

Jacqueline and I had been sailing up the Red Sea to the Mediterranean on our 32-foot sloop, the *Unicorn*. It had been a hard slog, wind on the nose, short, steep seas; we could walk faster than we were sailing. We still had a few hours left before we expected to duck into a *marsa*, a break in the reefs through which the streams from the interior empty. I had my eye on the shimmering haze from the desert heat that was darkening quickly in the west. Slowly, the gusty and variable wind laid down, then vanished.

"What is that?" Jackie asked.

In the distance, a towering wall of dark cloud rolled toward us, sucking up the desert sand – not a squall line or a weather front, not a vertical twister from a tornado but an ominous ground-hugging, solid-looking mass, that was churning, growing and swelling.

A narrow entrance to the reef appeared just ahead and reading the colours of the water for depth on either side, we motored cautiously into the opening and up the winding river as the storm bore down on us. Minutes later, the wind struck with an almighty vindictive force, knocking our 12-tonne sailboat onto its beam-ends.

The thick desert grit rasped our faces like sandpaper, stinging our flesh, working its way into our noses, mouths, hair and clothes. Swallowed by the storm, we disappeared inside a blinding, bilious-coloured cloud. The water turned a rich metallic grey-green and reflected an eerie greenish glow onto the yellow cloud.

"Get below!" I shouted. "And throw me up my diving mask and snorkel." Even with the mask, visibility now was no more than five metres and, with the river getting narrower, I killed the engine, stumbled to the bow and dropped the anchor.

Finding some protection in the lee of the cabin, I kept an eye on the depth sounder praying our anchor was holding – that we wouldn't be smashed against the reefs on either side. The drifting sand, driven by a shrieking wind, built up on the deck and against the cabin like snow in a blizzard. The deep yellow of our immediate atmosphere took on a reddish tint and, with the dry, hot, suffocating air, we wondered if this was not akin to sitting in the fires of hell.

"Come down, get out of that thing!" she called up.

"Can't! Too much sand. Would ruin everything below."

The wind began to subside and visibility improved, revealing how close we had come to trouble. We had anchored in a bight of the small wadi and, had I gone much further, we would have run into the reef that was only a few metres ahead. So close was our bow to the land, I could have tossed the anchor onto shore.

I heard the motor boat before I saw it. The muffled sound of the outboard engine muted by the heavy dusty atmosphere was unnerving. This was Eritrea, a no man's land, an unknown nation that had broken away from Ethiopia after a brutal 30-year civil war. As cruising sailors, we were not privy to government travel advisories and warnings but we did know the conflict had just ended, and while guns still bristled on either side, we didn't think that a couple on a sailboat seeking refuge in a storm would represent any threat. But we were not sure.

The boat appeared out of the haze, charging toward us at full throttle. Jackie saw it first. As I was bent over trying to shake the sand out of my hair, she grabbed my arm. "They've got guns," she said quietly. ►►

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