

## *Souvenir's Last Passage*

17° 45' N  
62° 25' W

ONLY A FOOT FROM HER FACE phosphorus ignited the dark sea surface, white light. Nan Gray, trim and athletic for her sixty-four years, clung to the lifelines and watched as if forced. She loved the way this white magic boiled past the lee rail, but she had thrust her head out not to watch the water but because she was about to get sick again.

At the stern the windvane dipped to the left and kept the boat plowing through the waves.

There, it came, and went, angry hand at her gut. What anger was this? And why tonight, after weeks aboard, as they worked the boat north along the Lesser Antilles? Then serenity, quiet at the center of anxiety's ring, the peace of the recently nauseated.

The ring of anxiety was vague, but also had one specific cause — the person she loved most was losing his mind. Even in her fatigued state, riding these relentless seas between Barbuda and St. Barts, she could recall with absolute clarity (and the same gripping of the stomach) the first time she glimpsed what was now becoming his future. She and Bill were walking across the yard of a friend's house on the York River. "I saw Fran last week," Bill had said. "She's got to have a hysterectomy." The news might have come as a shock, except that he had pronounced this exact sentence not twenty minutes before. She recalled how the muscles in her legs had frozen, a stabbing chill down her back. She'd almost stumbled. Bill must have thought the news had blindsided her.

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Everyone repeats now and then. Everyone has lapses. But deep intuition and more than three decades of marriage told her this repetition was like nothing he had uttered before. A bright and quick-witted man, a scholar, he knew exactly what he said and when he said it. That he would appear so completely unaware that he had just said this same sentence twice, to the same person, during the same walk along the river, frightened her. As the weeks and months passed, her premonition proved true. His memory was washing away. And because memory — more than she had ever understood — forms the frame for personality, for consciousness, he was losing nothing less than himself.

Despite the warm east wind, a chill came and she trembled. This blasted seasickness was taking its toll. She felt foggy.

Though hours away from St. Barts, she pictured the rocks and reefs the chart showed around the island. She needed to get to the navigation table, with its perpetual demand for exactitude, but felt unwilling to go below. In ten minutes her midnight watch would end and it would be Bill's turn. Would he remember? Would he know why his wristwatch beeped?

She rubbed her hands against her face and felt the roughness of her aging fingers: was this last passage a foolish, romantic mistake? It had been Bill's fervent, no, desperate, wish, once he began to understand what was happening to him. "Take one last sail with me, Nan," he implored. "I'm up to it. I know I am. And even if I weren't, you can handle the boat as well as I can. Maybe better. Please. It will be the last passage for us."

No, she had said. There will be plenty more passages. Plenty more.

A wave sloshed against the side of the bow and came washing back, licking her face. Since they'd put out from Venezuela, where the boat had spent hurricane season, she'd learned all too well that this would indeed be their last passage, and wondered now that she'd let him talk her into it. "He will begin to make irrational choices," the doctor told her, describing the long torturous path toward oblivion on which he had embarked. "Oh," she

said, "we've always made those." The bald doctor had looked at her over his reading glasses, without humor.

"Hey," he said, and she wheeled around, wide eyed. He was standing in the cockpit, his thin gray hair matted by sleep. "It's my turn."

She nodded and smiled. She twisted back toward the sea, her eyes stinging, as if to watch the phosphorus one last time.

"You didn't think I would miss my watch, did you?"

"No, dear. Of course not. I just haven't been feeling that well."

"Throwing sea pizzas? Why don't you take a break."

"I haven't gotten a fix," she said weakly.

"Don't worry about it. I'll take a look. Go on, get some rest."

"Thanks, Bill. I think I will. Call me if you need me." In her exhaustion her voice sounded child-like. She didn't even visit the head, though she knew she would regret this later, when her bladder wakened her. For now all she could do was peel off the damp foul weather jacket and slide into the sea berth, full of hope that once she settled in she would sleep and would not get sick again.

She lay in a twilight world of rushing water, wondering whether or not she had fallen asleep, stumbling vaguely from one dream to another. Informing those dreams was the endless, recurring, indomitable hope that Bill was getting better, that the medicine was working, that his memory had improved today, that his up-beat speech and behavior were not superficial, that he really had gotten control of this disease, and was licking it. That he was re-creating himself.

"Nan. Nan. Get up."

No, she thought or said. No, it simply could not be. They had agreed on three-hour watches, a compromise between two and four. Three hours could not possibly have passed so quickly. She moaned aloud.

"Shush," he said, for no apparent reason.

