The Perfect Storm

Sebastian Junger

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Extract

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GEORGES BANK, 1896

ONE mid-winter day off the coast of Massachusetts, the crew of a mackerel schooner spotted a bottle with a note in it. The schooner was on Georges Bank, one of the most dangerous fishing grounds in the world, and a bottle with a note in it was a dire sign indeed. A deckhand scooped it out of the water, the sea grass was stripped away, and the captain uncorked the bottle and turned to his assembled crew: "On Georges Bank with our cable gone our rudder gone and leaking. Two men have been swept away and all hands have been given up as our cable is gone and our rudder is gone. The one that picks this up let it be known. God have mercy on us."



The note was from the Falcon, *a boat that had set sail from Gloucester the year before. She hadn't been heard from since. A boat that parts her cable off Georges careens helplessly along until she fetches up in some shallow water and gets pounded to pieces by the surf. One of the* Falcon*'s crew must have wedged himself against a bunk in the fo'c'sle and written furiously beneath the heaving light of a storm lantern. This was the end, and everyone on the boat would have known it. How do men act on a sinking ship? Do they hold each other? Do they pass around the whisky? Do they cry?*

This man wrote; he put down on a scrap of paper the last moments of twenty men in this world. Then he corked the bottle and threw it overboard. There's not a chance in hell, he must have thought. And then he went below again. He breathed in deep. He tried to calm himself. He readied himself for the first shock of sea.

GLOUCESTER, MASS., 1991

It's no fish ye're buying, it's men's lives.

—SIR WALTER SCOTT
The Antiquary, *Chapter 11*

A SOFT fall rain slips down through the trees and the smell of ocean is so strong that it can almost be licked off the air. Trucks rumble along Rogers Street and men in t-shirts stained with fishblood shout to each other from the decks of boats. Beneath them the ocean swells up against the black pilings and sucks back down to the barnacles. Beer cans and old pieces of styrofoam rise and fall and pools of spilled diesel fuel undulate like huge iridescent jellyfish. The boats rock and creak against their ropes and seagulls complain and hunker down and complain some more. Across Rogers Street and around the back of the Crow's Nest Inn, through the door and up the cement stairs, down the carpeted hallway and into one of the doors on the left, stretched out on a double bed in room #27 with a sheet pulled over him, Bobby Shatford lies asleep.



He's got one black eye. There are beer cans and food wrappers scattered around the room and a duffel bag on the floor with t-shirts and flannel shirts and blue jeans spilling out.

Lying asleep next to him is his girlfriend, Christina Cotter. She's an attractive woman in her early forties with rust-blond hair and a strong, narrow face. There's a T.V. in the room and a low chest of drawers with a mirror on top of it and a chair of the sort they have in high-school cafeterias. The plastic cushion cover has cigarette burns in it. The window looks out on Rogers Street where trucks ease themselves into fish-plant bays.

It's still raining. Across the street is Rose Marine, where fishing boats fuel up, and across a small leg of water is the State Fish Pier, where they unload their catch. The State Pier is essentially a huge parking lot on pilings, and on the far side, across another leg of water, is a boatyard and a small park where mothers bring their children to play. Looking over the park on the corner of Haskell Street is an elegant brick house built by the famous Boston architect, Charles Bulfinch. It originally stood on the corner of Washington and Summer Streets in Boston, but in 1850 it was jacked up, rolled onto a barge, and transported to Gloucester. That is where Bobby's mother, Ethel, raised four sons and two daughters. For the past fourteen years she has been a day-time bartender at the Crow's Nest. Ethel's grandfather was a fisherman and both her daughters dated fishermen and all four of the sons fished at one point or another. Most of them still do.

The Crow's Nest windows face east into the coming day over a street used at dawn by reefer trucks. Guests don't tend to sleep late. Around eight o'clock in the morning, Bobby Shatford struggles awake. He has flax-brown hair, hollow cheeks, and a sinewy build that has seen a lot of work. In a few hours he's due on a swordfishing boat named the *Andrea Gail,* which is headed on a one-month trip to the Grand Banks. He could return with five thousand dollars in his pocket or he could not return at all. Outside, the rain drips on. Chris groans, opens her eyes, and squints up at him. One of Bobby's eyes is the color of an overripe plum.

