

### **Black Sky Mid Afternoon**

"If you've never sailed, then you've never lived."

I read aloud these peculiar words engraved into a tack box as we started down a narrow dock. I shook my head at it.

*Crazy. Just crazy.*

But I found later that day the engraving held absolutely one-hundred percent truth.

At almost twelve years old, I'll admit now, I was clueless. But I received a real education that summer day of 1981.

We'd traveled by car almost two hours from home to Port Clinton. The little lakeside town I knew nothing about, only fact I'd been informed of is that we were going sailing on our new boat.

The idea didn't shock me at first but, when I stopped in front of the thirty-two-foot Erikson, my mouth gaped open. Patiently waiting for us to board was a beautiful red fiberglass boat with its crisp white deck and gun-gray colored mast reaching towards the sky.

I couldn't believe mom had actually gone out and bought a real sailboat. Its beauty stunned me, but we weren't sailors. If anything, we were country town bumpkins.

I looked around. First at myself. I wore little red Ked sneakers, ragged edged jeans shorts and a yellow t-shirt. I shook my head. Then I looked at the rest of my family. All of us were dressed similar.

With a glance out on to the lake, a lake I'd rarely been to, you could see how blue skies colored the horizon with puffy white clouds racing as the wind became more active the further out from shore. Small whitecaps broke through the surface and dotted the water. The Marina's club members stood talking around their boats. Some scurried around in full sailor gear others in casual deck attire with coffee in hand. Most waved with a cheery hello.

Mast cables took to a rhythmic clanking and the seagulls swooped in to any unsuspecting morsel of food.

This notion that we were now sailors seemed surreal. The whole scene was far from my normal day life in Wooster, a small farming town in Ohio.

On the car trip up, mom kept telling us "It's good to try something new. You'll love it."

Worry slowly crept in with her unending assurance that now that we owned a sailboat, it made us sailors.

But when did Mom learn to sail?

I snapped out from my uneasiness when Mom called for us to board the Tabasco.

I giggled at its name. Not knowing what to do, I hopped on with my duffle bag, and headed below.

The cabin seemed huge. My inspection halted when Mom hollered at us to come up and help get Tabasco ready to sail. I hurried up, grabbed the rest of the gear and tossed it down the main hatch for my sisters, Alex and Renee, who stowed it away.

Ed and Brady untied the dock lines. Mom turned on the boats engine. My twin brother, Brady hopped on. Ed helped maneuver the boats departure as he walked it backwards from the slip. With breath caught in my chest, I watched as my older brother finally jump onto the bow.

Mom rotated the wheel and the boat swung to the left giving us a wide birth to glide down the channel. Manmade breaker walls protected the Marina and shore from any bad storms but their mission of protection didn't exude any calmness to my heart. They looked as if someone had just dumped gigantic slabs of concrete into the bay. No neat lines, just rough sharp edges that would rip into a boats hull if you came too close.

It probably took less than ten minutes to get out into the bay without incident. Once we entered the bay, I thankfully released my breath.

I inhaled the lake air. It smelled of fish at first near the marina, but clear and refreshing the more we motored towards our destination.

Energy tingled within. The bad nervousness felt earlier seemed to fade away now. After all, the boat seemed rock solid and the lake fairly calm.

Mom at the helm Announced, "We're heading to South Bass Island," but to the locals, Put-In-Bay.

She explained it would take us awhile to get there, a few hours if motored. But the weather was good and we were there to learn how to sail.

Mom gave us the basics on knots and hoisting and lowering sails. The lesson was brief and we'd caught on quickly. My older brother, Eddie radiated excitement about this adventure and wanted to get the main sail up and try the spinnaker.

At first, we kept to the bay. We tacked back and forth. We worked hard, but with the mixture of sunshine and adventure, no one complained.

We took a break for lunch. Mom pulled out turkey and cheese for sandwiches. We soon emptied the cooler full of sodas and crisp apples while munching on salty chips. To reward our hard work, Mom pulled out a plastic container of chocolate chip cookies.

We little guys practiced more knots while Renee lathered on the oil to soak in some sunrays. Eddie did a complete check of the cabin. He questioned mom on the insufficient amount of life preservers, only three when we needed six, and no ship-to-shore radio.

Mom brushed off the questions. She wasn't worried.

Immediately warning flares went up.

Not sure if by coincidence or if mom could actually sense some of the uneasiness of my older brother's revelation of no ship-to-shore radio and an insufficient amount of life jackets, she'd immediately rallied us back into position to continue our journey to Put-in-Bay.

The wind had picked up a little. We hadn't tried out the spinnaker yet and with the increase in wind, Mom gave the nod to push the rainbow colored sail through the bow's hatch. Secured to the cable and hoisted, the spinnaker filled immediately like a puffy balloon. The boat heeled to the right and we headed for South Bass Island. We tacked back and forth across the

lake making a zigzag cut through the water. Our speed had increased a few knots. The excitement of tacks and not losing our wind kept us from noticing the sky.

