

RIDING THE STORMS  
by  
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(Slightly rewritten portions of this essay appear in Charrie's novel, *Falling into the Sun*)

The psychologist I have hired to help my son tells him he is drowning.

My 13-year-old son is indignant.

"I'm not drowning," he says irritably.

"Yes," comes the soft reply, "you are."

We sit in silence that stretches. My son stares at the floor, his dark mood seemingly a reflection of his short, spiky hair, the color of smoldering embers. Like mine, his auburn hair comes from his grandfather, as does his fair skin and the small smattering of freckles across the bridge of his nose. As the silence drags on, I shift my gaze from my son to the bookcase, where tomes on attention deficit and defiant child disorders sit side by side with Shakespeare. I glance out the window overlooking a narrow alley and the young live oak beyond. I examine the brown-and-green stuffed turtle on the end table beside the couch where I sit. I stroke the turtle's soft plush while I desperately try to loosen the knot that binds the pit of my stomach, the same knot that forms every time I enter this office.

"You know, when you're trying to rescue a drowning person, you never approach him head on," the psychologist resumes serenely. "When you approach a drowning person head on, you risk getting caught in his struggle, and you both go down. You both drown."

I look at the counselor. He's about my age, his thinning hair a shade lighter than my son's. He leans forward, elbows on knees, gazing intently; a slight smile plays on his lips. I was a lifeguard in my teens. I know he's right. I know what he's going to say next. I dread it.

"I think that's the mistake your parents keep making. They try to help you by approaching you head on and you all end up going under in the struggle."

Another void. My son finds the rug fascinating. I look at one of the three clocks the counselor has stationed like sentinels about his office. The hands move across their faces silently, indiscernibly. The grains of time sift slowly here, but run out quickly.

“What you need is an anchor,” the counselor says in a hushed tone. “Who could you use as an anchor?”

Again silence. My son fidgets, examines his nails, eventually looks up, catches the counselor’s eye and shrugs in surprise.

“You asking me?” His acting is almost convincing.

“Yes.”

“I dunno.”

“Think. Who could be your anchor when those emotional storms threaten to sweep you out to sea, threaten to overwhelm you?”

“I dunno,” my son repeats dumbly, shrugging. The counselor waits.

“You maybe?” he finally ventures, refusing to make eye contact now.

“No,” the counselor says, shaking his head. “I’m not at your home when things fall apart. You can’t call me every time problems arise. I’m not always available. You need someone who can be there for you. Can you think of someone?”

My son can’t think. Nor can I.

Another prickly silence.

“How about your mom?” the counselor poses. “Could your mom be your anchor?”

My son doesn’t answer.

“She’s very strong.”

“I know she is,” my son says quietly, but with surprising conviction.

The sharp pain in my chest makes me realize I have stopped breathing. I pull in air, deeply, shakily. Now I'm the one who finds the rug enthralling.

I'm flattered by the psychologist's assessment, but even more incredulous. I cannot imagine myself an anchor for anyone, least of all my stormy son, whose rages have only recently, belatedly, been attributed to bipolar disorder. I have just lost my own anchor and am adrift, capsized, on the turbulent, squall-ridden sea that is my son's and my relationship. I feel tossed, pounded, crushed by the waves of physical violence that have left family members with bruised bodies, broken bones and harrowed hearts. But mostly I feel angry at the squalls; angry that I am so easily overwhelmed; angry that, for the first time in my life, I'm afraid of the water.

How can flotsam be an anchor?

I wish I could ask my father this question. A strong swimmer, a master sailor, my father was at ease on the sea. He loved the water, which is why I grew up on the Virginia shores of the Potomac. He gave me this love as he taught my brother and me how to navigate the river's mile-wide waters in his twenty-one-foot sloop. He taught us to find peace in the murmurings of her placid, patinous waves lapping the shore and beauty in the wind-whipped fury of her steel gray whitecaps. Most important, he taught us to respect her.

At the tip of the isolated peninsula where we lived, the river's current collided with a backwash from the channel, creating a deadly vortex hidden beneath the Potomac's deceptively calm surface. I remember as a teenager waking one night to the distant wail of a siren. I pulled myself up on my knees to peer out my bedroom window. The doleful siren grew louder, reaching its pitch as the rescue squad raced past our house, motorboat in tow, the trailer spitting gravel as it careened behind the speeding truck. As the trailer disappeared down the road, I felt a tender yet firm touch on my shoulder. I turned to see my father standing by my bed, staring out the

window. Our eyes met. His furrowed brow mirrored my own misgivings. The siren died away. After a long silence, my father said, “Come. Let’s have a drink.”

We walked to the kitchen. Without speaking, he poured himself a short Scotch on the rocks and me a tall apple juice. We wandered into the living room and stood before the picture window overlooking the dark water. We both knew the river had swallowed someone that night.

“Look,” Dad said, pointing to the dancing path of silver the full moon cast across the rippling water. “Beautiful.”

I didn’t answer.

“The river is beautiful,” he continued softly. “But we must never forget how powerful she is, how treacherous she can be.” He shook his drink for a moment, clinking the ice cubes against the glass, then took a sip and turned to me. “That doesn’t mean we should fear her,” he said as if he had felt my trembling heart. “Always respect her. Hold her in awe. But don’t be afraid of her. Fear is a poor counselor. It compromises us; it compromises our judgment.”

The next day, Dad, my brother Charlie and I went sailing. The wind was high and we sailed close-hauled, cutting through the chop at a fast clip, so fast the centerboard trembled in its casing, creating a slight hum.

“She’s singing,” Dad called out, his balding head covered by a Redskins cap bleached pink by countless summer days on the river. The wind whisked away each puff of smoke from the pipe clenched in his teeth even as he smiled.

“Hear her?”