Did I do that?

Yeah.

Jesus.

She considers his eye for a moment. How did I reach that high?

They smoke a cigarette and then pull on their clothes and grope their way downstairs. A metal fire door opens onto a back alley, they push it open and walk around to the Rogers Street entrance. The Crow's Nest is a block-long faux-Tudor construction across from the J. B. Wright Fish Company and Rose Marine. The plate-glass window in front is said to be the biggest barroom window in town. That's quite a distinction in a town where barroom windows are made small so that patrons don't get thrown through them. There's an old pool table, a pay phone by the door, and a horseshoe-shaped bar. Budweiser costs a dollar seventy-five, but as often as not there's a fisherman just in from a trip who's buying for the whole house. Money flows through a fisherman like water through a fishing net; one regular ran up a $4,000 tab in a week.

Bobby and Chris walk in and look around. Ethel's behind the bar, and a couple of the town's earlier risers are already gripping bottles of beer. A shipmate of Bobby's named Bugsy Moran is seated at the bar, a little dazed. Rough night, huh? Bobby says. Bugsy grunts. His real name is Michael. He's got wild long hair and a crazy reputation and everyone in town loves him. Chris invites him to join them for breakfast and Bugsy slides off his stool and follows them out the door into the light rain. They climb into Chris's 20-year-old Volvo and drive down to the White Hen Pantry and shuffle in, eyes bloodshot, heads throbbing. They buy sandwiches and cheap sunglasses and then they make their way out into the unrelenting greyness of the day. Chris drives them back to the Nest and they pick up 30-year-old Dale Murphy, another crew member from the *Andrea Gail,* and head out of town.

Dale's nickname is Murph, he's a big grizzly bear of a guy

from Bradenton Beach, Florida. He has shaggy black hair, a thin beard, and angled, almost Mongolian eyes; he gets a lot of looks around town. He has a three-year-old baby, also named Dale, whom he openly adores. His ex-wife, Debra, was three-time Southwestern Florida Women's boxing champion and by all rights, young Dale is going to be a bruiser. Murph wants to get him some toys before he leaves, and Chris takes the three men to the shopping center out by Good Harbor Beach. They go into the Ames and Bobby and Bugsy get extra thermals and sweats for the trip and Murph walks down the aisles, filling a cart with Tonka trucks and firemen's helmets and ray guns. When he can't fit any more in he pays for it, and they all pile into the car and drive back to the Nest. Murph gets out and the other three decide to drive around the corner to the Green Tavern for another drink.

The Green Tavern looks like a smaller version of the Nest, all brick and false timber. Across the street is a bar called Bill's; the three bars form the Bermuda Triangle of downtown Gloucester. Chris and Bugsy and Bobby walk in and seat themselves at the bar and order a round of beers. The television's going and they watch it idly and talk about the trip and the last night of craziness at the Nest. Their hangovers are starting to soften. They drink another round and maybe half an hour goes by and finally Bobby's sister Mary Anne walks in. She's a tall blonde who inspires crushes in the teenaged sons of some of her friends, but there's a certain no-nonsense air about her that has always kept Bobby on his toes. Oh shit, here she comes, he whispers.

He hides his beer behind his arm and pulls the sunglasses down over his black eye. Mary Anne walks up. What do you think I am, stupid? she asks. Bobby pulls the beer out from hiding. She looks at his eye. Nice one, she says.

I was in a riff downtown.

Right.

Someone buys her a wine cooler and she takes a couple of

sips. I just came to make sure you were getting on the boat, she says. You shouldn't be drinking so early in the day.

Bobby's a big, rugged kid. He was sickly as a child—he had a twin who died a few weeks after birth—but as he got older he got stronger and stronger. He used to play tackle football in pick-up games where broken bones were a weekly occurrence. In his jeans and hooded sweatshirt he looks like such a typical fisherman that a photographer once took a picture of him for a postcard of the waterfront; but still, Mary Anne's his older sister, and he's in no position to contradict her.

