

The Death of 59

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Tomorrow I enter into a new realm, a category to which I must yield. Before I take that last step out of my past...there is regret. Today I sensed and sniffed what tomorrow holds and I did not like it.

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No one on board, a boat drifts away once the ropes loosen from the cleats on the dock. The snug feeling of mooring at a packed marina fades as distance increases. On the open water the wind and currents move the craft along. If there is fate, the destination is unknown.

I arrived at the dock, the watery vacancy apparent. Other boats remained tied secure. Little laps of water and slight shifts of hulls surrounded me. In a solitude I hadn't recognized for ten years, defeat entered. The rising sun played on the nearby chrome fittings, spars, cleats, wood and fiberglass. No boat owners but myself had slapped shoes on the gangways to the marina's empty crafts. No routines of preparation, no orders, no husbands and wives exchanging duties. No barking, excited dog wagged and waited. The silence I alone owned chilled me. *I should've doubled-checked my sailors' knots, tugged each tighter. No. That's impossible, I know I tied those right.*

I looked west on the water and saw one vessel. "That's it. Damn it!"

This fairly sturdy vessel of mine for nearly 60 years now floated almost out of sight. Though sail down and motor not running, my small ship continued unmanned. The 32-foot metal spar pivoted like an unused flagpole. Unseen, the heavy keel mindlessly kept its commitment.

Depressed, I sat down on the dock, untied my deck shoes, set them on the wood planking and dangled my feet in the cool lake. My uncaring wristwatch ticked—not knowing that each movement indicted me. I slid my sunglasses from my hairline to the bridge of my nose. Amongst the uninhabited marina of various sizes of watercraft—good, impressive, wonderful or not—I was like a dull colored, plastic, unused dinghy—hull side up. The noisy motorcycles on liquid which make foamy white wakes—jet skies—sat silent like drowsy horses in stables waiting for riders.

I turned away from my vessel on the loose. I needed help. I needed a boat with a fast motor to take me to it. Then I'd steer back here. Though the tree-lined rocky shore still appeared a safe distance away, I feared a shipwreck. The tiny white hull stood out against the shadowed trees while the day's sunlight remained elsewhere.

While waiting for my inevitable ride I thought of my boat's mast, rudder, toe-rails and boom. Memories mingled with history of my hobby of buoyancy and sailing. Swimming, water

skiing, snorkeling and those sudden summer storms filled my mind—I swear I could even smell suntan lotion. Lake voyages through the years, children growing, learning to swim, life vests coming off, diving, tubing, sunburning. Learning to steer, learning to raise flags and most of all—learning to enjoy nature’s invention of water. One didn’t need a ship of any size to appreciate the presence of a lake. But a floating or motorized craft could take you places. Navigating inlets, bays and jutting shorelines, the children matured in such responsibilities.

My mix of thoughts were interrupted when I heard flip-flops approach. A curly, blond-haired young man, colored by an enviable tan, interrupted me.

Confident, with fine white teeth showing, he pronounced, “Another fine day at the lake, huh dude?” This man didn’t look at me when he spoke. No, he surveyed the lake and shore. In his hands he held common gear for the water—minus an ice chest. Staring at my posture and feet in the empty slip, he asked. “Goin’ out on the water?” He tilted his head. “Got one of those paddle boards or you got sumthin’ with speed?”

I hesitated. “Yes. Yes! That was my plan. To go out on the water—I mean. But, my 30 foot sailboat got away from me. Apparently I didn’t lash it down correctly last night and it drifted off early this morning.” I pointed, but the vessel had passed from sight.

The young man’s face scrunched, he squinted his eyes to see where I aimed, and he then moved his head forward an inch or two as if that would solve the problem. He eyed the empty slip. “Ahh...it’s really gone man! Wow. Not good. Got a plan before she drifts who-knows-where or wrecks?”

I stood and introduced myself, “I’m Mark. My name is Mark...and you?”

“Hmm...oh, nice to meet you, Mark. I’m Jim.”

“To answer your question, I’ve been waiting for a fellow boater to volunteer and help chase her down.” I shrugged toward where I’d last seen my boat. Frustrated I added, “Must’ve gone into one of those inlets.”

The stranger cocked his head. “If you can wait a few, I can take you on my jet ski over there. Wha’d yah say?” He fidgeted, arranging the items in his arms.

“Sure! I’m not going anywhere. Can’t!”

Soon I saddled myself on the back of his jet ski. I looked for proper handles to grip, but what the manufacturer provided barely defined a handle. We were off. This driver’s speed frightened me. I’d never been on one of these excuses for a motorcycle. My body was slipping little by little toward the rear. If I lost my grip I knew the water was harmless. I just wasn’t sure how quickly the driver would realize his passenger had left. I also believed that this youngster drove as fast as he could in order to dump me and get a good first big laugh of the day. He made ‘S’ curves and semi-circles swooping and swaying, accented with laughing and hollering. I strained my fists as tight as possible. In misery and hope we finally neared where I had last spotted my sailboat over 20 minutes ago. He slowed and the wake overran the running boards

and flushed cool water over our feet.

Turning us to the south he shouted, "Not here dude." Stretching out his arm he added, "I'll pedal us into this wide inlet coming up."

I nodded. "Sure." Then I saw the white hull. A young woman in a bikini held a coffee mug as she walked on deck. Someone let the anchor out. A small child in an orange life-vest jumped overboard, a cry of glee following into the water. A man yelled something.

"Yours?" He asked while revving the engine in neutral.

I didn't know what to say. Of course it wasn't mine. On the stern I read in bright orange and blue letters a boisterous *Hullabaloo*. No. This wasn't right. I put a hand above my eyes and scanned the lake and other visible shores. The lake's 45 mile length and width of 15 miles in parts was no comfort.

"Yours? Yo' bro' want off, Mark?"

Strained, I answered "No. No. I don't know these people or the boat."

"Not the *Hullabaloo*? What then?"

"I, I ah I'm, was, am, a sign painter—years ago, I mean. My boat is called '1956.' Sort of turquoise blue script and jade greenish shadow with off-white highlights." I recalled the memory of my new boat and its naked white stern. "Did it myself years ago."

"Sounds rad." After a long silence he asked, "So where to? I got gas."

I couldn't believe my thoughts or lines of reasoning. I had nothing to say—yet.

"What's with the numbers '1956' mean. Sumthin' important?"

That perked me up. "My age. My birthday. Tomorrow is my 60th." Dumbfounded, head down, I mumbled, "Jim, thanks. Take me back to the marina will yah."

"Sure thing." He slowly drove us out into the open water before gunning it in a straight line.

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I'm 59 years old today, March 7th, and tomorrow all of my 50s will be over. 60 and all those other 60s will keep coming. I wanted, wished that is, to race back over the past 10 years and inspect the good, the wonderful, the unexpected. I wanted to calculate decisions' fruit and folly. Each 365 days had created a linear year taking 10 of them to make up those 50s. Could I weed out the stupid, poison the seeds of wrongs, take back and reverse the foolish? Could I—did I maintain the fun, the happy, the best of me? 3,650 days now presented themselves ready to hand me off to 60—and I didn't like it.

* * *

And now I remembered how I did tie 1956 to the dock...correct, just as I taught my kids

to do. The ropes hadn't let loose. No. Someone had stolen the boat in the night and had headed far south. No doubt never to be recovered; thieves haul them to another state, remove the name and sell them. I can use the insurance money to help buy a new one.

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The years? Never to return. Redeem? Some perhaps. What's ahead is what matters and there will be wakes, summer storms and beautiful lingering sunsets.