I nodded back at him from my perch on the bow where I clung to the pulpit. Laughter spilled from me as the wind tore at my hair, the cold spray stung my face and the boat’s song reached my ear. I looked back at Charlie, who was manning the tiller with a light touch, feeling her play, gently searching for the boat’s limit. His russet curls flamed with the sun’s rays. His

brown eyes reflected my laughter. I felt perfectly safe with these two sailors, even as the boat heeled so the leeward gunwale threatened to kiss the water.

We heard the news when we returned home. Teenagers. Not local. A late-night party at the point. Beer. Skinny-dipping. Panicked splashing. Two disappeared. Their bodies had yet to be recovered.

They had committed the cardinal sin for any sailor or swimmer, according to my father. They had entered a water strange to them without first familiarizing themselves with her idiosyncrasies. Then, when the river wrapped her long, unrelenting fingers around them, rather than giving themselves partially over to her pull, resisting only obliquely, they struggled in direct opposition, ensuring their doom.

Now, years later, I find myself in strange waters, swimming hard against the current, trying to fight my way back to shore.

“Medication will only get you halfway there,” the psychiatrist had said after a mixture of antidepressant and anti-psychotic drugs “stabilized” my son enough to give us a month of relative calm after years of tempests. “Counseling must get you the rest of the way.”

The drugs have diminished my son’s bursts of physical violence, but not his surliness, his irritability, his underlying sense of emptiness and despair that leads his mind to toy with thoughts of suicide. So we sit in the psychologist’s office talking about drowning and anchors. Near the end of the hour-long session, my son walks out in anger. The psychologist doesn’t speak, just smiles at me. The silence and his smile make me nervous.

“What?” I finally ask.

“You must be tired,” he responds.

The compassion in his voice catches me off guard.

“Yes.” My eyes shift back to the floor. “I am tired. And I’m very sad.”

He nods. His smile vanishes momentarily then resurfaces.

“Perhaps he’ll come back to you.”

“Yes,” I echo without conviction. “Perhaps he’ll come back to me.”

The psychologist is speaking of my son. But I am thinking of my father.

I want to talk to Dad. I want to tell him about the guilt I feel over the mistakes my husband and I have made in ignorance--all the times we entered into the fray of our son’s fury because we assumed he was simply bad rather than realizing he was seriously ill. I want to confess my fear of the powerful drugs, the long-term effects of which are not known. I want to admit I am afraid I have neither the wisdom nor the wherewithal to help him.

But I can’t. My father died from heart failure two months ago, shortly after my son’s psychiatrist first said “bipolar,” before I could talk to him about flotsam anchors. I bend my ear inward, listening for his words, his wisdom, his encouraging laughter. I know they’re firmly tucked in the folds of my heart, but I can’t hear them. The screaming pain caused by his death drowns them out. All I can think is I want to go sailing.

So the following Saturday my husband, my son and I head out onto Tampa Bay in the twelve-foot, sloop-rigged dinghy recently given to us by a friend and christened *North Star*. My son has had several weeks of sailing lessons during each of the past four summers and thinks he’s an expert. But he handles the boat the same way he handles life; he’s too forceful with the tiller, thrusting it jarringly rather than coaxing it through a series of small adjustments. The boat heels dangerously as he points upwind with the main sheet cleated in.

“Fall off! Fall off for God’s sake!” I grab the tiller. “Ease off the main sheet!”

My son refuses to relinquish the tiller, his chocolate eyes now ebony with rage and wounded pride. As we each struggle for command, the boat lurches wildly, almost jibing. From the bow, my husband, a landsman, shakes his head at me, his face a portrait of reproach. When

we arrive home an hour later, my son stomps off. My husband follows him, pleading for peace. I am left to hose down *North Star*'s hull and fold her sails alone.

Later, Charlie telephones. He's coming from Virginia to visit. He wants to hear about our new house overlooking Tampa Bay in small town Safety Harbor. He inquires about my son, his godson. He asks about sailing.

"How's the boat? Have you gotten her in the water yet?"

"Yeah, but . . . I don't know," I say haltingly. "I think I need sailing lessons."

"You don't need sailing lessons. You know how to sail."

"Well, we went out today, but it wasn't very fun," I reluctantly confess. "I got so nervous when your godson had the helm. I kept yelling at him when we were heeling, telling him to fall off."

When I tell my brother about our tussle over the tiller, his laughter bubbles up as if from a wellspring. It flows across the line and encircles me in a warm embrace.

"Char," he says, "when I come, you and I are going to take your boat out and we're going to capsize her."

"No we're not."

"Yes we are," he answers gleefully. "We're going to capsize her. Then we're going to right her. And then you know what we're going to do? We're going to capsize her again."

"No," I say curtly.

"Now Char," Charlie says teasingly, in the same patient, cajoling tone I've heard him take with his stubborn, three-year-old daughter. "We must have courage. We must not take counsel of our fears."

He laughs again now with a note of victory, for he hears me laughing with him.

"Char," he says after a pause. "Have you ever capsized?"

“No. Never.”

“You’ve got to. When I taught sailing, it was the first exercise I made my students do once they could handle the boat.”

“Dad never capsized.” Again I’m belligerent.

Charlie is beside himself now. His rich laughter roars across the line, irresistible.

“Char,” he says finally, breathlessly. “How do you think Dad became such a good sailor?”

My surrender is implicit in our shared laughter.

Next weekend, then, my brother, my son and I will go sailing on the bay and I will put my son’s hand on the tiller. We will sail close to the wind, making the boat heel and the centerboard hum, waiting for a gust. When it comes, we’ll hold firm the main sheet. A purposeful mistake. And my father will be with us, in my brother’s laughter, in the sea spray, in my son’s smile when *North Star* sings--and begins to tip.