Lost and Afraid

More than anything I ever wanted; I wanted not to be there. But I was. I had watched the sun set, alone on the **aft** deck. We were lost in a world I knew nothing about. It was fitting that it was a darker place than I had ever been in my life, no moon tonight, and the stars gave so little light they seemed to be in another universe. Eleven hours ago we had set sail for Russel Beacon, the only marker in one hundred square miles of ocean to show vessels traveling this route that they were safely on course between the shallow corralshoals that lie to the south, and the very busy commercial Northwest Channel. The beacon was supposedly visible from eight miles. I kept scanning the horizon, or what I thought was the horizon, nothing.

I finally went below, everyone was asleep, I climbed onto my bunk, but was unable to fall sleep with the boat rocking and the wind making so much noise. As I lie there my mind wandered to events of the preceding days. It seemed like it had been so much longer than a few days since I had made the decision to go on this ‘vacation.’ I was thinking then, and am now still thinking. I could have said no. After all, I had never sailed, except in a small sunfish, in an very small lake in New Hampshire. I neither enjoyed those few experiences, not did I demonstrate any real intuitive or natural skill sailing. My wife and I had moved from California to Illinois in the fall. In late November her stepfather, who had retired early, moved to Florida, and bought a sailboat to live out his dream. I believe he had misunderstood Moby Dick and thought Ahab was a hero. He invited us to come to Miami and join he and is partner on a roundtrip sailing venture in his boat. Miami to Nassau and back**.** I said no when Lisa brought it up. I said I don’t know anything about sailing, especially not sailing in the Atlantic Ocean. Lisa said that she had made up her mind and was going whether I chose to or not. She had no concerns. Jim, she said, was an experienced sailor, very knowledgeable about the areas where we would be sailing, and was even hired frequently by rich people to sail their yachts back from the Bahamas to Miami. I changed my mind, to this day I remain unsure why. We flew to Miami, arriving late in the evening, still warm and humidity, and we went straight to the Marina where the boat was docked.

Some of my anxiety was lessened when I saw the boat. It looked big, thirty nine feet.It was single masted with a halyard for a jib sail or spinnaker, and it had a twenty-nine horse power engine. There was a galley, dining area, miniature bathroom and forward sleeping compartment. Jim and his partner were going to sleep in the forward compartment, Lisa on the dining table that turned over and became a bed, and I slept on a narrow bench adjacent to the dinning table. The plan was to sail from Miami, cross the Gulf Stream, which started in the Gulf of Mexico and flowed between Miami and the western Bahamas as it went north east. We were going to spend the first night after crossing the Gulf Stream anchored at one of the wester islands of the Bahamas, then sail to Nassau the next day, spend a couple of days in Nassau and then return.

We left the following morning at 2AM. It would take two hours to follow the channel markers out of the Marina and through the long Miami channel to the Gulf Stream. We had to follow thirty markers and needed to do so slowly because the only light was from the city and a hand-held spotlight that we had. And as we got farther away from the city there was no other light except the spotlight. At one point, as we swung the spotlight around looking for the next marker, we saw the shadows giant structures, thirty to forty feet high. We were in a kind of canyon, these structures on both side. As we got closer and shined the light on them, we could see that they were houses on stilts, abandoned now, except for the sea gulls living on them and screeching as the spotlight shone on them. I can’t say I thought about them too much at the time. Just wondered what had happened. A hurricane!

The wind was perfect so we raised sails. Jim at the helm, Maria his partner at his side. Lisa and I went below to sleep. I had fallen asleep quickly and soundly, even though the sofa was both too short and too narrow. I was awakened suddenly. I was scrunched into the sofa on my right side. I looked over my left shoulder and saw the port side of the boat where the ceiling of the cabin should have been. My sofa which had been along the starboard side of the cabin was now the bottom of the cabin. Then the port side dropped back, not to its normal positions but now it became the bottom of the boat. My body followed, feet and legs sprawling towards the Lisa’s bed that was now the bottom. I grabbed a vertical beam and held, also catching the edge of the table with my feet that stopped my momentum and bracing myself in an awkward semi-midair position. I struggled and regained a kind of sitting position both with my feet braced against the table. And then I heard a yell, then another. The yelling came from above, from someone on the deck. I was able to get to the steps and through the hatch. Jim was hanging onto the dingy, to me our life raft, but he was just holding the rope which had been securing the dingy to the boat. I was able to get to the back of the boat, grab one of the lines, and sit with my feet wedged into a small ledge about two inches above the storage hatches that I was sitting on. I tried to brace myself. Together we held the dingy.

