



Robin Stevenson

A
Thousand
Shades
of
Blue

One

Sailing in the Bahamas is a dream come true, right? Clear blue water, suntanning every day, cocktails on the deck with ice cubes clinking, tropical fish, brightly colored coral reefs.

Here's the reality: That clear blue water never stops moving. The boat doesn't always rock you gently. Sometimes it throws you around so violently you'd sell your soul to get to shore. More often it just drives you crazy with its constant motion and keeps you slightly off balance. The sun burns your skin. The refrigeration breaks down, and there are no ice cubes. Everything tastes salty: your hair, your lips, the tips of your fingers. The coral reefs are fragile and damaged, and the fish that swim over them can carry ciguatera, a toxin which damages your nervous system so that heat feels like ice and cold burns like fire.

Nothing is what it seems. Nothing.

I'm sitting on the foredeck of our sailboat. This is what passes for privacy now. My parents and my younger

brother, Tim, are twenty feet behind me. They can see me if they stand up, but at least I can't hear them over the sound of the waves breaking against the hull and the wind luffing the badly trimmed jib. Sailing only looks quiet and peaceful when you're watching from the shore. I lie down, close my eyes against the sun and try not to think about what happened back in Georgetown. After all, we've left. We've sailed away. Georgetown, the small Bahamian community and cruising hub, is behind us now.

"Rachel," Dad yells. "We could use a little help back here."

You'd think between the three of them, they could manage. I stand up and make my way back to the cockpit, holding on to the rigging as the boat rises and falls beneath me. The wind has picked up, and it's getting a little rough out here.

I sit down on the bench beside my brother. "What's up?"

Mom is at the helm, standing with her hands gripping the big wheel. Dad is frowning at the chart.

"Change of plans," he says. "Calabash Bay isn't going to be safe with the winds shifting to the west. We're going to go in here instead."

I scan the low barren shoreline of Long Island. "In where?" All I can see is rocks.

Dad stabs at the chart with his finger. "Joe Sound."

Tim reads aloud from the guidebook. "*A very protected anchorage with a narrow entrance channel.*"

"No shit," I say, staring at the rocks. "So narrow we can't see it. Are you sure we're in the right spot?"

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Dad nods. “Absolutely.”

“Right there,” Mom says suddenly, pointing. “God, it’s really narrow. Mitch, are you sure this is the best plan?”

“Unless anyone else has a better idea, or feels like sailing all night,” Dad says. “It’ll be dark in a couple of hours.”

Tim and I drop the sails and tie them down quickly. As we get closer to shore, the channel looks even narrower. The waves behind us push us forward, and the water changes from blue to green: It’s getting shallower.

“I don’t like the look of this at all,” Mom says.

“Let’s not have negative attitudes.” Dad glances down at the chart again. “It should be perfectly straightforward.”

“Perhaps you’d like to take the helm then.” Her voice is tight and brittle.

He takes the wheel from her without saying anything.

Tim picks up the guidebook again. “*The channel is six feet deep at its center. Follow the imaginary line into the calm waters of Joe Sound.*” He snorts. “Follow the imaginary line?”

“Get up on the foredeck, you two. Guide us in.” Dad’s voice is tense.

Tim and I go and stand at the bow, gripping the fore-stay tightly. I try to find the bluest, deepest water and signal to Dad. It’s not as easy as it sounds. There are a thousand shades of blue. Anyone can tell the difference between water that’s two feet deep and water that’s ten feet deep, but trying to tell the difference between the subtle shades of turquoise that differentiate four feet and six feet is a bit more difficult.

And yet essential. Our boat needs five feet of water to stay afloat.

“A little more to starboard,” I yell, pointing.

Tim is shaking his head. “This is crazy. There isn’t enough water.”

Once we’re in the channel, there’ll be no way to turn around. The rocks on either side of the channel are jagged and sharp, and I can’t help agreeing with Tim: This is crazy.

Dad is coming to the same conclusion. “It’s too narrow,” he shouts. “I’m turning back.” The bow of the boat starts to swing back to port.

I look down through the water and see the yellowish sheet of rock on the bottom. “It’s too late to turn,” I yell. “It’s too shallow.”

There’s an awful crunch, and the boat stops dead. My forehead smashes into the bow rail, and Tim grabs me to keep me from falling overboard. Then there’s another awful crunch, and another. The waves are lifting us up and flinging us back down onto the rocks. The whole boat shudders horribly with each impact.

Dad throws the engine into reverse. It roars, and we lift and crash and then somehow, just as suddenly, we’re free and floating again. I point wildly to starboard. Dad puts *Shared Dreams* into forward, the boat swings back into the channel, and we slip through into the still blue water beyond. It looks like a wide shallow lake: acres of pale blue water surrounded by beach and scrub and low hills.

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We set the anchor. I rub my forehead; a tender bump is starting to form where I whacked it on the rail. I figure everyone must be shaken by what happened, but no one says anything about it. Dad's pretty quiet. I bet he's furious with himself. Mom and Tim stow the genoa and tie the cover on the main sail, and Dad jumps in the water to make sure the bottom of the boat is okay.

As for me, I'm starving. It's my turn to cook—we have a schedule for absolutely everything. I'm stirring noodles into boiling water when Dad climbs back on board and stands dripping in the cockpit.

“Bad news, folks,” he says. “The rudder's pretty badly cracked. No way we can fix that without getting the boat hauled out of the water. And there's no marina here. We'll have to sail it back to Georgetown.” He shrugs, like it's not such a big deal. Like it's not the end of the fucking world.

A dull pain thuds in my chest. Tim and I stare at each other. The water in my pot starts to boil over, and I pull it off the burner, slopping scalding hot water and noodles down the side of my hand. I swear under my breath. It hurts, but at least it's a distraction.

Tim chews on the edge of his finger. “Isn't there some way we can fix it here?”

“No, it's a big job.” Dad rubs his chin. “I'll slap some underwater epoxy on tonight to help it hold together for the sail back. We'll head to Georgetown in the morning.”

I want to scream at him. I want to tell him that Georgetown is absolutely the last place we should go.

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He has no idea that this stupid crack in the rudder could destroy our already messed-up family. And I can't tell him without destroying it myself.