

The Boat

by Stephen R Madden

How long to the end? An hour? Two? More? Fear flowed through his body – fear of the unknown, fear of the inevitable. Fear is just an emotion, and he was supposed to be able to control his emotions, wasn't he? Alas, he was so consumed by fear that it threatened to swallow everything he was, forcing him to retreat from his present reality. He just wanted it to end.

But onward he pressed, something inside not willing to surrender to that fear. Still pushing; still concentrating; still demanding he endure a little longer. Barely holding on, his thoughts and emotions bordered on the edge of sanity and insanity; between hope and resignation. Madness pressed against his sanity like a dark, cold night presses the light of a small candle. He remembered the term *crazy with fear*, but now he understood. He straddled that thin line between insanity and reality; he wished against all reason he could wake up from this nightmare.

A thirty-foot wave broke as he gained the crest, the icy cold water drenching him and threatening once again to send him under. The skiff began its descent down into the trough until it would once again climb the next wave. A white light flashed, accompanied by an incredible burst of thunder, companions never far apart. Again a flash of light and the crashing of thunder above the roar of the waves. The chaos of water and white light and wind and waves constantly threatened to consume him.

Up the skiff climbed upon the next wall of water, rising and rising towards the curl at the summit that would break once again. He reached the top and the water broke. He fought with every fiber of his being to keep the small ten-foot aluminum craft from capsizing.

His clothes were soaked to the skin; his hands were numb and feet icy cold. Even if he were to survive long enough to make it to land through these mountains of water, the likelihood of surviving the cold which now gripped him was small. But he refused to surrender without a fight. The next wave would come and he would do everything to surmount it. On

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and on this unceasing battle raged for what seemed like hours. Back and forth, the violent sea tried to claim him as it had his skipper's boat.

Six of his friends had already perished; he was the last. His skipper, Bill Jacobs, was a tough man, or rather had been. He had fished around Kodiak Island for over two decades and was considered one of the most knowledgeable captains in Alaska. Many crews had gone out on his boats, and all had returned with their pockets full. His boat was one of the most sought after to work on, and hence one of the most difficult to get on. Frank had been lucky to get the position of driving the skiff.

Frank respected his skipper, and like all sailors stood in awe just a little because of the authority Bill held over the crew. His orders were followed without question; none spoke against him. None would anyway because he was skipper, *and* he was Bill Jacobs.

But Frank had seen a flaw in Bill, or what he had perceived to be a flaw. Bill thought he would always beat the sea. He had sailed so often in so many different kinds of weather that he had developed a callousness towards failure. Bill did not think the sea would claim him.

Oh, every sailor knows each trip could be his last. Every man who has spent his life around the ocean any length of time knows that his days may end in the icy, cold void of its depths. So each sailor has a respect for the sea. But no skipper leaves the dock thinking it *will* happen. Once that thought enters his mind he is finished. Truth be told, some skippers have canceled a trip or delayed it because of an epiphany. But each skipper has that latent apathy against failure. They have beaten the sea before; they will do so again, and again...and again.

On occasion nature provides a not-so-gentle reminder that man has not yet conquered the elements. Man can struggle against, work with, and sometimes even influence nature. But never conquer it. Every airplane that falls from the sky, every ship that sinks, every car that skids off a roadway, each serves as a reminder that the laws of nature are unforgiving. Such events are called accidents, tragedies. Yet men continue on, reliving the illusion they have mastered the world they live in.

And so Bill Jacobs believed he would always win. When the first signs of the storm had appeared, the seine was out with Frank controlling the end with his skiff. The seas swelled to eight feet as the wind picked up, foreshadowing what was to come. The net was scheduled to be out another fifteen minutes before Frank would close it off and bring in the haul of salmon. It looked to be a large catch.

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Frank had radioed Bill his thought that it might be a good idea to bring in the net immediately and get back to land, but Bill countered they would be all right and could wait the full thirty minutes before closing the net. According to the weather reports, the full force of the storm was still hours away, so they should reach the island eight miles north with plenty of time to spare. Who knew, he said, they might even be able to throw out for one more catch before heading in since all the other boats had disappeared and they were no longer in a queue.

The minutes seemed to drag into hours, but there was nothing Frank could do but his job. Sure, he had been in foul weather before. But he had a feeling about this one, a feeling he did not care to acknowledge. He hoped he was wrong.