We began at some point to try to pull the dingy onto the boat, but couldn’t, we barely held it in our grasp. The wave that had originally dislodged the dingy had also filled it with water which made it heavier. As the boat pitched with each wave, Jim and I would fall to our sides and slide towards the starboard side, nothing between us and the ocean except the small ledge and a nylon line strung around the boat about two feet above the level of the deck. Our positions were precarious, to say the least, and deteriorating. My arms and legs were so tired they were shaking, and my stomach and shoulder muscles were on the verge of cramping. As I tried to hold the dingy, Jim began to cut away a dangled mas of rope. It seemed like it was taking a very long time and I wasn’t quite sure what we were going to do with the dingy once he got the lines cut away. Finally with the rope cut, we pulled the top of the dingy forward and most of the water poured out. Now the problem was what to do with the dingy. There was a canopy over the aft deck and the dingy was too wide to carry under the canopy and the canopy was too high to allow us to lift the dingy over it, even if we had the strength to lift it.

The idea was to knock the less important and less valuable canopy down. We seemed to be short a person. Jim screamed for Lisa who had still not woken up. This was a moment of some humor as Lisa had yet to become aware of our situation and the state of the ocean as she had drugged herself to sleep with multiple sea sickness pills. Parenthetically, and also not that I really could enjoy it at the moment, but Lisa had constantly ridiculed my fears about dangers that we might encounter. As she emerged, her expression, slightly dazed from sleep, changed immediately to shock, and maybe more, as she saw the huge waves and her husband and father-in-law dangly with the dingy at the stern of the boat. She said later that at that moment she thought that Jim and I, at the very least, would be swept overboard.

To her credit, she recovered extraordinarily quickly and knocked the canopy down. Then Maria, Jim’s partner, who had been trying to get the boat turned into the wind, managed to do it. Jim and I lifted the dingy and carried it forward, holding it slightly above cabin level. It was very difficult, like standing up in a rollercoaster as it went up and down its tracks. Now that the boat had been turned into the wind, the bow would go up with the waves, rather than over, then nose straight down, then back up with the next wave. Neither of us fell overboard, but we did fall several times, fortunately against the cabin, as we tried to walk and carry the dingy. We reached the mast and set the now down-turned dingy nose towards the bow, lying on the cabin roof and then began to secure it. I was weak enough, my hands swollen from holding the rope, my legs weak, arms and shoulders shaking and burning and my stomach ready to heave. It was hard to tie the required knots to secure the dingy. After finally securing the dingy, I crawled to the starboard side, secured myself with a rope, and threw up I stayed in that position for several hours, boat keeled way over as we sailed close to the wind, left hand on the cabin roof railing, just throwing up into the sea and wondering when it was going to be over.

The first day of the “vacation” ended late in the afternoon, as we anchored off Gun Cay (pro-key), one of the western most islands of the Bahamas, and one of the smallest. It was only a mile long and fifty feet wide with two trees. Even though we were no longer in the Gulf Stream the winds were still very strong and the seas very rough and the island as small as it was gave us very little protection even on the leeward side. And Jim had decided not to turn on the anchor lights, so we were not visible to another boat that might be seeking anchor in the same small harbor.

The next morning at breakfast I made my fears known. We had discovered later that Jim had heard the small craft warning before we had entered the Gulf Stream. Lisa and I both said that we didn’t want to travel in weather like that again. Jim agreed, at least, for the day, and promised to check the weather frequently before we left the next day. He and Maria assured us that there would be “nothing like what we experienced the rest of the way.” During this discussion we found out that we had over one hundred miles of open ocean to cross to get to Nassau. Jim assured us that there would be no problem, we would be sailing straight east and , in case, there was a problem there was a small chain of islands, one called Chub Cay with a beautiful small bay, harbor and restaurant and hotel that we could stay at.

We left the next morning, a beautiful day, the goal to sail as far as we could, drop anchor, then sail to Nassau the next day. There would be, however, no place to drop anchor except in one hundred square miles of ocean and that was possible only because the ocean was so shallow for half of the one hundred miles. We also had to travel on a specific course, as I previously mention to make sure that we avoided the shoals to the north and south. Our target was a beacon, supposedly forty-five miles away, and visible from eight miles, so it could be missed by quite a ways and it would still be okay.

