy to make our own homemade version of donuts, had taught me if you really want something, particularly if folks say you can't have it, you find a way. In all, I felt I had already endured a lifetime worth of "roughing it" experiences that made me far more durable than the average bloke. I parachuted with a sheet, started my car with a screwdriver, swished with hydrogen peroxide. I rode horses, climbed rocks, leapt off cliffs. I fixed things with duct tape, staples and hot glue. I spent summers in the sleeper of a big rig. I ate Malt-o-Meal. Surely these were excellent traits of a sailor. Surely I was *salty* enough? I fancied I was. Phillip suspected I could be. Either way, we were going to find out. Travel was the goal. The time to go was now. All we needed was a boat.