PROLOGUE

I am not prepared to be alone at the helm of the forty-five foot catamaran, if you can call being in the company of six teenage girls and two other pre-menopausal women "alone."

My two nieces and four other godchildren sprawl on the front of the boat, counting out how many bottles of nail polish we have on board. No kidding, we have seventy-five.

Before we'd left the dock, Peter and Elvay, who run the charter company, had spent a couple of hours showing my friends, Marian and Leslie, and me the boat's operating systems: engine, electrical, radio, refrigeration, bilge pumps, anchors and heads. These are the parts I know just enough about to know what I don't know. I do know that in fine print, the rental company has reserved the right to ruin our vacation. I'd submitted the required resumé with my deposit, putting a star by the fact that Bill and I had sailed sixteen hundred miles of open ocean alone a few years back, but a rental company always reserves the right not to rent. If Peter or Elvay conclude that I'm a land-lubbing klutz, they can require us to hire a captain (probably a guy) for the entire week.

First, Elvay demonstrates the gear shifts for the twin engines. Forward, we are told, is the red knob in the forward position; reverse is the red knob in the opposite position. So far, I'm feeling rather expert. He shows us the toilets, and sternly reminds us there will be a $75 surcharge if the staff has to unclog one; a single roll of single-ply toilet paper has been placed in each head.

"We'll probably need more," Leslie says, and she is flatly denied.

"Forget it," I tell her. Rather than being as startled as she is by Elvay's rudeness to a paying customer, I remember the time during our ocean passage when our boat's head overflowed in the front while kerosene leaked from the stove in the rear. I agree wholeheartedly with Elvay and am tempted to give back *all* the rolls of tissue on board.

"Well," she recovers from his rebuke, "at least we won't have any trouble with guys leaving the toilet seat up!"

Marian, Leslie and I follow Elvay down into the engine room, which, although twice as large as what I'm used to, also looks familiar.

"The alternator--that's where the electricity comes from?" he begins. Since I haven't been treated like a dumb blonde since I was a child, I bite my lip to prevent my smile from turning mean.

"Of course," he quickly corrects himself. "Uh, you know."

He seems quite uncertain whether in fact I do know.

Under Elvay's curious tutelage, I practice finding the dipstick and checking the oil. He shows me how to switch the water tanks and test the batteries, and points out which engine belts are most likely to show signs of fraying. Obviously he has done this on-board orientation hundreds of times, but I gather from the question marks at the end of all his sentences that he is accustomed to talking boat-talk man-to-man.

I nod my intellectual understanding in Elvay's direction because I've heard all the technical terms before, but my stomach has a lot of questions about what might happen if push comes to shove and I have to implement any of his detailed explanations. My self-doubts aside, all I want is for him not to have any doubts that we girls can handle this boat. Sideways, I see Marian and Leslie looking at me and then staring at each other. Since they are both fresh-

water, small boat sailors, they don't appreciate that engines are the trickiest part of big-boat-handling. It occurs to me that I may have to convince them, too.

With feigned casualness, I look Elvay straight in the eye and say, "OK, got it. Next?"

Peter had said Elvay would run through the sails and rigging with us while we were on the way to our first stop, Marina Cay. In the company's brochure, it was a touted selling point--in the BIG TYPE--that they provided a captain for the first leg of the charterer's vacation; in fact, the brochure had said, they *required* it. I'd found this reassuring. While Elvay is finishing his lunch, Peter backs *Fahrenheit* out of her slip. When we are just about at the mouth of the cove leading into the Sir Frances Drake Channel, which separates the main string of British islands, Elvay comes speeding up in his dinghy. I assume the plan is for Peter to get off and for Elvay to get on. With a flourish, Peter hands me the wheel and hops off. Elvay and Peter juice up the dinghy motor, wave the happy 'thank-God-they're-gone' wave of the tired tour director, and roar full-throttle away.

So here we are. The Caribbean sun mocks our winter-white skin as Marian lathers the latest technology in UV protection on Leslie's back. On our left the dense trees of a mangrove step down into the waters of Maya Cove as if on stilts, their red roots gnarled beneath a dark green canopy. Ancient pelicans and stark white egrets hide among waxy leaves the size of a lady's fan. In time, the mangrove will reclaim the ambiguous shore; for now, it frames the intrigue of these islands, the full-spectrum-blue space between them.

"I can't believe we're really here!" Leslie squeals.

"Girls," she yells into the wind, "did you put on sunscreen?"

The girls don't hear her, and she shrugs. Marian gives Leslie back her bottle, and Leslie comes at me like a mother with a tissue at a kid's drippy nose.

"I'm OK!" I shout in self-defense, and Leslie slaps another glob of white paste on her already ghostly face.

It's just after Christmas, and the easterlies in the British Virgin Islands are unusually benign, fifteen to twenty knots. This is, by choice, my first trip here without my husband, Bill; after fifteen years of sailing these islands annually with him, it is my first time as captain; my first all-female crew. No husbands, no men. Two mothers and me.

Fahrenheit is also my first catamaran, rented from a company at Maya Cove, on Tortola. I'm used to sailing our own thirty-two foot boat, *Vikara*, a deep-keeled ocean-going sloop, heavy and slow as a tank. Despite her four staterooms and five heads, *Fahrenheit* sits lightly on two pontoons. She promises to be fast, but at twenty-four feet across, she feels as wide as a barge. She has a three-foot wheel and from the stern I'm too short to see her finger-like tips.

When he is about two-fists tall, Peter stands up in the speeding dinghy and screams something unintelligible at us, his words blowing away. In a panic, I clutch the helm, sure that he is warning me off a rock, or worse, an oncoming boat.

"Close your hatches," he shouts again, and I finally understand: we women have failed Sailboat Housekeeping 101. The port-hole covers are wide open, airing out the staterooms below decks. A sea wave could pour through the boat windows, soaking the berths; if that happens, they will not thoroughly dry out during the week. Salt water is wetter than fresh water, and a soggy bunk is--almost forever-- a soggy bunk.

Gripping the wheel, I shout my first order, "Close the hatches!"   One of the mothers jumps to obey.

Experienced sailors, true sailors, wouldn't have left the dock without everything on board being battened down, closed tight, stowed away. It's the captain's responsibility to make sure the boat is ready. In fact, I'd given a mild form of the order back at the dock, telling the girls to stow our huge basket of fruit and their radios, books, suntan lotions and other potentially lethal projectiles.   I was ignored the way a flight attendant is ignored when asking passengers to stow their carry-ons under the seat in front. I'd decided that my definition of "ship-shape"--a definition I'd learned from Bill--was a tad anal for this group and they would soon learn for themselves what I meant by "stowed." I'd settled, even though I'm not a mother, for "good enough."

I am sunburned with embarrassment, but I'm the only ocean sailor on board and the only one with enough sailing ego to be hurt by Peter's parting shout. My nieces don't know I've made a mistake. They assume-- as should I--that their mother wouldn't have let them come if they were in any actual danger. The nieces don't know about sailing etiquette; heck, even Marian and Leslie didn't notice the sailor's equivalent of a drippy nose.

Peter and Elvay have become as small as my thumb, and there's no way to shout back a demand for the "required" under-way orientation. I am suddenly, unceremoniously, captain.

In a moment of sanity, I miss my captain, my husband, Bill. In another, I fear I *am* insane.   I feel as if I've never seen these islands before, as if I am, like the girls, fifteen years old and behind the wheel in driver's ed for the first time.

"It's just a sailboat," I remind myself. "You don't need a dipstick to sail." I call to my manicured crew to come hoist the sails.

"Thank you, Aunt Mary, for bringing us sailing," my niece Amy says. She says her nails are dry, she's ready to help. "What do you think?" she asks, her hands outstretched.