I looked back to Mom to ask if we could try steering, but before I could even ask, the dark sky following in our wake widened my eyes and caused my mouth to drop.

I stuttered, "Mom, "What's that sailor's warning you told us earlier?"

Mom cocked her head and studied me for what seemed like forever, but then finally recited the warning. "Red sky at night, sailors delight. Pink in morning, sailors take warning."

My stomach twisted as I shakily raised my hand and pointed behind her, "What about black skies in the afternoon?"

Mom whipped around, she swore, then hollered, "ABC, down below. Eddie and Renee we need to tack."

'Mom," I shouted as the wind picked up, "Can we go back?"

Mom shook her head, "No we'll try to outrun it. We aren't far from the island."

Really. No way.

Last I'd checked, Put-In-Bay appeared nowhere in sight. Right then I declared Mom insane.

Alex, Brady, and I immediately took shelter and dug out the three life jackets.

The rain started to come down. It was cold and pelted everything above board like little rocks.

Tabasco rolled with each swell of the waves. Water crashed over the deck. The skies got black. The sun disappeared. I wanted to throw up. It was midafternoon and with each violent tumble, the boat heeled more until finally the mast dipped into the water.

The storm raged on. Eddie and Renee lashed nylon ropes around their waists to prevent their sweep overboard. They wrestled with the main sail while Mom tried to steer the boat with the waves. Alex, Brady, and I wanted to help but each time we charged up the steps Mom screamed at us to stay below. On our final attempt, Mom pushed us back and corraled us on to the galley bench. She hurriedly searched the bookshelf behind us. The boat rocked hard, water gushed into the cabin. Mom told Brady to hit the switch for the bilge. Nothing happened. The pump didn't start. Mom swore again. If anything that day, I learned how to swear like a sailor.

Mom yanked open an encyclopedia on how to sail. She searched madly for information on how to survive a storm.

By this time, I was a neon green. I wanted to pass out but I clenched my jaw, choked back the bile and watched as Mom raced up to the deck. I didn't want her to go out there again. She had no life jacket and no rope tied around her. She hollered at Eddie and Renee to get the Spinnaker down once they secured the main.

They crawled to the bow.

I jerked when the front hatch blew open. Water immediately started to pour in.

Alex jumped up to shut it, but halted when the rainbow sail started to push through the opening.

My stomach rolled as I realized the boat was spinning in the water. Mom left the wheel to release the ropes for the spinnaker so Ed and Renee could pull it down quicker. We grabbed the sail and pulled from our end. The boat rolled and spun in a motion I didn't think possible. Renee finally dropped in through the hatch, landed on the front berth's bed. She untied her safety rope and jumped off as Eddie soon followed. Once freed, he climbed over all of us and the sail and raced up the steps. Mom continued to struggle with the helm. Together they got the boat to stop

spinning. Mom hit the motor hoping to motor us out from underneath the storm, but the motor wouldn't spark. The engine was flooded, the bilge wasn't pumping.

My heart beat like a freight train. I could have probably powered the boat to safety if I could've attached it to my chest.

Doubts swam in my head of our survival. The wind was still strong, the waves continued to crash over the deck. I huddled with the others. I closed my eyes and recited the Lord's Prayer with chattering teeth.

Then after what seemed like hours of this horrific storm, it stopped. I slowly opened my eyes. Tabasco continued to move with the swells, but water no longer rushed over the deck. The sky started to lighten.

Relief flooded me.

"We made it," I whispered, "We beat the storm."

Renee jumped up with a "woohoo!"

Then mom called us above deck. Renee scrambled up the steps first, then Brady, Alex and I.

The soaked cushions needed picked up. Some of the trash from lunch had escaped from our garbage bag, and the main sail hung off the boom like an unraveled paper towel roll.

Mom announced we would clean up and head back to the marina. The engine only worked at half power and the bilge never started to pump. She didn't want us to take on any more water.

I didn't care what the reasons for our return, I just wanted to be on hard-dry land.

Tabasco limped into the Marina. Sailor friends of Mom's spotted us coming in and met us at our slip. The dock was crowded with shocked faces. They couldn't believe we'd been out in that storm. They reported there'd been at least seven-foot waves.

I wanted to argue, no, more like ten footers, but my exhausted mom excused us to the showers. Our friends laughed letting us through. Brady and I trailed the others not speaking a word. I turned and gazed out on to the lake.

Brady nudged me on.

I looked at him trying not to let loose some giggles that pressed forward to reach my smile. "Damn, it's great to be alive."

He grinned, then we broke out into laughter.