"Is it my watch already?" she whined, her face in the pillow.

"Not yet," he said.

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She opened her eyes. If it were not yet her watch, what was he doing?

“Is there something wrong?”

“I think so,” he said. “I’m not sure.”

She felt weary tears shoot toward her eyes. What was he thinking now? Last week, on the way to Antigua, he had turned the boat around, somehow convinced that he was supposed to find the reciprocal. But he had been fine for much of the time — what was it now?

“Bill?”

He had gone. She cursed and crawled from behind the lee cloth. A lurching wave knocked her off balance, and she fell headlong against the quarter berth. Bracing both knees against the berth she thrust her arms into the stiff damp cloth of her foul weather jacket, then leaned over the chart table to see whether or not Bill had gotten a fix. He had. A neat X lay halfway between Barbuda and St. Barts, only slightly off their rhumb line. She looked at her watch. He had charted the fix only a half hour ago. Now where was he?

Nan climbed the companionway, nervous that she could see Bill nowhere, then she felt his bony hand draw her into the well of the cockpit. “What in the hell? . . .”

“Hush. Don’t say anything.”

“Bill. Oh, Bill. Listen, everything is all right. Just let me . . .”

He held her, gripping her arm above the elbow, the bones of his fingers firm through the crinkling foul weather gear. “We’re being followed,” he said.

“Followed?” This struck her as ridiculous, and she felt a sudden angry laugh rise in her throat. She was sick. She was tired. She was not exactly a spring chicken, and damn it all, it wasn’t even her watch yet.

“They don’t have any lights.”

“What?”

“No running lights. I saw them through the binoculars when I was doing my usual 360. I don’t want them to know how many

of us there are, or anything about us. I'm sure they've been looking through their binoculars too."

"Let me see," she said.

"Just stay low," he whispered. "All we need is for them to see an elderly woman and her senile husband. We're an easy target, my dear."

She took the binoculars from around his neck. "Where are they?" she asked.

"Off the port quarter. Stay down."

The port side dipped with the wind, making it difficult to stay out of sight. She crawled along the cockpit seat, then raised her head just enough to lift the binoculars over the weather cloths. Nothing. Nothing. Bingo. There was a boat, black shadow, lightless, parallel to their course and probably closing. She couldn't tell what kind of boat it was, a motorboat of some kind, a fishing boat perhaps, except where were its lights?

She remembered reading of pirates off Barbuda.

"You're right," she said, when she'd slumped back into the cockpit floor. "A boat with no lights."

"He's been getting closer ever since I saw him. That's why I called you."

"Now I wish we had a gun."

"You and me both. Tell you what. I'll get the flare gun and you make a call on the VHF. No, wait. They'll be listening. No offense, but it would be better for them to hear a man. You get the flare gun and I'll make the call."

"Where's the flare gun?"

"Under the sea berth. At least that's where I saw it last. I think. I'm not sure."

With the windvane pointing the boat toward St. Barts, they scurried below. There she held her fingers over the front of her flashlight, to dull its glare. She could hear Bill on the radio as she lay on her belly, rummaging in the storage space beneath the sea berth.

"Hello all stations. Hello all stations. This is the yacht . . ."  
He stopped.

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"*Souvenir*," she said out loud.

"Damn," he said. "This is the yacht *Souvenir*," he said, then stopped again. "I don't know what to say." He did not say this to her, by way of asking advice. He said it to the bulkhead, by way of admitting defeat. His mind had failed him, and in the dim red light of the instrument panel, she could see him clenching his fist.

She got up and stood beside him. "Try this," she said, as if making a suggestion. "This is the yacht *Souvenir* at 17 degrees, 45 minutes North, 62 degrees, 25 minutes West. We are being pursued by an unlit vessel. Please stand by to render possible assistance."

"I don't know," he said. "That sounds pretty vague."

"We may not have much time," she rasped. "If they board us, we at least want people to know our last position. How else can anyone help us?"

"How can anyone help us anyway?"

She looked at him.

"Go ahead," she said. "Give our position."

"This is yacht."

"*Souvenir*."

"*Souvenir*. Our position is."

"17 degrees, 45 minutes North."

"17 degrees, 45 minutes North."

"62 degrees, 25 minutes West."

"62 degrees, 25 minutes West."

"We are being pursued by an unlighted vessel."

"We seem to be pursued by an unlighted vessel. Anyone with information please call at . . . what's our phone number?"

"We don't have a phone number. This is a radio. Did you take your hand off the transmit button? Take your hand off the button."

"I wish we had a weapon," he said.