It has been said that some of the most dangerous fishing in the world is in the Bering Strait during the winter crab season. The sixty to one hundred-foot boats go out for six to eight weeks and come in with even the lowliest members of the crew making between thirty and fifty thousand dollars. The waves can swell to over thirty feet and even higher. Any man or woman who has a fear of the sea should never be caught in those waters. Boats have capsized, entire crews lost, people disappeared without a trace. It is a rare occurrence, but every sailor knows the danger is real.

South of Kodiak, thirty-foot waves just don't happen in June. While many sailors in Alaska claim that the weather can get as bad as a hurricane in the Atlantic, the truth is very few have ever sailed in hurricane force weather when the waves can reach up to sixty, seventy, or even a hundred feet in height. Sailors and captains are big talkers. Perhaps this is the thinking that caught the men aboard the *Judy Girl* off guard.

Southeast Asia had experienced an unusual monsoon season. The rains had been extremely light, and the humidity had been unusually high. The sun continued its relentless onslaught on the equatorial region, but the rains just did not fall. It was a meteorological anomaly, but it caused unexpected results around the world. A northerly wind from south of Australia blew heavy moist air north above the Tropic of Cancer, producing El Nino like effects. Record rainfalls fell all along the western coast of North America, extending all the way to Alaska.

These winds mixed with easterly winds from Kamchatka, thus producing mixes of cool and warm air throughout the Gulf of Alaska. It was like being in central Kansas on a hot and humid day. A cool front from the west within a matter of hours can produce storm

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activity so strong that tornadoes of incredible power can be generated. In fact, there had been reports of waterspouts throughout the Gulf, but much of that was thought to be just rumor. On this day, which had started so calmly, the ocean became a deadly battleground with every sailor caught on its waves like pawns on a gigantic chessboard. It was a day that Bill Jacobs thought he would never see.

The thirty minutes finally passed, and Frank felt some relief they were half done, but more so that the waves had not grown since his conversation with Bill. Hell, they might have even gotten smaller, though he was not certain. Maybe he had been a bit too anxious. No matter now; they had fish to catch.

He drove the skiff in an arc towards Chris, who stood at the winch ready to secure the line to the winch. The cork line floating on the surface formed a gigantic circle as Frank drew closer. The lead line was below the water under the cork line; the fish would be caught in the seine between. Closing the cork and lead lines would capture the fish, after which the winch would pull the lead and cork lines onto the boat from the boom, which also included the net between them. These would be stacked on the rear deck until the seine was fully closed at the bottom. Once closed, the boom, the bottom pole extending from the mast affixed with pulleys for the lines, would raise the net of fish from the water, swing above the deck and dump the fish into hold, presently stocked with ice at the bottom.

Frank plowed through the eight-foot waves and handed the end of the line off to Chris, who attached it to the winch. With the bottom of the net now closing, Frank circled around the bow of the *Judy Girl* to the port side and attached another line to her. His line was attached to the rear of the skiff, and he now drove his boat to port until his line was almost without slack, opposite the side where the net of fish was closing. He would drive the skiff full throttle to port once the boom raised the closed seine from the water, providing counter-balance to the weight of fish. This would take almost thirty minutes, and then hopefully they would head back in.

Rick pulled the leads while Andy stacked the corks and the net. Chris controlled the winch as the rings, used to attach the net to the lead line, continued onto the boat, closing the net ever tighter around their catch. This *was* going to be a big catch.

The last ring came aboard and now the net was fully closed. The boat struggled against the weight of the fish; she listed heavily to starboard and the boom seemed to bend with the weight of the catch. As Chris powered the winch to raise the net, the boat listed even more.

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The catch was just too heavy, even with Frank pulling full-throttle to port. There were so many fish. Water flooded the deck through the scuppers on the starboard side; the boat was fighting with everything it had.

After struggling for several minutes, Bill directed Chris to lower the net back into the water and have Frank move the skiff around and ram the net when they tried again. This would hopefully provide enough of a start that part of the haul would come aboard and thus lighten the load on the net and give the boom the advantage it needed to pull the catch aboard.

So Frank detached his line and circled around the stern in preparation to ram the net.

It is the job of the pilot to maneuver the boat so that it is in the best position possible not only to bring aboard a catch of fish, but also to remain afloat. Rogue waves can appear even on calm days, so the pilot must always be careful to watch. Unfortunately, Bill had become so engrossed in bringing the fish aboard that he lost track of the position of the boat in relation to the waves. On a normal day the listing would not be a problem, but the waves were swelling and had now risen to almost ten feet. On land that may not seem very high, but in the middle of the ocean on a forty-eight footer, it can be monstrous.

