

Come Sail Away

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WIND WHIPPED HIS HAIR. SALT STREAKED his face and rimmed his lips. And she swam alongside, keeping up with his boat, passing him so casually that it almost seemed as if he were moored or drifting backward and not skimming across the surface at 8 knots. When she catapulted herself up and out of the water, leaping across his bow, he could hear her call out—“Mark? Stop!”—before she dove in along his other side. Then she breached the water again. “Stop, you dumbass!” she managed to say before diving back in, her webbed toes flexing then pointing before all of her went under.

At this, Mark loosened the rope and cut his speed. The sail went slack and he secured it to the mast with his only bungee as he sank to a squat and peered over the side. He leaned and looked deep until he saw her face emerge to meet his.

“Stop, Mark,” she repeated. “Those guys don’t know what they’re doing.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is.”

“It’s not true, Beth.”

“Listen to me!”

“Yeah, no thanks.” Mark was . . . upset. He stroked his facial hair, coarse and untrimmed, adding twenty years to his nineteen. “What do you know, Beth? Nothing! Might as well follow those assholes.” He pouted. He couldn’t help it. Mark, was Mark. He wasn’t The Rock in *San Andreas* or Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*. He wasn’t a planner or a fighter and definitely not into sacrificing things or going without. He was a sailor with a layman’s understanding of

economics and marketing. Just last week, his main goal in life was to win the Bucky Danes Davenport trophy in the Laser 2 Division—and to get fucked up with Beth on the beach after winning. But then this apocalypse happened. He’d spent the past two days being sad about his family and was still coming to grips with the lame end to Race Week. Now? His main goal was to have a new goal. Literally any goal.

“They have to have a plan. Right? This is so stupid.” His father—Mark Senior—he’d have a new goal already. If he’d survived, he’d rally all surviving humans into a giant flotilla, give them purpose, divvy up rations, sell them stock. “Lance. He’s over there. He’s captain of the sailing team. Captain, ya know? If anyone has a plan it’s him.”

“Lance is still trying to call The Club, Mark. He’s trying to call The Club and complain that he literally can’t see The Club. Like, doesn’t matter that it’s a bazillion feet below water now.” On the word water, Beth swished around and pointed at all the black dots on the horizon. “Those jerk-offs you want to follow? They want to sail to Denver. Denver! From New York. Are you listening? So stupid. Just because you ski there doesn’t mean you should sail there. Like, folks are all saying Denver because no one can remember any other cities that are up high, right? There are so many up-high cities. So many.”

“Like what?”

“I can’t remember. But there are so many high-up cities.” Beth spit out salt water. Her tongue felt thick. “No maps. No Google Maps.

No Waze.” Water bounced off her shoulders when she shrugged. “Besides, you, we, don’t have enough Dasani left to make it to Denver. Am I right?”

“So?” His lips, chapped and scabbed, hurt. “So? Fine . . . you’re right.” Beth was the only person Mark had ever acknowledged, ever, as being right about anything.

Sailing dinghies, much like the one Mark crouched on now, dotted the ocean as far as the eye could see, thousands of feet between each. It was as if the earth was a baby-blue strawberry and Mark and his fellow sailors, the seeds. Based on their current perspective of the Manhattan skyline, they were no longer in the Long Island Sound, but sailing over what used to be Brooklyn. “Why not the Rockies, though? Denver is fine. It’s just . . . it’s fine. We could literally be there in a few days.” The way he said that. It was blatantly obvious to his only listener that Mark didn’t believe any of the words meandering across his tongue and tripping over his lips. But they, Mark and Beth, needed to talk now before rejoining the others. Discuss a few ideas. Come to a few conclusions. Vent. They needed to get all pissy with each other, as best friends often do, before taking up with those loose acquaintances—all of whom were winging it, none of whom knew any better what to do than anyone else. No clear leader had emerged in their merry band of yuppy sailors. Most, including Mark and Beth, wished their patriarchs and matriarchs were still alive and in control of everything. Maybe buying their way out of this situation somehow. In this apocalypse, those least capable of decision-making needed to make a few decisions.