"Let me look for the flare gun again," she said.

"Oh, the flare gun. Good thinking."

"It was your idea," she said, as she dove back to the berth.

Just as she thrust her hand into the locker the boat lurched, a sickening shudder. Every movement and sound signifies in a boat at sea, and there is no sound worse than that of unexpected contact. They were alongside.

“Hurry!” Bill called. Had someone stepped aboard?

She aimed the flashlight at the brilliant mess. There it was in the back, an orange plastic cylinder. She grabbed it. The lid wouldn't budge. Were those footsteps on the deck, or the jib block banging?

Bill stared with a bewildered look, a look she had not seen on his face until now, of confusion, of fear. A look she knew would begin to take away . . . everything. Perhaps it would be best to let the pirates board, to let them do their worst — because what could be worse than this?

“Are we sinking?” Bill asked, puzzled.

“No. No, we're not sinking. Only there is a boat following us.”

“Are they friendly?”

“We don't know yet,” she said, her voice catching.

The lid came off. Inside was a flare gun, still wrapped in plastic, with three cartridges. She jammed one flare into the barrel; the other two she dropped into the pocket of her foul weather gear. Clicking the barrel back in place, she headed for the companionway. Bill grabbed her. “Where are you going?” he asked.

“I have to see what they're up to,” she said, trying to pull his hand away.

“Let me take the gun,” he said.

“No, I don't think that would be a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“I just don't.”

“Who's the skipper of this vessel?” he asked. Now she felt his eyes go hard in the dark.

“Let me get by,” she said.

“You're trying to take control,” he said. “You're trying to control me.”

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"Bill, this is not the time to argue."

"Who's arguing?" he said. "I'm not." He spoke as if he were addressing a stranger, his voice blank.

She felt another sickening bang as the nameless boat bounced against their hull. Before she could think, Bill turned and bolted up the companionway, as though the shock of the contact beckoned him. She followed. He was facing the black boat, which had dropped back slightly, clearly visible in the moonlight. As far as she could tell, no one had boarded, but to make certain she peered forward over the dodger.

Bill faced away from her, toward the black boat, yelled something lost to the wind. *Souvenir* plunged through the waves, pursuing her rhumb line to St. Barts. No one on the other boat said anything that she could hear; nor did she see anyone clearly, only a shadowy figure at the stern. She held the flare gun straight up in case it should go off, her elbow bent, the gun behind her head.

Bill pointed toward the other boat and then gestured away, signaling them to stand off. She did not think they could see him, until a shot rang out and Bill spun and dropped to the cockpit floor. Her first thought was: The worst has happened. The very thing she'd read about in sailing magazines and worried about all these years. She had feared this moment, but not expected it, not really. Now strangers had invaded from whatever world they inhabited out there to arrive here, in the fabric of her real life. Cocking the flare gun with her thumb, she leveled the barrel toward the spot where the shadowy figure stood and squeezed the trigger. White fire shot from her hand. The flash smacked directly into the black boat, then fell into the water, where it bubbled furiously. She spilled the empty shell to the cockpit floor and grabbed a second flare from her pocket. She loaded fast and aimed. She knew they would shoot at her now, though crouching behind the weather cloths she would be difficult to see. She aimed farther aft this time and as the black boat dipped into a trough she squeezed the trigger and once more flashed her white fire. This time the flare landed in the cockpit, where it sputtered and spun angrily.

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Now she could see the shadow in the cockpit become a man, brilliantly lit, with the flare at his feet. A second man emerged from the cuddy where he'd been steering. He ducked back inside and reappeared with a fire extinguisher. Already dark smoke billowed from the cockpit, evidence that more than the flare was burning. The black boat veered toward them now, and the first man jumped back toward the wheel to avoid a collision. At the same moment, she felt a jab in her ribs and spun around to see Bill with blood spreading from the wound in his shoulder. His right arm dangled uselessly, but in his left hand he gripped the red plastic jug they used to hold gasoline for the dinghy's outboard motor.

"Take the top off first," he said, catching his breath. Though they hadn't discussed this for many years, since their first trip alone in the islands, she knew exactly what he meant. Twisting the top off and yanking the metal chain out of the opening, she pulled herself up to the lifelines. As the black boat banged against them once more, she tossed the squat jug end over end into the wide cockpit. The man had extinguished the fire from the flare, with only a little smoke rising from charred wood. Now he set down the fire extinguisher and headed for the rifle leaning against the cuddy cabin, the rifle that had shot Bill. The first man was still at the wheel, trying to keep the two boats close but not colliding as they rose and fell in the waves. With the flare gun in her left hand, Nan fumbled for the third flare in her pocket and then jammed it into the barrel. The man grabbed the rifle and slid the bolt back and then forward. Her nausea returned as she watched the man drop to one knee as if he'd had military training. He aimed the barrel toward her.