"Perfect," I say. Her choice of *turquoise* is perfect for our almost-perfect first day.

CHAPTER ONE: THE IDEA

I'm an Aunt!

Nothing prepares you for being an aunt. No passionate love-making with the risk of life-making, no hormonal softenings, no prolonged agony, no pre-auntal classes, no heavy breathing exercises of any kind. You can be arguing the death penalty at the Supreme Court, sailing in the Caribbean, or sleeping soundly when the phone rings and a new relative and title are thrust upon you. And with the cute pink announcement comes a whole set of expectations about how thrilled you should be to be an aunt and what an aunt should do and should want to do. If you are barren, you are told how blessed you are to have the joy but not the responsibility.

Joy was not my first reaction to my sister's phone call on the Christmas morning that she gave birth to her first child, Amy Michelle Steele. Donna, only eleven months and two weeks younger than I, had skipped first grade, beaten me to the altar, and now had delivered to our parents what I would never be able to, a grandchild. I hovered over my mother, then sixty-three, as she listened quietly while Donna bubbled on about how easy her labor had been--she'd had time to put on mascara, have bacon and eggs, open her Christmas gifts and get to the hospital. She'd had root canals that had been more painful, she said. "Born for it, I guess," my mother said, shaking her head in disbelief.

When the going gets tough, I grind my teeth. When I am awake, this passes for a smile. I did both on December 25, 1982. I remembered vividly a day fifteen years earlier when I'd been a freshman in college and my best new friend from Connecticut came running down the hall screaming "I'm an ahnt!" I had no idea then what she was talking about, let alone why it

should be so exciting. Now, with deliberate mental emphasis on the Midwestern pronunciation, I thought, "I'm an ant!"

"How did you pick Amy?" I risked asking my sister. The name's a little snippy, flowery or cutesy--not to mention nasal--for my tastes, but I withheld my opinion. "We liked the sound of it," Donna said. "Michelle is for you."

I was born Michael Daniel in 1951, and my father modeled a clay bowling ball, a baseball bat and a tennis racket for the arrival of his first-born. My parents were not prepared for a girl, and salvaged "Mary Michelle" for the birth certificate. I suspected the lilt of Amy Michelle was as important to my sister as the tribute; my lawyer-mind busied itself with the implications of the age-old question, "what's in a name?" What did it matter to me that Donna and I had once shared a surname, that I was given a boy's name, that my sister's first child was given a part of my name? What did Amy Michelle do to my idea of family?

My mother. My father. My sister. One kid per parental hand on family outings. Doubles for tennis, which we played starting in high-school, though not well enough to challenge the parents. Four for bridge, which we played during our college years. Grammy and Grandpa, who lived with us, were too old, even when we were very young, to be included on Sunday afternoons, which we had dubbed "family activity days." Family was four. We had one aunt, who lived in Michigan with my one cousin. Not a role model, she seemed to prefer horse shows to children, including her own, and we rarely saw them. My aunt smoked cigarettes, had a pot belly, and otherwise seemed to share my father's attitude that kids should be avoided until well after the age of reason, which he approximated, optimistically, as age seven. "Family" was a very narrow notion, and Donna and I were in our early thirties before it expanded, somewhat

reluctantly, to include husbands. The four of us worried, just a little, about whether they could adapt to our peculiar family dynamics.

What makes our family peculiar is not dysfunction, but its over-functioning. Any single person's project--from counting my mother's penny library fines to cutting fabric appliqués for my sister's hand-made children's clothing business--becomes a "family" project. You get so much help in my family that sometimes it's hard to recognize your own success. We're pretty smart as a group, although my mother lags behind educationally with "only" two university degrees instead of three, and we tend towards perfectionism. My sister can spot a gray hair on my head a mile away, and will pluck at it with a tsk! tsk! before saying hello. With age each of us is growing wiser than any of the others realize. Disagreement is a sport, a test of logical argument ultimately won by the most emotional--and least logical--of the bunch, and disagreements are only over the most trivial of matters--three no-trump or four spades, for instance--not basic values. We're intensely loyal to each other. We can be a little loud.

We're not easily understood by outsiders. Even my husband, sixteen years later, still finds us a bit of a shock, but, then again, he had little experience with even the traditional notion. His mother and father each had married three times, once before and once after the union that produced William Rutherford R[xxx]. When Bill was nine, his mother left his unpredictable neurosurgeon-father in Louisville and drove the three children from that marriage across the country to Chelan, in eastern Washington, in a converted hearse. On the road out of Louisville, she handed nine-year old Bill the map, which she didn't know how to read, and pointed in the general direction of her homeland, British Columbia. Bill knew at that moment that his childhood was over. Following Bill's instructions, his Aunt Jesse drove a station wagon

ahead of them; his mother, a new driver, followed as best she could: she refused to push the hearse over twenty-five miles an hour.

Bill's mother, Edna Mae R[xxx], was an army-trained nurse who had been to embalming school. The stickers in the rear windows of the hearse startled the gas station attendants along the highways who thought there was a coffin in the back rather than three children, several bags of potato chips, a scotch cooler with a 7-Up bottle full of vodka, and the "porcelain potty." Edna Mae had purchased an enameled white pot with a thin red ring around it so that baby Jane, then almost four years old, would have the same freedom as the boys to do her business wherever they might want to stop. Bill remembers that Jane still took longer in the cornfields, and that he and his six year old brother would comb the roadside gravel while they waited, collecting geodes and arrowheads. Bill was thoroughly engaged by the unfolding geographic wonders of the western badlands, and, because the trip stretched on for weeks, it was to him a great and leisurely adventure rather than a wrenching away from home and friends. Bill got the notion that the physical world was both more surprising and more stable than the one his aunt and mother whispered about at night.

At dusk one day on their three-week ordeal across the country, Mrs. R[xxx] stopped, exhausted, at the next roadside motel she came to. Bill R[xxx] took one whiff of the room and refused to stay. He doesn't recall exactly what was wrong with the room, but he does remember that his mother called him "persnickety" and pressed the hearse on. She must've known then that her oldest son--the one who took care of her--was going to make his living taking care of others.

In Chelan, Dr. and Mrs. R[xxx]'s children acquired an apple-growing stepfather. When visiting their father back in Louisville, they got an all-business stepmother. They shuffled

between the two for grade-school in Washington and prep school in Louisville, and because there were a couple years between his younger brother and his even younger sister, the kids met for only a few weeks at the beginning or the end of one phase or the other.

Bill had little interest in "family" as such. He met my parents a few months after we started dating, when we were getting serious and were unabashedly cuddly in public, even in front of them. The four of us spent an afternoon sailing, and, as my father and Bill were putting the boat away, I waited for my mother to comment on how nice he was, or at least to say she'd always wanted a doctor in the family. She was silent so I knew something was wrong.

"Well?" I asked.

"Well, what?" she said, with an unconvincing and annoying pretense of not knowing what I was asking.

"Bill?" I coaxed.

"Well, he doesn't seem to like me very much. He didn't pay much attention to me."

"He's not supposed to!" I cried. "I'm the one he's supposed to marry!"

I knew, then and there, that I was in fact going to marry Bill R[xxx]. For him, our notion of family was as good as any.