“Denver’s population just increased by 10,000,000 percent.” Beth could tread water indefinitely, though even she knew it unlikely that she could swim as far as Denver. She loved Mark but hated being on that boat with him. So moody, that guy.

Mark was . . . upset. He focused on his BFF who looked to be standing in the ocean, perfectly erect, eyes on his eyes. Looked like she could place one elbow on the surface of the water and rest her head in that hand, while

drumming her fingers out of boredom with the other, tapping those white caps with French tips. She could literally tread forever. It’s why she’d been captain of the swim team. Head lifeguard at the club. Why she’d won every local, state, and national accolade possible for swimming, and was only excluded from Olympic trials due to a birth defect she refused to correct with surgery.

“Everyone who got to Denver already—and, yeah, that would be everyone but us—they have all the canned goods. All of them! Haven’t you ever watched a zombie movie? Everyone wants the canned goods when things get super bad. Look. Over there. See the city? Or what’s left? What’s sticking up out of the water? That’s where we need to go. Not Denver.”

How did she have enough breath to speak that fast? “I’m thirsty,” Mark said.

“Duh. I know.” Beth stumbled in her constant treading as empathy and dread pulled at her cheeks and lips. Weighing down her mood and gripping her stomach with fierce anxiety.

Death. Death and water were everywhere now. It really sucked.

Mark saw her frown, but it didn’t make him sad. All he could think was that as she bobbed in the water, the pearl earrings she’d worn since fifth grade looked particularly natural on her right now. “I’m hungry,” Mark said.

“Dorito bags keep floating by.”

“Nah. No more Doritos.” Blue bags of Cool Ranch were everywhere. Blue took over everything: borderless oceans, airplane-free skies, and now his least-favorite snack chip. Mark figured an 18-wheeler of Cool Ranch Doritos must have cracked open with the tidal surge. So much water. So fast. No warning. Mark wondered if Beth missed her family. He hadn’t asked. She seemed okay, so far.

“Well . . .” Beth dipped her chin to her chest and peered into the water right there at her abdomen. “I think . . . I think I could get you a fish or something. There’s one, no, four big ones right there by my . . .”

“No. No more fish.”

“Um, really? That’s literally all we have is fish, Mark. Fish and Doritos.”

NOAA, the National Oceanic and

Atmospheric Administration, had no explanation as to why those who hadn't drowned were now stuck eating fish and Doritos. How searing heat domes had formed so quickly over Greenland and Antarctica. How could NOAA not see them coming? NOAA had one job. One! Predicting when the atmosphere would and could trap scorching hot, humid air was literally their only skillset. The surviving scientists resided on floating labs now. Nudging glasses up sweaty noses, looking at numbers that either made no sense or that they couldn't, didn't, want to wrap their heads around. Every question was met with a shrug, an exasperated wide-eyed stare, a terse laugh, a loosened tie. The speed at which the ice plates had melted, the seas rose, and most died was 100 percent Armegeddeny. Aliens were to blame, some said. Or a solar flare. Always with the solar flares! This time, NOAA couldn't downplay the flare idea. They couldn't laugh that conspiracy theory off.

"Mark? We so can't rejoin them." Beth nodded at the black dots in the distance, at all the other sailors and swimmers trying to figure it out. "You know that guy, Reggie, he thinks he's all that, but he isn't. We're better off without him or any of those stuck-up men-children. They're just gonna hold us back."

A privileged few, like Mark and Beth, survived in the coastal towns since they were already in the water. The heat domes appeared during Race Week at the Larchmont Yacht Club. They appeared and melted polar ice faster than if God had popped earth in a celestial air fryer. Presumably it was Race Week in other parts of New York or the world as many sailors—team and individual—along with a few swimmers and kayak-paddling lifeguards, now dotted the ocean trying to figure out how to make do without shade or Wi-Fi. Spectators drowned, but their coolers survived; airtight Igloos and Yetis filled with Sancerre, cheeses, and sparkling water had drifted within reach during those first few hours before sinking. Now, just Cool Ranch Doritos.