We left at dawn, Jim had decided that it was a good day. It wasn’t. The wind was blowing from the east; the direction we were going. We could not sail, so we used the twenty-nine horse power engine. It was a diesel engine and managed to move us along at the amazing speed of 3.5 to 4 miles per hour. Eleven hours later, no beacon, just darkness. Jim did turn on the anchor lights in case we were in the middle of the busy Northwest Channel. We left at dawn at dawn again. Not too long after we had started, we were able to see with binoculars the beacon. Also the winds were favorable, so we raised sails, and it seemed like we were flying, seven miles per hour! As we tacked eith the beacon on our starboard we decided to change to a smaller jib sail because the winds had increased. So we lowered job, stow job, unstowed job, hooded job, raise jib. I make this clear because we got really good at it. Because the wind changed again, so we, lowered …and began motoring again.

We had fallen behind schedule, so we decided to change course for the small group of islands, Berry islands, specifically Chub Cay. Ten hours later we arrived at the Cay, a truly beautiful place. We anchored in a secluded bay, the ocean clear, the sandy bottom visible, beautify beaches with forests beyond. And I had gained a little confidence concerning my sailing skills, and overall knowledge. That day, not only did I become an expert on raising, lowering. . .but I had been at the helm most of the time, and was quite proud of my skills. Plus I had ignored Jim’s directions which would have put us several miles to the north of Chub Cay and further from Nassau. But also I had read a pamphlet on sailing from Miami to Nassau, the same one, evidently Jim hadn’t read, or read and ignored. Because it said, do not sail from Miami to Nassau in the winter months because the wind is always against you, and especially don’t cross the Gulf Stream because the wind blows against the direction of the stream creating huge waves and a very dangerous situation. I am not kidding.

Because Nassau was only thirty-five or so miles away, and the weather report was favorable, mile wind, and gentle sea, Jim and Maria decided to extend their alone time. Maria had made it know the previous evening that she wanted some privacy. Lisa and I were not sure where we were supposed to go, so we went up on deck and waited until Jim decided to leave. It was late morning. We motored out of the bay and set sail for Nassau. Well, as you might have guessed the weather report was wrong, very, very, very wrong. The wind was strong with gusts of 35 mph and we were sailing into it, trying to sail into it. So we lowered sail and began motoring, seeminly slower than before. After a short period of motoring in place, Jim decided that the wind had changed directions, so we should try to sail. This was despite the fact that the waves were again the size of multi-story buildings. I decided at this point that this was going to be my last day on the ship, one way or the other. Maria turned the boat into the wind and Jim and I went forward to put of the sails, in the strong winds. The boat was going up and down like a rollercoaster. Jim and I were on the cabin and bow respectively trying to raise the saile.

Several times Jim and I found our vertical and horizaontsl switched. I was hoping the boad didn’t go that one more foot and then over. Once when raising the main sail, standing on the top of the capi, hanging on to nothing but the boom, the baot lef my feet, and I was left to dangle from the boom. The boat returned. Ath this time thw aves and the wind were hitting us from the fron, the bow would rise to the height of the wave and then fall, exactly as I had in the Gulf Stream. One time the waves came so close together that Jim and the bow wre on there way down when the next wave rolled over the, engulfing Jim up to his shoulders. I laughed uncontrollably as I lie on my back on the tope of the cabin, totally soaked and trying to raise the jib sail. Trying to sail in winds this strong and a sea this heavy seemed ridiculous, but I kept trying.

Sails finally raised, we crawled to the aft deck and truned the boat tight into the wind. Unfortunately the best course we could make sailing this direction was not Nassau, but the open seas of the Atlantic Ocean. Then something bad happened, the wind changed and gusted as it did. Our job sail was too tight wand the wind caught it from the side and started pushing us even farther over than any time before. I told Lisa to get ready to jump. Maria, “a lifelong sailor” yelled ‘We’re going over.” I was had the helm now and tried to turn the boat into the wind, but it changed again, and began tipping us the opposite way. I tried turning into the wind again, but the boat didn’t respond. Jim emerged from below deck where he had been changing clothes. He yelled at Maria for intilling fear in us! “The boat,” he said, “ can’t go all the way over. It is impossible.” (re: article months later in Sports Illustrated, boat like ours did go over, left everyone on their dingy). He told us to let go of the lines and the boat would turn into the wind. It already had. Then he said, “Guess we can’t sail.” That meant he and I were going to go forward assume our previous positions and lower both sails. This turned out to be more difficult than raising sails. During this effort, there was again one moment, when I was swing on the main sail. As the boat would roll one direction I, holding on the boom, would fly across the cabin, and then as it rolled the other direction, I would fly back. We were able to get both sails down and stowed, and began to motor, but decided to go back to Chub Cay and try again the next day.

Postscript: Chub Cay we found that night had an airport of sorts that Bahamian Airlines used. We abandoned ship and flew to Nassau, then Miami.