If Amy were lucky, I thought, she wouldn't become a family project. Perhaps my parents would be too busy or too tired in their retirement to want to be involved, and, as far as they were concerned, they hadn't made any mistakes in raising us which required correcting in the next generation. For my part, I wasn't prepared for the role of "aunt." I'd never babysat as a child, and had never changed a diaper, a still-glaring omission in my skill-set. The first time I

saw Donna breast-feeding Amy, I was sitting with my father in my parent's living room, and I was moved to tears I couldn't shed. My parents' living room was dark, and a single Stiffel lamp gave it a warm glow. It's a huge room, made cozy by earthy brown couches, heavy rust-colored carpeting, cherry end tables. Meticulous ship models, my father's handiwork, sail over the stone fireplace at one end, and three more are encased in glass at the other. Donna sat in a plush burnished-orange chair, Amy Michelle at her breast. Amy has fine blond hair, and, like her mother's, it is straight, without body of its own. Donna used to call my hair "horse hair;" it is brown, thick as a mane, but impossibly curly. We can't tell, at this age, whether Amy will grow into Donna's pliable good looks--smooth white skin stretched over high cheekbones, patrician nose, small pink mouth. Donna's is a stage face, the kind that can play any number of roles; she is told by strangers that she's a dead ringer for Bette Davis; she's also been mistaken for Meryl Streep. One difference in this mother and child: Amy has brown eyes. My mother, Donna and I bear a common mother-daughter marker: we all have big blue eyes. Donna's are serious, my mother's determined; mine more changeable with their surroundings, reflective of blue skies, blue seas. Bill says that if I had tears, they would come out blue.

Donna bowed her head with the reverence of a Madonna. I bowed mine in shame for what I didn't know about mothering. I had, of course, seen women nurse before, on planes, on park benches, even at cocktail parties, and had tried to see without appearing to be staring. I wanted to ask those strange women what it felt like to have a calf sucking at one's body, but that seemed impolite. This time I was struck dumb by my little sister, who in this simple act leapt by me into realms I'd never know. When my father and I got into a heated debate over nothing in particular, Donna clenched her teeth and shushed us at the top of her best stage whisper, "You

have to be quiet." We started to protest; she flung her right arm towards the door, banishing my father and me until the whole feeding thing was over.

Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. It was neither May nor October, the two months the Roman Catholic church reserves for the praise of Mary, the Mother of God. As a child, I'd prayed the Hail Mary daily, and three Our Fathers and three Hail Mary's were a usual penance after my childhood confessions of petty crimes. I hadn't prayed such a formal prayer in years. Yet underneath my continuing political discussion with my father, the word "womb" throbbed. In the spaces of our debate, which lost some of its passion after Donna's rebuke, I remembered vaguely the words of Luke, *Blessed is the womb that bore thee and the breasts which thou has sucked.* I didn't have a womb, and my baby sister, nursing her own babe, somehow was now more blessed than I, nearer the perfection encouraged by the Dominican Sisters at St. Thomas the Apostle grade school. Later, I couldn't ask Donna how it felt without betraying my own imperfection, and so I never asked.

I supposed, then, that all maternal instincts had been cut out of me seven years before, after I doubled over on the Yesler Way bus. Barely two weeks into June, while I was an intern at a Seattle law firm, I was admitted to the University of Washington Hospital with what was later diagnosed as a slowly ruptured appendix. During exploratory surgery, great baseballs of cysts were discovered and removed, along with all my reproductive organs, in a five-hour attempt to save my life. As I was coming out of anesthesia, the young surgeon slipped me the news in a soft and unalarmed way. In my morphine fog, I acknowledged the hysterectomy with, "No little Tommy Marks?" in reference to my then boyfriend. My mother rushed to Seattle the night after the surgery; the next day, I assured Tom there was no need to come out from New York. When I was leaving the hospital a week later, a social worker asked me in an oblique

fashion if I planned to see anyone, and did I know adoption was always an alternative? I had no idea what the woman, kind though she was, meant by "seeing someone;" I had a boyfriend I was "seeing." I was a year away from being one of twenty-four women graduates of the Yale Law School, headed for a prestigious career without cramps, kids or birth control pills. At the sound of the word adoption, my mother shook her head and stared out the hospital window. She helped me settle back into my Lake Washington apartment, where I spent the next six weeks recovering on the dock and sipping Bombay and tonic at five o'clock every afternoon to ease the discomfort. When after a week she left, my mother warned me that there would be times when I would feel like crying for no reason--sort of like menopause--but I would just have to shake it off. Until Amy Michelle, I did.

The first six years of Amy's life, the Steele family lived in Nashville and Dallas. Two years after Amy, Sarah was born, and Peter William two years after that. Meanwhile, I progressed at my law firm to partnership. By my own reckoning, I was a financially generous but otherwise not very useful aunt. The children knew Uncle Bill was a doctor and always wore stiff shirts and ties; they knew I was something called a "lawyer" and Amy called me "Aunt Money." Their visits were limited to Christmases and christenings and perhaps one other family occasion per year. After Peter was born, Donna decided that raising children was indeed a family project--she wanted her children to know their grandparents (and incidentally, they make good babysitters)--so she and her husband, Tod, who was also a native Chicagoan and avid Bears fan, moved back. The family calendar was again crowded with family activities: now nine birthdays (including one on Christmas), Easter, mothers and fathers days, Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, Labor Day and St. Patrick's Day, plus assorted children's concerts, swim meets, talent shows, and tournaments of every kind. Family now was nine.

Sometimes I think giving up Christmas is the hardest thing about giving up childhood. Every night as the holiday approached, my sister and I would lie in our twin beds and pour over the Sears catalog, playing "take it or leave it." One of us silently would pick something out of the thick book and concentrate on it, then ask the other if she wanted it or not. You got three picks. It was a terrible shame to waste one on underwear or a dishtowel; we trusted each other completely not to switch "its" after our "takes." After picking, you could give up unwanted gifts like socks for the next unseen item, for the possibility of something better. "Ohhh," we would moan when we had given up some special "it" and what was behind door number two was a lousy "take."

On Christmas day, we usually got the things that were on our list, but it was a painfully slow process. We'd wake up at first light and sneak to the living room where Santa had left our stockings full of foil-wrapped chocolates and peppermints, and usually a little gift, like barrettes, wrapped in red tissue. We would notice the box of molded chocolate Dutch shoes which Santa always left on the mantle without a note--for my mother, according to her--and see that he'd drunk the Ovaltine and eaten the cookies we'd set out for him on the coffee table. I remember vividly one year when my father left open all the drapes on the picture windows on all three sides of the family room where the Christmas tree stood, and the snow was pink. It was the first time I actually saw the sun rise. My mother said my father did it on purpose, and I remember thinking that he wasn't as stern as I thought he was, after all.

Eventually my parents would wake up, and we would dress for Mass. After an excruciatingly long service, we tiptoed up to the front of the church to see the Baby Jesus in his crib. Finally, finally, we went home, gave the grandparents their post-Communion breakfast, and the ritual of opening presents could begin. One present at a time, we took turns with

Grammy and Grandpa and Mommy and Daddy--it took hours. And it all seemed to be about me--and Donna--and Christmas wishes from the Sears catalog come true.

Christmases with the Steeles reprised our memories; they, too, focused on The Children--but Donna's children. One year Donna suggested we have an old-fashioned, tranquil Christmas in the country, which meant at the farm Bill and I owned in Wisconsin. The chaos of Christmas would not fit in Donna's own home, and our farm house, perched on the highest point in Walworth County, Wisconsin, just over the Illinois border, seemed to her the perfect setting for this fantasy Christmas. I agreed. The house was built in the 1870's, which makes it old by Midwestern standards, but its two story white frame has been added on to and updated to the standards of the 1950's. Forty acres of corn and soybeans surround two barns, two silos, and a rickety garage. Occasionally at art fairs we see renditions of our house in water colors by local artists, and one of the silos was used for a location of a scene in *Chain Reaction* with Keanu Reeves. The pictures don't tell you that we have the deepest well in the county, and a reputation for the worst water. When we bought the house, we added a dishwasher, and within a week its white interior was stained bright orange. Bill discovered a "rust-out" product which bubbled the blood-rust off of plates and mugs and glasses, but couldn't prevent the stain from sinking into laundry. Scotch and water turned a sobering gray. The water-softening company was baffled, and our partner at the farm bought bottled water for her dog. The well water was, in fact, potable, just not the country crystal we expected.