Chris loves you, he says suddenly. I do, too.

Mary Anne isn't sure how to react. She's been angry at Chris lately—because of the drinking, because of the black eye—but Bobby's candor has thrown her off. He's never said anything like that to her before. She stays long enough to finish her wine cooler and then heads out the door.

THE first time Chris Cotter saw the Crow's Nest she swore she'd never go in; it just looked too far down some road in life she didn't want to be on. She happened to be friends with Mary Anne Shatford, however, and one day Mary Anne dragged her through the heavy wooden door and introduced her around. It was a fine place: people bought drinks for each other like they said hello and Ethel cooked up a big pot of fish chowder from time to time, and before Chris knew it she was a regular. One night she noticed a tall young man looking at her and she waited for him to come over, but he never did. He had a taut, angular face, square shoulders, and a shy cast to his eyes that made her think of Bob Dylan. The eyes alone were enough. He kept looking at her but wouldn't come over, and finally he started heading for the door.

Where are *you* goin'? she said, blocking his way.

To the Mariner.

The Irish Mariner was next door and in Chris's mind it

was *really* down the road to hell. I'm not crossin' over, thought Chris, I'm in the Nest and that's enough, the Mariner's the bottom of the bucket. And so Bobby Shatford walked out of her life for a month or so. She didn't see him again until New Year's Eve.

"I'm in the Nest," she says, "and he's across the bar and the place is packed and insane and it's gettin' near the twelve o'clock thing and finally Bobby and I talk and go over to another party. I hung with Bobby, and I did, I brought him home and we did our thing, our drunken thing and I remember waking up the next morning and looking at him and thinking, Oh my God this is a nice man what have I done? I told him, You gotta get out of here before my kids wake up, and after that he started callin' me."

Chris was divorced and had three children and Bobby was separated and had two. He was bartending and fishing to pay off a child-support debt and splitting his time between Haskell Street and his room above the Nest. (There are a dozen or so rooms available, and they're very cheap if you know the right person. Like your mother, the bartender.) Soon Chris and Bobby were spending every minute together; it was as if they'd known each other their whole lives. One evening while drinking mudslides at the Mariner—Chris had crossed over—Bobby got down on his knees and asked her to marry him. Of *course* I will! she screamed, and then, as far as they were concerned, a life together was only a matter of time.

Time—and money. Bobby's wife had sued him for non-payment of child support, and it went to court late in the spring of 1991. Bobby's choice was to make a payment or go to jail right then and there, so Ethel came up with the money, and afterward they all went to a bar to recover. Bobby proposed to Chris again, in front of Ethel this time, and when they were alone he said that he had a site on the *Andrea Gail* if he wanted it. The *Andrea Gail* was a well-known sword boat captained by an old friend of the family's,

Billy Tyne. Tyne had essentially been handed the job by the previous skipper, Charlie Reed, who was getting out of swordfishing because the money was starting to dwindle. (Reed had sent three children to private college on the money he made on the *Andrea Gail.*) Those days were over, but she was still one of the most lucrative boats in the harbor. Bobby was lucky to get a site on her.

Swordfishing's a lot of money, it'll pay off everything I owe, he told Chris.

That's good, how long do you go out for?

Thirty days.

Thirty days? Are you crazy?

"We were in love and we were jealous and I just couldn't imagine it," says Chris. "I couldn't even imagine half a day."

SWORD boats are also called longliners because their mainline is up to forty miles long. It's baited at intervals and paid out and hauled back every day for ten or twenty days. The boats follow the swordfish population like seagulls after a day trawler, up to the Grand Banks in the summer and down to the Caribbean in the winter, eight or nine trips a year. They're big boats that make big money and they're rarely in port more than a week at a time to gear-up and make repairs. Some boats go as far away as the coast of Chile to catch their fish, and fishermen think nothing of grabbing a plane to Miami or San Juan to secure a site on a boat. They're away for two or three months and then they come home, see their families, and head back out again. They're the high rollers of the fishing world and a lot of them end up exactly where they started. "They suffer from a lack of dreams," as one local said.