They began their attack on the net once more. The boat listed more to starboard as the net rose from the water, further increased by the waves. Frank rammed the net, and fish spilled onto the deck; the boat listed more and more. Everyone was focused on the net, and as the fish started piling onto the deck, it appeared they were close to gaining the advantage needed to raise the boom fully above the hold and finish the catch. Bill piloted the boat to fall into troughs at off angles; thus the boat would not fall straight into the troughs.

But the waves were getting steeper and some were breaking. When *the* wave came, Bill could do nothing. Even if he had been given ample warning, he would have been hard-pressed to prevent the boat from capsizing. As it was, the moment he realized what was happening, it was too late. Halfway up the large swell, Bill looked up and cursed under his breath.

“Damn.”

The wave broke, spewing green seawater as if the wave itself were sick. The *Judy Girl* turned a somersault under the breaking water and lay on her side, descending into the trough with more of her under than above the water. Frank had managed to keep the skiff from capsizing, but his relief was short-lived. He watched in horror as the *Judy Girl* lay dying.

Neither Rick, Andy, nor Chris could be seen. They had either been swept overboard or were trapped under the net. Curt and Jake, who worked in the kitchen, were probably still

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inside, struggling to get out. But the net had sprawled over the back of the boat, lines everywhere, so even if they managed to reach the door to the deck they would not be able to escape.

The *Judy Girl* was sinking fast now, the pilothouse and mast all that remained above the ocean. Bill was nowhere to be seen. Frank piloted the skiff closer to her as she rose and fell in the next two swells, but he was powerless to help. He could only watch and hope that someone had escaped.

Then came another fifteen-foot breaker. Water covered the *Judy Girl* completely, and after the water passed the boat was almost done. While she lay on her side, still above water, the fish remaining in the net struggled to escape.

Oh God! Please let someone get out!

It was all he could think.

Two more swells, then another breaker hit her. After the wave passed, the *Judy Girl* was gone.

At first Frank despaired. But that quickly turned to fear, then anger as he realized what had happened. Why had Bill been so bull-headed about getting to harbor? Why was he so proud? Alas, Bill was now dead along with the rest of the crew.

Frank had to find his way back to shore to survive.

Frank did not know how long, but it had been some time since the boat had gone down. He could not see Kodiak Island, although he believed the waves headed that direction. If the sea turned while he tried to follow the waves, however, he would miss the island entirely and be swept northeast, which meant he would die.

The seas had risen to thirty-foot breakers and swells. Frank knew the skiff had very little fuel left, and if he didn't get back to land before it ran out he had no chance. Everything was stacked against him. Part of him wanted to hide away and curl up in a ball and die. Get it over with. Stop this insanity. But another part of him could never give up. It would be ultimate cowardice to give in when he had a chance. He would use every chance he had. Life was sweet and worth living. What was there in death that he had to look forward to? The end of his present fear? That was not good enough. Fear be damned. Faith be damned. He wanted to live!

He cursed the storm. He made it personal.

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“You won’t get me, foul tempest! I am not yours! You cannot have me!”

He continued, knowing that indeed the sea would probably claim him. There were worse ways to die, to be sure. It was better than torture, after all. Perhaps he would die of hypothermia before it even came to that. After all, he could no longer feel his feet or his hands; they were so cold. Yet the fire within demanded nothing less of him than total effort and the will to live.

On and on he fought to keep the skiff afloat. How long had it been, really? What would his family think? What kinds of monuments or memorials would they erect in the name of the men on the *Judy Girl*? Plaques and memorials looking out over the peaceful waves were raised for those who had been lost at sea. He had seen the documentary about the Edmund Fitzgerald and how divers had recovered the bell and placed it on the banks of Lake Ontario. Would some kind of memorial be raised in his honor? And why? Because his skipper had ignored the danger they were in? Well, that was unfair – how could he have known? How could anyone have known? It was unfair to blame Bill.

The Sea was his enemy. It had a life of its own, an anger and hunger that could not be denied. The Sea had put him into this position. The Sea had deceived Bill Jacobs, lured him into her calm arms only to crush them all. Bill must be a sort of Judas Iscariot, except there were no thirty pieces of silver, only the promise of all those fish that must even now still be trapped. The Sea represented all that had fought against him throughout his life. From the bullies larger than he as a child, to the men and women who had laughed at him or mistreated him, all that anger and angst was directed at his enemy – the Sea.