On Christmas Eve, we attended a children's Mass at our local church, Amy and Sarah in matching green velvet dresses Donna'd made for them, and Peter in short pants and a navy blazer, a fake red tie stuck in his collar. Hundreds of nervous children squirmed in every

pew, every adult attached to at least one little hand. I grabbed Bill's hand, clenched my teeth and sang "Silent Night," in a whisper.

It was dark the next morning when I heard the first stirrings. By seven o'clock, we were all somewhat awake: three children under seven, all clamoring for attention, all opening presents at the same time, all needing batteries and help with buttons; my father fidgeting as impatiently as any four-year old, not wanting to wait for his presents until the kids had Christmas out of their systems; Bill filling garbage bags and trying to maintain his version of order; my mother desperately trying to give everyone their fair share of attention; me serving coffeecake and muffins and more apple juice and several rounds of Mimosas. At three o'clock, a couple of hours after the adults had finished opening their presents and the children were settled into the inevitable disappointment from advertising's over-promises, I was appalled to discover I'd put the turkey in the oven breast-side down--what my mother would call "upside down"-- and while there was no real harm, it was a tell-tale sign that I'd had one-too-many Mimosas.

We ate the poor bird despite its non-traditional presentation, and after dinner cleared the dining room of Christmas for a proper celebration of Amy's birthday. We strung birthday streamers and balloons, lit seven candles on her birthday cake and presented her with another round of presents. We spoke of Christmas morning as if it were a long time ago and this was a whole new and special day. Everyone tried to remember what their favorite Christmas present had been. Five-year-old Sarah said, "I wish we had cousins."

Cousins? My family was feeling overcrowded as it was.

Once best friends and personal advisers, my sister and I now had few conversations that didn't concern the exceptional development of Amy and Sarah and Peter or that weren't punctuated by their annoying ploys for attention. At family gatherings, my Mother

and Father became "Grandma" and "Grandpa." When Amy was 10, I announced to my mother than I'd resigned from my law partnership after seventeen years, and she said, "Did you know Sarah beat her best time ever in the 50 free?"

* * *

Bill's Idea

If Bill didn't know what he was agreeing to when he joined our family, I didn't know what I was agreeing to when I married him. Of course, none of us knows what we ourselves are going to grow into, let alone our spouse. That is probably the riskiest thing about marriage, and Bill R[xxx], despite his regular costume--Brooks Brothers white button-down shirts (extra starch), khaki's and navy blazer--and surface normalcy, was full of surprises. I'd had a mental checklist of what I wanted in a spouse, and I'd taken to heart my mother's advice that 1) it was much more important that the man love the woman than vice versa (on the theory that when the sex appeal of youth wears off, the man would be less likely to wander); 2) "you'll learn to love him," and most importantly, 3) you had to like doing things together. Bill clearly loved me, and it had taken me a week to learn to love him, so after a month or two of dating, I concentrated on my "things-to-do-together" list: 1) dance 2) sail 3) bridge and 4) tennis. (Seventeen years later, I would substitute golf for tennis and add "surprise me," but at the time I was thirty and a shorter list seemed more realistic.) I presumed the husband-to-be would be intelligent and witty and professional; my mother assumed he would be Catholic and just like my father. I told her I wouldn't stand for being yelled at by my husband, and that I didn't ever

expect anyone to be quite as clever as LeRoi, who loves making things--from tailored ladies' suits to model ships to cabinets and tables--but can't be told anything by anyone, and never, ever reads a book. Without further investigation in the past sixty-five years, my father believes he read all the great ones in high school and that's enough--anything else he needs to know in life he'll figure out on his own. He therefore is not tolerant of stupidity, which is his favorite word for things--like emotions--which can't be figured out. His nickname for me, from childhood through my first breakthrough in therapy (when I was over forty) was "stupid."

"You're stupid if you think I think you're stupid," he later justified himself.

Bill and I danced on our first date in March and played tennis on one of Chicago's first spring days, in late April. We sailed at the end of May. He never called me "stupid." Things were getting serious. I was on the look-out for the fatal flaw. At a stoplight at the corner of Lake Shore Drive and Randolph, on the way back from the tennis court, I looked over at Bill at the wheel of his beat-up brown Rabbit and asked if he played bridge.

"Oh, yes," he lied. (It's a bit of family folklore that my mother also lied to my father about playing bridge, and my father, who's played--brilliantly--since he was 12, was so dazzled by my mother's beauty that she bluffed her way through their first game without his knowing she didn't have the slightest idea what she was doing. They've been married fifty-six years, and I'm quite sure she hasn't sat at a bridge table since without making some mistake or other that my father feels compelled to bring to her attention.) A week later, I saw a book with a title like, "The Beginner's Guide to Bridge." thrown carelessly on the back seat of Bill's car, and I knew I'd been dealt a Grand Slam.

At the end of July, having completed his internal medicine residency, Bill moved to Seattle. Before meeting me, he'd agreed to work at a Seattle clinic. He shipped what little

stuff he had and said we would work things out. He didn't say how. The day he left, I sprawled on the kitchen floor of my apartment and called my mother in sobs; it's the only time I can remember my mother not being there for me: she had a houseful of company and was about to serve dinner.

Five days later I called her again. "Bill's coming home!" He'd told the hospital administrator his intention to return to Chicago after his year's commitment, and he'd been released. My father was yelling in the background that they were late for wherever they were going, and again she had to go. We got married the following June, 1982.

We knew this much going in: he thought having children was risky business; he liked the fact that I had a career; I could take him to a party where he didn't know anyone and while I tended to business or social obligations, he'd find the most interesting character there to talk to; he didn't mind playing bridge or sailing or doing things with my parents; that we would not part.

For the first seven years or so of our marriage, there were few surprises.

Vikara was the big one. After seven years of solo medical practice, including two thousand house calls, mostly under-compensated, many uncompensated, Bill sold his practice and gave himself a sabbatical. I learned why societies organized themselves with one bread-winner and one home care-taker. I continued to practice law, agonizing over a possible change of firms, and came home each day to a pretty good wife. I wasn't exactly sure what he did all day, except to read medicine and teach himself celestial navigation, but it was convenient to have a personal valet ready to run my errands, vacuum and do the laundry. Our apartment has never, before or since, been so clean and orderly. I did notice Bill's growing collection of sailing books, sailing manuals, sailing magazines and sailing newsletters when we had to buy a

new bookcase. He also subscribed to a computerized service that spewed out a personalized monthly listing of boats for sale in the U.S., and mysterious area codes--Florida, the Carolinas, Maryland--trickled onto our monthly phone bills. I didn't pay much attention because I thought he just needed someone to talk to during the day, and most other husbands (and wives, for that matter) whom we knew worked.

It didn't occur to me we needed another sailboat. We already owned a sailboat, or rather, two. A Cape Dory 25 occupied our weekends at the farm in Wisconsin. The other was a very old sixteen-foot flat-bottomed scow, which we were not particularly fond of. We'd taken it out for the first time one Memorial Day, capsized it, and nearly died of hypothermia. We stowed it on a trailer in the barn.

At the end of July, during his sabbatical, Bill said he was thinking he might "have" to go to Florida in the next couple of months. The next Saturday, we ended play on the ninth hole because he had to call the airlines by noon in order to get a special rate for his trip, *the next Tuesday,* to Florida. He went to Florida, I got bronchitis, and I left my law partnership for a partnership in another firm, all in the same week.