Bobby Shatford, however, did happen to have some dreams. He wanted to settle down, get his money problems behind him, and marry Chris Cotter. According to Bobby Shatford, the woman he was separated from was from a very wealthy

family, and he didn't understand why he should owe so much money, but obviously the courts didn't see it that way. He wasn't going to be free until everything was paid off, which would be seven or eight trips on the *Andrea Gail*—a good year of fishing. So in early August, 1991, Bobby left on the first swordfishing trip of his life. When they left the dock his eyes swept the parking lot, but Chris had already gone. It was bad luck, they'd decided, to watch your lover steam out to sea.

Chris had no way of knowing when Bobby was due in, so after several weeks she started spending a lot of time down at Rose's wharf, where the *Andrea Gail* takes out, waiting for her to come into view. There are houses in Gloucester where grooves have been worn into the floorboards by women pacing past an upstairs window, looking out to sea. Chris didn't wear down any floorboards, but day after day she filled up the ash tray in her car. In late August a particularly bad hurricane swept up the coast—Hurricane Bob—and Chris went over to Ethel's and did nothing but watch the Weather Channel and wait for the phone to ring. The storm flattened entire groves of locust trees on Cape Cod, but there was no bad news from the fishing fleet so, uneasily, Chris went back to her lookout at Rose's.

Finally, one night in early September, the phone rang in Chris's apartment. It was Billy Tyne's new girlfriend, calling from Florida. They're coming in tomorrow night, she said. I'm flying into Boston, could you pick me up?

"I was a wreck, I was out of my mind," says Chris. "I picked Billy's girlfriend up at Logan and the boat came in while I was gone. We pulled up across the street from the Nest and we could see the *Andrea Gail* tied up by Rose's and so I flew across the street and the door opens and it was Bobby. He went, 'Aaagh,' and he picked me up in the air and I had my legs wrapped around his waist and we must've been there twenty minutes like that, I wouldn't get off him, I couldn't, it had been thirty days and there was no way in hell."

The collected company in the bar watched the reunion through the window. Chris asked Bobby if he'd found a card

that she'd hidden in his seabag before he left. He had, he said. He read it every night.

Yeah, right, said Chris.

Bobby put her down in front of the door and recited the letter word for word. The guys were bustin' my balls so bad I had to hide it in a magazine, he said. Bobby pulled Chris into the Nest and bought her a drink and they clinked bottles for his safe homecoming. Billy was there with his girlfriend hanging off him and Alfred was on the payphone to his girlfriend in Maine and Bugsy was getting down to business at the bar. The night had achieved a nearly vertical takeoff, everyone was drinking and screaming because they were home safe and with people they loved. Bobby Shatford was now crew on one of the best sword boats on the East Coast.

THEY'D been at sea a month and taken fifteen tons of swordfish. Prices fluctuate so wildly, though, that a sword boat crew often has no idea how well they've done until after the fish have been sold. And even then there's room for error: boat owners have been known to negotiate a lower price with the buyer and then recover part of their loss in secret. That way they don't share the entire profit with their crew. Be that as it may, the *Andrea Gail* sold her catch to O'Hara Seafoods for $136,812, plus another $4,770 for a small amount of tuna. Bob Brown, the owner, first took out for fuel, fishing tackle, bait, a new mainline, wharfage, ice, and a hundred other odds and ends that added up to over $35,000. That was deducted from the gross, and Brown took home half of what was left: roughly $53,000. The collected crew expenses—food, gloves, shore help—were paid on credit and then deducted from the other $53,000, and the remainder was divided up among the crew: Almost $20,000 to Captain Billy Tyne, $6,453 to Pierre and Murphy, $5,495 to Moran, and $4,537 each to Shatford and Kosco. The shares were calculated by seniority and if Shatford and Kosco didn't like it, they were free to find another boat.