The battle raged on, or was it really a battle? Was the Sea just toying with him, leading him on like a girl at a dance who pretends she wants the class clown?

Up a wave, down a trough, up the next wave, down the next trough. And then he saw a miracle.

He saw land!

It was very close, perhaps a mile away. How blessed that sight was! All that anger against the Sea turned into a warm feeling that gave him renewed confidence he might make it after all. He felt it like the promise of a warm fire as a man travels through the wintry snow and sees a yellow glow through a window. He felt hope.

At the top of each wave the land appeared, then disappeared as he sank into each trough, its memory printed in his mind. The waves were smaller now, perhaps twenty feet

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high, maybe even less. Hope within him grew. He embraced it, caressed it, allowed it to flow through him and motivate him and lead him home. He allowed himself to believe he might actually make it. He might yet live! Oh blessed life!

As he crested each wave, he saw the land was closer. A few hundred yards now. He was so close! It was there!

He pictured the beach as a lady holding out her arms and welcoming him to her embrace. The waves were only about ten feet high now, but constantly breaking and still rough. But he did not notice because he was almost to safety. Controlling the skiff was so much more difficult now, but confidence grew within him.

He steered the boat across the waves, not directly at the beach. He felt an energy within him, a newfound resolve. He could not feel his hands or feet, but it did not matter. He was going to make it.

How could he get the boat to shore without capsizing? He knew the energy of the water was such that the closer he got to shore the more dangerous it would become and the more difficulty he would have in not capsizing the skiff. But after all he had been through he was not about to fail now. Not with the land so close. Not with life so close.

He rose to the top of a ten-foot swell and saw the shore; the gray sand with the green trees just beyond. The green leaves waved in the strong winds; he imagined them as a huge crowd encouraging him home, wanting him so desperately to make it. He would not disappoint.

He was about to enter the area where it would get tricky. The waves ahead were breaking intensely. Once he reached those waters, he would be carried forward with a new momentum. That was where it would be decided if he were to live or die. Each result was divided by a razor thin line, one so thin no one would choose to walk it.

Just three swells from the breakers. Now two. Now one.

Climbing the last swell, he was about to enter what he called *the zone*. The breaks were not consistent but they were all violent. A wave would start breaking at either end and meet in the middle. Some waves overtook the waves in front, at times killing the break and at other times increasing the break. It was chaos. But he had to get through it to reach safety.

He would try to hit the next wave in the middle, before it broke. He figured that was probably the best plan to avoid capsizing. Pausing slightly, he pushed the throttle to hit that wave with speed.

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The engine sputtered.

“No! Not this close! Give me just two damn minutes and I’ll be there. Just two more minutes, damn you!”

The wave passed beneath him. He looked to climb the next wave to the spot where it did not break. He was throttling and backing off the engine to control the boat in the waves.

The engine sputtered again. Then it cut out, then back in. The fuel was almost exhausted.

“Dammit! Not yet!”

His plea was futile. The engine cut out completely.

He no longer had control of the skiff. He would have to ride it into shore and hope for the best. He was so close!

Maybe a hundred yards. The next wave was on him quickly. It carried him forward but pitched the boat to its side. As the water broke over top of him, it threw him from the boat and plunged him into the icy, cold ocean.

Boom! He spun in the water and fought to get to the surface, but he did not know where it was. He held his breath and spun round and round. He was not ready and needed breath. Somehow his head popped above the surface and he breathed. The relief was short-lived.

Another wave hit him and forced him under. He spun round again and fought his way to the surface. It was so hard to kick and swim and stay above the water. He hoped there was no undertow. He attempted feebly to swim to shore, but it was taking everything he had left to stay above water.

Time was running out. He could feel it.

He was exhausted and cold. He had lost feeling in his hands and feet long before, and the cold water was sapping the remaining heat left to him. Oddly, a warmth began spreading throughout his body. This scared him because he knew it meant he was close to total breakdown...death.

“No!” he yelled when he surfaced again. He fought for the shore as each wave dragged him under. Perhaps it would be his last word, but at least he had given it everything he had. He was not done yet!

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Again and again. He rose with the waves, then went under when they broke, spinning round until he rose again. The shore continued to get closer. The trees waved in the wind. How close he was!