Vikara--roughly translated, "us folks"--arrived on a flatbed truck from Florida a few weeks later. *Vikara* was perfect, Bill said, for two people to sail across the Atlantic.

Are you crazy? How long does that take? What happens when--if-- you get there? How do we get back?

"Back? Usually people sail down to the Caribbean for the winter."

How long does that take?

"Well, you can take as long as you want."

What about my job? By the way, my mother would like to know, DO YOU EVER PLAN TO GET A JOB?

Vikara is a Westail 32, a double-ended cutter. I didn't know much when Bill bought her--without input from me--but here's what I was told: In the front, the bow, there's an extension off the deck called a bowsprit, which effectively adds another five feet to the length of the boat, like a giant hood ornament on a Jaguar. She has a fifty-two foot mast, taller than those of many boats her size, and it's about two feet around, although it's more elliptical than truly round. *Vikara's* mast looks different because it has triangular steps on either side, so that a sailor can literally walk up the mast to fix a problem with the wire rigging or spot a pirate. The two foresails extend from the front of the mast to the foretip of the bowsprit. The foremost sail, or jib, is the driving sail of the boat: you use a small one in big winds, and a larger one, a jenny, in light ones. The second sail off the bowsprit is the staysail, a smaller, sort of "booster" sail that gives a cutter its defining configuration and classic profile. Our staysail happens to be brown, which is typical of many ocean-going vessels: on the ocean, a colored sail can be seen more easily in the vast glare.

Vikara is hull number 437 in a run of a thousand hulls produced by hand at the rate of a hundred or so a year by a company no longer manufacturing new boats. The early hulls were built in Newport Beach, California; *Vikara* was made in Wilmington, North Carolina, and finished inside by a local father and son who did the work in their back yard. They christened her *Solus*, which means roughly, "alone" in Latin. The interior walls are dark mahogany and teak. The galley-- a sink, two pressured-kerosene burners, an oven, and two deep ice lockers--is on the port side and the navigation table is on the starboard. In the main cabin, which is about as long as a hearse, there are single bunks on either side, and above the starboard

side bunk, a third bunk, known as the pilot's berth, which has little headroom and is meant to be used by hired help. On *Vikara*, our pilot's berth is filled with our abandon-ship bag, large yellow water-tight containers of emergency flares, and several boxes of miscellaneous extra charts, lines, pulleys and other gadgets. The head (porcelain potty and stainless-steel sink) is on the port side in the passage to the V-berth, the second cabin in the fore of the boat, which has the triangle-shaped double bed on which Bill and I store extra sails and miscellaneous repair gear.

Under every berth and in every seemingly unused space there are storage compartments, and because *Vikara* was outfitted twice for an ocean passage--once by its previous Florida owners and once by Bill--every storage locker is full. They contain all the equipment and parts necessary to rebuild *Vikara* while at sea, if need be. The cover of one locker, for instance, has a built-in vise-grip. If you take the cushions off the berths, you'll find bins loaded with an emergency tiller, water and oil filters, tubes of grease and caulking, fiberglass repair epoxies, alternators and other engine parts, pulleys, bolts, screws, grommets, wires, sail cloth and tapes, wrenches, screwdrivers, and saws and various other tools, including my favorite, hydraulic wire-cutters. Bill tells me they're for cutting away the mast, should it fall at sea. Then there are pots, pans, plastic food containers, clothespins, sheets, towels, and the stuff of everyday living. It's a floating house and body shop.

It's also a boat meant to go to sea. The cockpit, where the sailors spend their days in nice weather, is very small, just a deep well in the back (stern) of the boat, which seats maybe four people semi-comfortably. What's lost in comfort is made up for by the fact that if a wave breaks over her, the four-by-five foot well will empty quickly through two sunken drain spouts, and *Vikara* will maintain her stability.

I didn't need to know too much else. I trusted Bill's judgment completely. *Vikara* was ready to go to sea; the question was, was I?

* * *

We're Cruising Now, Babe!

Sailing across the Atlantic had been the dream of *Vikara's* previous owners, a couple in their mid-fifties. They lived aboard, they outfitted, they planned. While they planned, a parent became ill and needed them to take care of her. They postponed their trip, hoping her condition would improve; by the time she was well enough, the adult child was not. The seller fought back tears as Bill practically had to force him to take the check. I wrote a right-of-first-refusal clause into the deed of sale; if we ever sell the "Big Boat," the old owners would have the right to buy it back.

"*Carpe diem*," I'm told by Bill. "If you're going to do it, you have to do it while you're young. While you can."

It just didn't seem very likely that I could *carpe* any time soon. A couple of years after joining a new law firm, more than fifteen years into my career (which was peaking), I couldn't imagine waltzing into the Managing Partner's office and saying, "If it's okay with you, I think I'll take the next year off." After all, I'd made the switch to the new firm for the supposed challenge of starting a new department from scratch.

Bill was ready any *diem*. The thought of walking away from it all didn't bother him; in fact, he planned for it. He joined an HMO and signed an annual--emphasis on annual--contract. His options were open, but he said, "If you don't want to go, we won't go."

What about my family? I wondered. My parents lived close by and we saw them a lot, which seemed to help them in their transition to their seventies. I hadn't yet outgrown them; I was myself transitioning to my forties and still talking to my mother almost daily. Bill said they were in good health and that was precisely the point.

The first summer that we owned *Vikara*, we learned to cruise and swat flies. On our first overnight with a group of sailors loosely known as Pete's Fleet, we were mostly becalmed on the forty mile sail up the eastern shore of Illinois to Racine, Wisconsin. Some ten miles off shore, about one-third of the way there, the flies--literally thousands of them--blackened the decks and splashed in drunken delight in bug repellant. Where do they come from? Are they just in the air? How do they find this boat, which occupies 250 square feet in a lake of 22,400 square miles?

We cruised in fog, in rain, in flies, in tanker lanes, and through the night. We crossed the lake and back several times, and in addition to feeling comfortable with the boat, I began to feel a little nautical. One Sunday afternoon we motored into Chicago's largest harbor and the folks on another boat yelled to us, "where are you coming from, Sweden?" I figured we must look pretty battered, or it was later than I thought.

For Christmas that year, I received my very own binoculars, less bulky than Bill's, but still very powerful. *The better to see tankers with, my dear.*

I gave Bill a real oak bucket. Bill had read that every ocean-going vessel should have one all-(and they mean ALL-) purpose oak bucket. When you put it in the bathtub for the first time, its ribs swell tight. I thought it would make a good planter.

The idea of sailing across the Atlantic became a humorous rallying point for private jokes between Bill and me and our little secrets. Whether things were going our way or we were being pestered by some nit of everyday living, one of us would remember our personal slogan: *We're cruising now, babe!* But one day, while I was still trying to figure out what the attraction was, Bill stunned me by saying quite simply that he would hate to die without having tried this thing: this was the one thing he would really like to do in his lifetime. I was almost forty, and I couldn't think of anything that I could say that about. Not kids, since we didn't have them; certainly not career. I remember a cold sweat and a churning in my stomach that nagged: Do you understand that you are going to die? What, Mary, is your passion? Does everyone have such a dream or overriding goal? Everyone except me?

In 1973, I had tumbled into law school, idealistic head over middle-class heels, with the best and the brightest, the class of anti-establishment, anti-business school kids who weren't scientifically inclined, were too impatient to teach and otherwise were likely to land on the job market with liberal arts degrees and no tools of any trade. At the time, advice to would-be journalists like myself, was to get an advanced degree in something other than journalism: law was not only fashionable, but versatile. One could go to law school to change the world without actually becoming a lawyer. The agency of change--government, academia, private foundations,

news media, corporate board rooms--could be chosen later, but certainly a law degree would bring the power to the people, meaning juris doctors.