Tiny boats made of glass-reinforced plastic survived. They didn't break apart when the waves pushed all larger vessels landward and

into other buildings or yachts or people or mountains and crushed them or were crushed against them. Swimmers, like Beth, fared well, for now. Word on the ocean was that Michael Phelps led a battalion of swimmers or fish-gatherers off the coast of where California used to be. Michael Phelps. Now, that guy knew how to lead. A stand-up guy, Mark thought, like my dad.

Beth and Mark drifted past the still-blinking tips of the Brooklyn Bridge.

"Fine." Mark leaned over and fished a bag of Cool Ranch from the water. "Let's head toward the Empire State Building. It has working windows."

"It does?"

"Of course it does."

"I guess you would know."

"Yeah. Like, my second home, right?" He crunched a Dorito and winced. Too much salt for one with so little water and no Mountain Dew. "Damned fine office."

"Yeah. Damned fine office." Beth bobbed in the water while Mark set his snack aside, unfurled and adjusted his sail.

Those who survived had an uncanny love of water. Surfers made it. They'd all sensed a wave was coming. A really good one. They hadn't run from it. They grabbed their boards and ran toward it. But no surfers knew that once they caught that wave and rode it inland, they would never reach solid ground. Because the wave they caught was now all that there was.

Beth swam and Mark sailed past the upper half of the Woolworth Building and saw their reflections in the glass. High noon was an unflattering light. Again, Mark was . . . upset. Beth chose not to glance at herself more than once. Sunburned skin, the puffiness and hue, looked monstrous and unnatural.

The scientists, those blindsided at NOAA, had been wrong all along. The melting of the polar ice caps wasn't going to happen slowly over time just because of climate change. For a while, sure, they melted. Ice had always melted. For hundreds of thousands of years, it all melted and refroze and melted again. But then those heat domes.

People everywhere locked their doors, figuring they'd be safe at home. From rising water. There's that classic scene in most adventure movies where our hero or heroine is trapped in an airtight room that slowly begins to fill. That hero starts to frantically search for a way out, clawing at the seams where the walls meet or pounding on windows, trying to crack glass and can't. They can only go up, so they do. They go up until their lips brush the ceiling. They float and open mouths clamor for that last breath of air. They are up with nowhere else to go but float and face their deaths. That had been every other human being on earth last week. Hundreds of millions of corpses floated with their faces pressed against their ceilings, their mouths open, their lips pursed, stretched, gray.

Even airline pilots drowned. This somehow seemed silly, as in why not fly away? But then where to land . . .

The New York Stock Exchange gleamed white in the water below them. The Canyon of Heroes now resigned to being a trench. All traders drowned. No one had ever liked to leave money. Writers all died instantly because arranging words on the page, grasping for that perfect catch phrase to describe the end of the world, couldn't save them from the end of the world. *Hasta La Vista*, Fish. I'll be back.

As he tacked in line with what might be Broadway, Mark contemplated food other than raw cod or Doritos. Having direction helped bring his appetite back. Could canned goods survive this kind of water pressure? He honestly didn't know. Could Beth dive far enough down to get a can and find out? Now that they were floating above Chelsea, there had to be a deli nearby. Or a grocery, somewhere down there. It would be a matter of her holding her breath long enough to find a can opener. Or did one need an opener? Were there other ways to open cans? He'd opened so few and just didn't know. Mark contemplated chowder and other soups and comfort foods. A salty crust filled the red lines on his face and made it harder to smile.

"What's so funny?" Beth asked. She

alternated between the butterfly and backstroke and always kept one eye on him. Her webbed feet looked so much like a tail when pointed and pressed together like that.

"Today's pizza day at The Club. You know, when the truck pulls up and we can order whatever personal size we want."

"Holy yum." Beth nodded, indicating the windows on their left. The Empire State Building loomed large, offering immediate relief from the sun as Mark grabbed onto the granite corner. He held fast. They looked up and craned their necks to see over the closest windowsill.

"Do you have a credit card?" She asked.

"Why? We can't buy—"

"Just give it."