He kicked his legs and waved his arms so hard to stay above the water, but his body was no longer responding. It was like moving against wet cement. His fate no longer rested with his efforts and he knew it. It rested with the gods, or God, or luck, or whatever was out there that determined these sorts of things.

At that moment time froze for him. In that moment, the whole of his life rushed through his head in one shining, clear point of focus. All emotions were gone. The fear was gone. The hope. What was left was the thought that he had done everything he could and there was nothing left. He had given his all. He had given his best.

If he lived, he would be a changed man. Life would be profoundly different. If he died, at least he knew he had fought hard and proven to himself there was more to him than he had ever imagined. But even then, at this moment, those things did not matter. He simply was. Is this what Buddha meant by Nirvana? What a question.

And as with all moments that have ever been or ever will be, this one passed.

The next wave rushed forward and hurled Frank Wilson with it, carrying his hopes, dreams, desires, and all that was him into the waters once again. He churned round and round, feeling his momentum increase, being totally relaxed and at peace. The fight was gone, and he wondered what would come after. He looked...where...beneath him, or left? Did it really matter?

He fought to hold his breath, then realized he was above the water once again. He took in a deep breath as he saw the next wave approach, a large wave with the crest already breaking, like a surfer sees where the water forms a cone that closes. When the point of the cone reached him, he heard a loud thunderous boom and then everything faded to black.

Boyd Tillman had walked the beaches every morning for twenty years, since the day he had retired from the cannery. He had made his money, married, fathered one son who now lived in Phoenix and worked as a lawyer, and was generally a happy man. He walked the beaches because each morning brought new beauties to experience, and because it brought back memories of his late wife who had been the love of his life. Though she had left him almost two years before, he was still completely in love with her.

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He also walked the beaches because Jim at the Coast Guard asked him to alert them to anything unusual he might find.

Seven years ago he had discovered the bodies of two men who had gone down with a fishing boat and been washed ashore. He always carried a radio, so called in his grisly discovery. The radio was his own. He enjoyed his walks. Life was good in his sunset years, though he missed Eve beyond belief...still.

This morning promised a beautiful day. The sun sat just below the eastern horizon, soon to break forth into the golden eastern sky. Yellow and purple rays spanned across the clear purple sky high above, a surreal picture of wonder. A soft gentle breeze blew from the south, almost an irony after yesterday's terrible weather. Who said magic was not real?

Reports had been circulating that three boats had gone down out in the Gulf, and of those three the *Judy Girl* had been closest to this part of the island. Reports stated the beacon sounded off sometime around ten in the evening, still light out, but rescue efforts were nearly impossible. Cutters were combing the area and had been for the past few hours, but at last word nothing had been found.

Boyd strolled along the beach with a walking stick, observing the beautiful tapestry of the sky while keeping an eye towards the woods. He carried a rifle, just in case he met any of Kodiak's famous inhabitants – Kodiak bears.

Up ahead a metal skiff sat on the beach, upside down and severely dented. *Judy Girl* was written on the bow; not a good sign. It looked to Boyd like the boat had been driven into the ground bow first. He looked inside from underneath but there was no one. He radioed in that he had found the skiff, then continued on.

Further ahead he saw the body of a seal, which he initially thought was a shadow. As he drew closer, he realized he was wrong about that – it was a man. He rushed forward quickly to help, seeing the man lying on his back.

The young man had a handsome face, with shoulder-length brown hair and a strong chin. He looked to be in his thirties, but you could never tell with fisherman. Yes, this was a man who lived on the sea. His hands were callused and rough.

Boyd reached down and felt for a pulse – perhaps the man lived. The skin was too cold. The eyelids were just a bit open, giving the appearance the man was asleep. Boyd felt along the neck, then each wrist. He put his ear to the man's chest and listened for a heart beat. Nothing.

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He would radio this in, and people would arrive to take the young man away, but there would be no rush. Boyd searched for any kind of identification, but found nothing, as he expected.

“Well my good man, what story would you have to tell?”

He pulled out his radio and looked out to sea. It was really quite beautiful today. The sea was as calm as glass, with gentle ripples just caressing the shore. He wondered what kind of man this was he had just found, and what his last thoughts were. Boyd knew his own day was not far off, but it was a shame that one so young had reached his end so early in life. As Boyd turned on his radio and adjusted to the correct frequency, he could not help but think...*poor bastard.*