With typical East-coast bias, I set my sights on Yale, which advertised itself as a policy school, not as narrowly letter-of-the-law as the "other" law school: Harvard was said to turn out four times as many graduates and place them mostly on Wall Street and in other bluestocking streams of commerce, in other words, back in the establishment I was hoping to change. Nearly everyone who got in to both Harvard and Yale chose Yale, and far fewer got into Yale. I made the trip to New Haven for an interview in the fall of my senior year at Brown. After the drive down from Providence, I stopped a guy in the hall and asked directions to the ladies room. "There isn't one," he said. Even if he meant it as a joke, his tone was surprisingly hostile. Perhaps he had just been humiliated in class; perhaps he was mad at his girlfriend--more likely, with the School's ratio of 6 or 7 to 1, he didn't have a girlfriend. In any event, his was not the welcome I had expected from a place that held itself out as enlightened. I resolved I would go to this guy's law school and find my own place to pee.

My sister happened to make her only visit to Brown the day I got my acceptance letter from Yale. Being a theater major, she was not as overwhelmed as I by my success--to me, it was the equivalent of landing a lead role on Broadway at your first audition--but she bought me several dozen yellow daffodils in a miniature metal milk pail. Every spring I still fill it with daffodils, but they don't have the same glow as they did that day in 1973. My boyfriend, Tom, got his letter from Yale that same afternoon. A group of us went to a local pub for hamburgers, and at closing time I walked out with a glass pitcher half-full of Harvey Wallbangers under my jacket, one of the few crimes I have ever committed, before or after my admission to the bar.

The first semester's curriculum consisted of Torts (wrongs we do to each other, with a splash of wrongs that just happen); Contracts (promises we make to each other, and then, to make them interesting, break); Constitutional Law (what we dream together) and Civil Procedure (the gentlemen's guide to combat). Potentially interesting, the subjects were lost amid the famous egos of the faculty and their complete ineptitude in handling the issue of women. The twenty-four women in my class did not consider themselves an "issue," but apparently we were. Joseph Bishop, the author of *Military Justice is to Justice as Military Music is to Music*, began each Torts Class in a friendly-enough tone, "Gentlemen." My friend Ellen started collecting little plastic pigs that she found in novelty stores and three times a week, before each class, she would put one on his chair. Three times a week, he would toss the pig aside, and begin, again, "Gentlemen."

A short, round, balding god named J. Willie Moore, whose name was on seven large volumes in the library, taught us Civil Procedure I, the introduction to the rules of court. There was no introduction. This mean little man, who had taught several Supreme Court justices their first civil procedure class, the man who could argue a case to the Supreme Court and dismiss his own treatise's pronouncements on an issue with a simple, "I've changed my mind," this man began his lecture in the middle, without so much as an explanation of what we were to learn or why. He barked his first question on the first day to a class who had read their very first law cases the night before, and smirked at the attempted answers. I escaped questioning the first day, but not the second.

"Miss Hutchings," he called.

The class had sixty people in it; there was no seating chart. There were maybe nine or ten women in the class. I didn't understand his damn question. I didn't understand why he

seemed so angry. At Brown, full professors and Nobel laureates had treated us as colleagues at wine-and-cheese seminars, independent study projects, and anti-war rallies. "Hell, no, we won't go!" echoed in my head. It was time to take a stand. I'd be damned if I would be made a fool of. I'd be damned if I would be made a fool of in front of all those men.

What can you do when you don't understand the question? One possibility is to conclude that you are, and are likely to remain, completely ignorant of the subject matter, and to give up; another is to dismiss the questioner's thinking as itself confused, and dig in until you know what the question should be. A third is to pretend to understand, and to keep talking, like a child swinging his plastic bat at a mean father's hardball fast-pitch. The child ignores his own whiffs for the sake of the illusion that they are playing the same game; the father, absorbed in his own demonstration of superior skill, doesn't care much who the opponent is--his part plays the same. He keeps pitching, as if they are on the same level. There were, of course, some insufferable first year law students who could delude themselves that they were enjoying the game, and they would play along with J. Willie Moore on the slippery slope of that day's topic. The student on the legal hot seat would be pricked and probed and led down a torturous path of Socratic teasing. I found the process silly, immature, and very male.

I stared straight ahead.

A friend or two from Brown turned around and looked at me. I ignored them, the idiots. My neck flushed red in a nervous rash. I was paralyzed in the silence, and my throat was dry--I didn't have a voice with which to change my mind, even if I'd wanted to. J. Willie Moore went on to the next name.

I quickly decided that the class of one hundred sixty divided into two--those who were there by divine right (and therefore did not mind being made a fool of) and those of us who were

increasingly convinced there had been a lucky mistake. If they really knew me, they wouldn't admit me to this club. I had little to say to people like Ruth, who told me casually in the cafeteria line one day, and quite sincerely, that she had wanted to be a labor lawyer since the time she was six. I couldn't tell her that at six I wanted to be Miss America and hadn't the slightest idea what a lawyer was, let alone a labor lawyer, management side.

My college boyfriend and I clung to each other for the first few months and tried, unsuccessfully, to get our new classmates to take short breaks with us, like camping in the Adirondack Mountains. After the first month, we found two who were willing both to admit that they knew bridge and to spare an hour or so from studying to play. Law school became easier and more bearable as I got the hang of it, but two months into the ordeal, I wrote a letter home that said I wasn't sure I wanted to stay--Yale was so anti-intellectual, so unlike Brown. My father wrote me the only letter he has ever written me, saying that if it were too hard for me, if I couldn't do the work, then by all means I should drop out; but if I just wasn't having enough fun, life wasn't all fun and I should stay. I was furious. Keeping up with the work wasn't the problem! How dare he suggest I couldn't keep up, that I was, in fact, "stupid"? There had been much more work at Brown, and I had thrived, succeeded, held my own. I didn't feel intellectually inferior to these people, just bored by them! But my father had again thrown down the gauntlet, and flailing in my insecurity, I grabbed it. After the first year, I found more humane professors, classes I liked on freedom of expression, and eventually found my voice. In my second year, I participated in the mandatory Moot Court, a hypothetical appellate argument before a panel of student and visiting judges, requiring the preparation of a written brief and a half-hour oral argument before the court. This spectacle of academic hazing went like this: you would begin your argument and immediately the judges would pounce--clawing at

your assumptions, scratching at your citations of cases, shredding your reasoning. These judges were far better prepared than the ones we would be likely to encounter in real life, short of the Supreme Court itself, but the idea was to give the students a feel for the skills required in oral argument. Several rounds of competition among forty of us resulted in the selection of four student lawyers to participate in the Prize Argument in the law school auditorium before a panel of real judges, usually including one Supreme Court Justice. My father's training in the sport of argument paid off: I loved Moot Court and was elated to be chosen for the finals, to take place before Justice Thurgood Marshall, Judge John Gibbons from the Third Circuit Court of Appeals, and Frank Johnson, Jr., the Chief Judge of the Federal Court for the Middle District of Alabama. I studied my brains out for a month, determined not to reveal my stupidity to the entire school.

My friend Jonathan was my opponent; we met in the library almost nightly and harassed each other in a good-natured way each time we found a hole in the other's argument. From the beginning of law school, Jonathan had been among the group confident enough to willingly allow themselves to be made fools of. He wasn't worried, but I was. I had another, peculiarly female concern: what to wear? Since most of my friends and classmates as well as a number of University bloodhounds would be staring at my backside for half an hour while I parried with the distinguished panel of famous judges, I spent a precious few hours of my study time looking for the perfect professional dress--black knit with maroon tailoring and most importantly, a slenderizing A-line skirt.