She did not fire at the man, but at the back of the cockpit, where the gas can had rolled. The flare exploded from her hand, bounced inside the cockpit, and then lit up the night. She saw the man's face quite clearly, and heard the bullet whistle past her head. The aft end of the black boat rushed into flame. With no more flares, she collapsed behind the weather cloths and stared at the burning boat.

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Some of the gasoline, she thought, would drip into the bilge, taking volatile fumes as it went — and this could cause an explosion, possibly blow the main fuel tanks. They had talked about this long ago. She and Bill.

She turned to see his face lit by orange fire. He was holding his shoulder, his fingers red. His eyes looked almost blank, but the corners of his mouth twisted in a weak smirk. “Give ‘em hell,” he said.

She turned toward the black boat. It drifted astern, on fire, dipping up and down with the waves. *Souvenir* kept plunging ahead, as before.

For several minutes they watched the glow fall astern. Evidently the men had found another extinguisher. Already the glimmer was fading, and it seemed that there would be no explosion. The flare gun dangled from her wrist as she climbed down the companionway to get the first aid kit. She found it in their “grab bag,” kept near the companionway in case they had to abandon ship. She climbed back into the cockpit and slid next to Bill, who lay against the coaming. Had the bullet passed through, or was it lodged inside him somewhere? If it was lodged in his shoulder, was there anything she could do about it?

“End of story,” he said.

She met his gaze. He was looking straight at her now, very focused. “You’re going to be all right, Bill,” she said, but she had begun to tremble, and so the words did not come as strongly as she’d hoped.

She tried to pull away his foul weather jacket, but he yelled in pain, so she found scissors in the first aid kit and began to snip the jacket from the wound. Then she cut his T-shirt, exposing the hole in his shoulder. She knew little about such things, but the bullet seemed to have made a rather neat entry. What happened on the inside, she could not say. She poured hydrogen peroxide on a piece of gauze and wiped all around the wound, trying to sanitize the area as much as possible.

“Oh, man,” Bill rasped. “Oh, man.”

"You'll be okay," she told him again. "This may hurt some." She took a wad of sterile gauze and pushed it right into the wound, to try to stop the bleeding.

"Whoa," Bill cried. "Whoa."

She held the gauze in place as he squirmed and then she began to wrap more gauze around the shoulder, continuing until she reached the strip of cardboard at the end. She didn't know what else to do.

"Let's go below," she said, taking his good arm.

They looked downwind as they stood, for the other boat. With the fire out and no running lights, it would be hard to spot in the endless waves. Perhaps the black boat would leave them alone now. Perhaps they had run out of extinguishers. They wouldn't know she'd spent her white fire.

The companionway was too narrow for them to go together, so she went first, then helped him down. They banged their way arm in arm past the chart table to the sea berth, where he stumbled in and lay on his back. "Just lie still," she said. "Just lie still."

"Let's go home now," Bill said, not bothering to open his eyes. "I'm tired."

"Yes," she said. "We'll go home now. Try to sleep."

At the moment home was Gustavia, where she hoped they would understand her high school French. When they got a little closer she would try to call on the VHF, but now no one would likely hear her except the black boat — and she didn't want them to hear anything.

How much farther was it? She pulled herself to the chart table and wrote down the bright green numbers from the GPS display. Then she carefully measured out the latitude and longitude, placing a neat X on the chart. She walked the silver compasses to the chart's edge. About twenty-eight miles out, she figured.

Bill's breathing came heavy but regular. She needed to look around and climbed to the cockpit with the binoculars. As she hunched toward the wheel she kicked an empty flare shell. It thunked and rolled across the fiberglass cockpit. Crouched low

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behind the weather cloths, she brought the binoculars to her eyes. In the peaks of dark waves she searched for the black boat. One after another, black shapes dissolved into oblivion as wave after wave formed and then moved on. After a while she grew dizzy from looking.

In the east the sky gave the very first hint that she would see another day. She checked the compass heading, still right on the money, and then leaned back against the coaming, watching for the dawn. *Souvenir* surged ahead. Whether or not Bill survived the gun-shot wound, she knew she would soon have to learn to live without him. For the first time since her early twenties, when they had been married in the university chapel in Charlottesville, so very long ago, she felt that she could.