He gave it. Beth jimmied Mark's Visa against the window locks and opened their way into a twenty-seventh-floor office space. Mark peered in. "Sweet," he said, until he noticed all the haggard employees lining the walls. "Um . . . may we come in?" He grabbed his open bag of Doritos and tossed it toward them as a peace offering. They all looked at each other as if they were mentally deliberating pros and cons of letting strangers inside, even if those strangers did have snacks.

A tall, shoeless woman in a haute but disheveled suit nodded. Her nodding put everyone else in the room at ease. She, apparently, knew how to lead. "Come in." She reached out and took the Doritos. "You're our . . . first visitors."

"Oh," said Mark.

"Hi," said Beth.

"So great that you have a boat," said the leader.

Mark and Beth tied the dinghy to a pipe just inside and to the left of the windowsill. Everyone scooted back as they hoisted themselves up and climbed through, wobbling. Especially Beth. The floor felt uncertain. They both kept adjusting their stance even though they no longer needed to.

"You both look like you could use some water."

This woman knew how to read a room,

Mark thought. She's so a leader. Never having been great at sarcasm, Mark thought this genuinely.

"We have a good-sized stash of cooler refills on this floor." She smiled, though her smile belied her unease. Clearly neither she nor anyone else in this room had processed the dire straits they found themselves in. No one here quite understood who or what they'd lost. "It's . . . it's good that you have a boat to find more drinking water? When we need."

"Sure," said Mark. "Where's the bathroom?"

"Down the hall and to the left," said the leader. "Here." She reached into her pocket. "You'll need the key."

Mark took the key and left. Beth followed, fully conscious that none of their new acquaintances could take their eyes off her webbed toes.

"How can you not know where the bathroom is?" She whispered.

"I know where the bathroom is."

In the hallway, Beth nudged Mark with her

elbow and whispered again. "You just pissed a few minutes ago, no? Over Macy's?"

"So?" Mark passed the bathrooms and made for the stairs. Beth followed.

They climbed six stories, up to the thirty-third floor. Once there, they found more employees, each one just as shellshocked as the last. Both sobbing and laughter could be heard coming from somewhere. They avoided the stares of those lining the hallway, and when they reached Granite Financial, Mark barged in like he owned the place.

"Who're you?" demanded the office manager.

"I'm going to my dad's office." Mark said. Beth followed.

Employees parted like the red sea, allowing Mark to approach the prime corner real estate that belonged to his dad. He opened the door and asked those squatting along the perimeter to leave. They did. Why wouldn't they? Without thinking, Mark sat in the buttery soft leather chair and swiveled to face the East River, which

had swelled, overflowed, and now engulfed all of Queens and Midtown Manhattan.

Beth stood behind his chair and looked in the same direction as Mark. She squinted at the water, the expanse of unending blue that blended with sky so thoroughly that it all appeared to be the same. The sameness hurt her eyes. It made her sleepy. She got bored.

"I'm going to return the bathroom key," she said and nabbed it from his half-open palm. "And get some water." With that, she left. Mark didn't even hear his father's door close after her.

He crossed and recrossed his legs. He noticed his father's binoculars and wondered if the old man had used them to watch birds or women. He picked them up and looked at the water, since water was the only thing to look at really.

In the distance, a flotilla was forming. Boats were bonding together. Sharing supplies. Stretching out sails to block the sun while plans were made and needs were taken into consideration. Someone, possibly that guy,

Reggie, kept pointing toward where Mark sat now.

"Water, water everywhere . . ." Mark murmured. It was the only part of the only quote he'd ever remembered, though he didn't know who wrote it or what it was from. ". . . but you can't drink it. Can't drink any of that water, water."

Mark was upset. The flotilla outside was large and clearly not heading to Denver. He knew this might be important. He knew he should say something to Beth. Or maybe the leader on the twenty-seventh floor.

But right now, it just felt good to sit in a leather chair. Leather from a land animal that, except for those few cows that maybe survived in Denver and other high-up cities that he couldn't remember, could very well be extinct. He didn't care, honestly, what The Rock or Bruce Willis would do right now, under these end-of-days circumstances. Mark would so tell people about the encroaching flotilla in a few minutes.

He would.

He totally would. 🦎