My argument flowed; I lobbed the judge's questions back to them with the top spin of my own argument, dodged the known black holes in my case . In the grace of the moment, I forgot myself, my competition, my friends, my parents, and my backside. Rarely have I felt a sense of accomplishment so complete as when I sat down at the counsel's table after my half-hour. I

hardly heard the next speaker. The self-doubts which had plagued me during the first year of law school dissipated: the girl who had stared down J. Willie Moore had just wowed the Court, and she knew it. My mother said later that my father had squeezed her hand so hard it bruised; perhaps for the first time, he realized just how stupid I wasn't. I was awarded second prize to Jonathan, whom we fondly called Rosenblabber. At the post-argument reception, two of the judge's wives told me that they thought I had won, and should have won, but that their southern husbands were sexist. They also said they liked my dress. Since I liked Jonathan, and had come to admire greatly his fearlessness, I counted second place as a victory of its own sort for women.

I began to feel that there were parts of lawyering that I would indeed enjoy--and be good at--and that I wouldn't mind working for a law firm for a few years. Yale, despite its reputation, also expected its top graduates to go to the top law firms, which expected us to be their top prospects, and I definitely wanted to be counted among the top--after all, I'd paid both my financial and personal dues. To pursue journalism at that time seemed a waste of pedigree, unless you wanted to be a cub reporter for *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*. I didn't want to be a "cub" anything, and secretly feared I wasn't hard-boiled enough to start at the bottom and claw my way anyplace near the top. I knew from Moot Court that I could be a top attorney, but I also knew I could be out-worked any day by a classmate who didn't want to hike in the Adirondacks or who'd wanted all her life to be a labor lawyer. I looked around for a city that was both politically open to me and near a large body of water and for a firm that had a good legal practice without the eighty-hour weeks of Wall Street. I ruled out D.C. as too transient, San Francisco and Boston as too provincial, Miami as too southern, Los Angeles as too Los Angeles. That left Seattle and Chicago. I interviewed on campus with a Seattle firm and

the thirty-five year old interviewer, as stiff as his starched white shirt, asked me whether I wanted to be "the best attorney" in the country.

"Heavens, no!" I blurted. "If I did, I wouldn't be going to Seattle!"

Having managed to insult him, his firm and his city in one fell swoop of honesty, I was not surprised when he didn't call me back with a job offer. Somewhat reluctantly, I came home to Chicago. My parents, of course, were thrilled when I told them I'd accepted a position in the intellectual property group of one of Chicago's largest and most revered firms, and sent me a case of champagne which ten of us polished off one night when law school didn't matter any more.

Some sixteen years later, did I have a secret fantasy that you could squeeze out of me after my third or fourth scotch? The only thing I could think of was that I would like to write a book, not a law book, but perhaps a novel. I had gone to college intending to be a creative writing major, thinking I would become a journalist, but during my freshman year, in Creative Writing 3, the other twenty students were far ahead of me. They had experiences (mostly sexual) to write about, used the words "fuck" and "shit" liberally in their writings, and didn't mind having everyone in the class read their material and speculate on how much of it was true. In comparison, my own experience and imagination were limited. *Very* limited. I suspected writing about not getting invited to the high school prom wasn't going to make it. My father had said it was stupid to care about not going to a dumb high school dance--I certainly wasn't about to confess my stupidity over that trivial trauma to people I hardly knew!

Perhaps this cruising thing would provide an opportunity to see if I could write something else. At least by now, I'd heard about experiences that might make good stories. Perhaps I could

even disguise some of my own. When was I happiest at work? Writing. What was my most satisfying professional accomplishment to date? Writing my own book, which became the standard in its field.

Could I have a portable computer on board?

"An old, manual Remington. Less temperamental."

Oh.

Practicing law in the private sector, for the private sector, didn't give me a sense of real purpose in life. It wasn't justice we promoted there; it was commerce, good, old-fashioned Wall Street commerce. There was professional satisfaction, and certainly there was financial reward, but not anything that made the non-professional me, the me without the costume and role, feel socially worthwhile. I envy doctors a profession that provides decent financial remuneration and the same intellectual stimulation as law, but is socially useful. I am told I am wrong. Bill can go on for hours about why practicing medicine does not give one a sense of contributing to society: People don't feel good when they see their doctors; doctors don't make the pain go away, and although they may ease it in some cases, many, particularly the old and chronically sick, are not grateful even for that. Families as well as patients cannot accept the imprecision of the art form in a society taught to worship science and all its strides. They demand that something be done. There is a difference between what can be done and what should be done; between what is being done and what will happen regardless of its being done. We are all dying, some more gracefully than others, some with more fight than others. Few with gratitude.

No, I am told, there is not that much satisfaction in practicing medicine. Oldsters are cheap, ungrateful and rude. It is their entitlement. According to Bill, whose practice is primarily people over seventy-five, being over seventy is license to say and do whatever you

want. To whomever you want, including the doctor. There is some appeal in this. Bill says, "Why wait?"

When I asked my friends what gave their lives meaning, each one who had children gushed, "kids." I winced. That answer seemed too rote, too rehearsed, as if not to say the expected was to fail the catechism quiz prior to confirmation. Parents did not have time to analyze such things, my sister assured me. She said her children were her "greatest accomplishment." By my early forties, I felt I had foregone the opportunity to adopt, although in the years since, an increasing number of older women like myself have chosen that option. In my thirties, I had been unaware of any loss, and, even in passing, Bill would gag on the suggestion--Why would we do that? I was focused on my career, on proving myself not stupid, and I thought in some self-important way that I had a duty to other women to make it in the man's world of my profession. If I--freed of maternal obligations and expectations--didn't make it, who would? And in fact, I had made it, by most standards. But it turned out not to be enough. I was expecting a professional advancement from "income partner" to "capital partner" a year and a half after joining my new firm. We had had an understanding as to what would have to happen for me to be admitted to this prestigious, then all-male circle at the firm; the hiring partner said I would be their first woman. My male partner, who had joined the new firm as a "cap," and I had met the specified goals and I awaited my anointing. But "they" had understood the goals differently. I was passed over when four men were made capital partner.

I was professionally insulted, politically angry and personally enraged about the limited progress of feminism. The distinction between income and capital partners is not one apparent--or important--to the outside world, but it had become disproportionately important to me, particularly in its being withheld. I had chosen law to prove I was up to the challenge; I had

assumed the legal profession was a meritocracy, and I thought I had proved my merit. The implication in not climbing one more rung on the professional ladder was that my father had been right when he had written me the letter back at Yale; I silently feared that I had finally disappointed him.

The distinction between partners matters only internally in the politics of a law firm, and, believe me, law firm partnerships are intensely political. The word partnership does not really pertain. Partners are not equal. Some partners have power, some have none. Power is about bringing in million-dollar clients, even if you never lift a finger or a legal pad on their business. It has a lot to do with the old-boy network. It has a lot to do with kissing ass.

What's the point of this power? Take a gaggle of huge egos, as are common in the legal profession; then try to motivate each ego to best the next. The result will be more billable hours, more billable clients. More money. To motivate these huge egos, you need to get them to believe or at least suspect that they have not yet done enough or been good enough--that there is still another hurdle to be jumped. So, you hold out this "you've finally made it" medal. And as they get closer, you change your standards a little, but don't tell anyone until after the fact. It works because we humans are all insecure enough to be enticed by praise, acceptance and approval, which we think will ease our self-doubts. Lawyers, who make their living bending rules and shading behaviors, suffer the insecurity of over-achievers who know they are good but perhaps not good enough. Even the winners don't know why, exactly, they earned law firm heaven. My personal torture was in thinking there were fixed rules for everyone and that there was something I could do to "earn" it.

I will confess to wanting to be admitted to the ultimate fraternity of the inner circle. Or, even if I knew that personal fulfillment didn't lie in a title, my ego certainly didn't want not to

make it. Especially if men less qualified than I were getting the gold I'd been promised. I ranted and raved and was a total bitch--justifiably, of course. My inner voice was hoarse from my silent screams of rage at the entire male system.

Without realizing it, I turned more and more often to the soothing warmth of scotch, but I still felt depressed, passionless, lost. I knew that, fundamentally, something was wrong: on a strictly visual inspection of my career, my husband, my friends, our condo, our country house, our sailboats, I should be one of the happiest people alive. Instead, I had a soul full of dissatisfaction. One day at lunch a friend of mine said, "You've got the world by the tail, Mary, think what it would be like if you got this monkey off your back!" I had no idea what monkey he was talking about; Bill had never said he saw such a creature. My friend silently pointed to my glass of wine. He found me a therapist who specializes in such mysteries as "addictions and professional women." The professional quickly concluded that the scotch I'd used to alternately silence, soothe, tune and amplify my voice had turned against me; I resented being told (again) by a man what was "wrong" with me.

Bill may have been secretly pleased when I didn't make capital partner; he openly was when I gave up drowning my sorrow over it. Had I been promoted in February, 1991, I probably would have felt compelled to stick around the Firm for a decent length of time--at least four or five years. With ascension promised for yet another year and scotch no longer clouding my vision, I understood how a person gets caught, chasing a goal simply because it's there and easy to see; I hadn't been forced yet to think of a better one.

Carpe diem. I told Bill that in October, 1992, I would take a three-month sabbatical and set sail with him from Norfolk, Virginia, to St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, as part of a race-rally called the Caribbean 1500.

* * *

My Idea

The idea occurred to me one winter day when Bill and I were vacationing in the British Virgin Islands, several years after the Caribbean 1500, and I had been sober for several years. We were at anchor early, as we often are, enjoying the spectacle as the charter boats come in, many dropping anchor for the first time, their crews screaming to one another as they try two or three times to do it right. Flying off the backstay or at the spreaders of most charter boats, there is a burgee in the company's distinctive colors with its logo emblazoned on it, a yachting version of the white boxes on the top of driving-school cars that warn in large black letters, "STUDENT DRIVER." Since we are an old-fashioned boat, without modern marine technologies like a cell phone, a laptop, a weather fax or a TV, the charter burgees tell us which boats are likely to be the most inept--the most entertaining.

In theory, the point is to choose a shallow spot in the anchorage where you will have plenty of swinging room in case the wind shifts in the night, drop the anchor (but not on top of someone else's), and wait for the boat to drift back so that the hook will dig in to the sand. One person, the helmsman, is at the tiller (usually a wheel on charter boats). Another person (and often the entire crew), positions himself on the bow, ready to drop the anchor at the precise moment the helmsman signals. If a couple is sailing alone, usually the woman is at the helm and the man handles the anchor and chain. Setting a good, confident hook on the first try is a thing of beauty, and the envy of an entire harbor of on-lookers. Sloppy, repeated attempts make you the evening's joke.

Clearly, a fair amount of tension surrounds the anchoring maneuver. Couples deal with these tensions in different ways. Usually the man shouts the first sharp words from the bow, accusing the woman of not following his directions as to where, precisely, to stop the boat, which, due to the momentum any object has when in engine-powered motion, requires a few feet, anyway, between the order and the dead stop. At the helm of a forty-five-foot boat, I find the instruction, "twenty feet ahead" incomprehensible. Since I'm only five-five, I usually can't even see the bow of the boat, let alone "ahead." Even the term "a boat length," while slightly more visual, is difficult for me to calculate from the stern. I've seen women shout some obscenity on the wind and abandon the wheel altogether to go below and put on more after-sun while the man can damn well anchor the damn boat by his damn self. Bill and I have agreed that while the frustration is to be expected, the shouting is unnecessary. We have devised a set of hand signals for his instructions, which seem to work better than bellowing orders up into the wind while the helmsman is downwind in the cockpit. The gesture for, "We are in neutral, dammit," is my holding both hands up as in a bank robbery. Only occasionally do I resort to that gesture with only my middle finger pointed up.

As soon as Bill and I are at anchor, we put on our snorkel gear and take a swim. The water in the Caribbean is so clear that we can swim over the anchor and be sure that it has buried itself deeply in the sand, and that we haven't hooked a rock or coral head. We then shower off the salt and relax in the cockpit with a cold drink, a book and our binoculars at the ready. There is much to see: pelicans and flying fish, and, of course, the charter boats.

At this time of day, the sun is no longer directly over head and the pelicans dive bomb their dinners in a feeding frenzy along the shore. Schools of tiny white fish, thousands of them, hug the reefs in translucent, watery clouds, but are easy prey. The pelicans glide, tuck their

massive wings and point their gullets straight down. There is a kathunk that always tickles me and then the splash. Along the shore, an occasional larger fish shoots out of the water on its own search, making a graceful arc as long as six feet. I instantly shout to Bill, "there!" but it's gone. I hear a dainty commotion like rapid-fire rain drops on a shallow puddle, and, off the stern of the boat, schools of silver fish, each the size and shape of a small spinner, march across the water in unison, in and out, in and out. I don't know if they are themselves fishing, or avoiding being fished.

The anchoring, the pelicans and the fish make this a special time, and distract me from the unread book on my lap as Bill and I sit in the cockpit, each with our own binoculars at the ready.

"Here comes one," Bill said on the day my idea was hatched. As with basketball, Bill is a more avid spectator of the sport of anchoring than I am. When he added, "He's making her drop the anchor," I figured "this one" might be special.

A thirty-five foot boat was coming in to our right, and I waved at the twenty-something red-head on the bow. She waved back. As the boat glided by, another woman at the wheel also raised her tanned arm.

"I guess the boys are getting the cocktails," I said, and then a brunette, short-haired head appeared in the gangway. "About time, buddy," I muttered and put down my binoculars.

"A buddy in a bikini," Bill said. Seldom does a black bikini on a perfectly tanned body pique my interest. But, counting two women on the bow of the boat, and one at the wheel, I grabbed my binoculars.

Another woman appeared, this one in a loose, sleeveless tee-shirt, the kind with large armholes. When the fifth woman appeared and took her place on deck, I finally got it.

"Hey! Hey! A girl boat!" Bill chuckled. Girl is a term of admiration when it comes from Bill, not a derogatory or diminutive one. I trained my binoculars on the boat. One of the women was laying the anchor chain on deck. The other waved "thumbs up" at the woman at the wheel. She slowed the boat and one of the foredeck crew eased the anchor over the bow. Two of the women poured out more chain, and then the line. They stood relaxed on the bow and smiled back at the woman at the helm, who stretched her arms over her head in a cat's yawn and then casually picked up a Diet Coke, the wheel unattended. In a few minutes, she juiced up the engine and inched the boat up to the anchor, as if the women were going to yank it up and try again. They were huddled over the anchor locker, doing something I couldn't see. Just as it seemed she might run over her own anchor, the captain swung the boat about 45 degrees to her starboard side and we heard another splash: the women dropped a second hook. In crowded anchorages like this, with swirling winds, a second anchor is the preferred overnight procedure, but most charterers, relieved to have set even one right, don't attempt the second.

"Bravo, girls!" Bill said. "Two anchors. Now, that's professional!"

"Do you think I could do that?" I said. "I'm not sure I could set an anchor without you."

"Of course you could," he said. "We've done it together hundreds of times. You know what they say in medical school, 'see one, do one, teach one.' "

"Hmmm," I said, wondering who could be my crew.