



Location of the Gulf of Aden, which joins the Red Sea to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. The equator is just off the bottom of the figure, crossing through Kenya (south of Ethiopia) and the southern tip of Somalia.

PROLOGUE

My world at the moment was a white porcelain cave with smooth walls and a lake at the bottom. The toilet bowl felt cool under my chin. I had never been so violently ill. But even though my head was in the toilet, my life had been out of one for a couple of years now.

Amy heard the bowl flushing and walked into the bathroom with a glass and a bottle of bubbly water.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, knowing the response would be obvious, but exhibiting a sense of empathy that we both agreed I would never seem to possess.

“I’ll make it to the ship as long as we don’t get stuck in traffic,” I responded, still on my knees. I took the glass from her hand. “How much time before we have to leave?”

“According to the agent the van will be here in two hours.” She sat down on the side of the tub.

There was never any real concern over traffic. The only congestion we would likely encounter on the way to the port was a slow-moving herd of goats, typical of Djibouti, an African country pretty low on the list of car ownership per capita.

Amy sat there quietly. This was something else she claimed to do better than I—sit and listen. My need to be proactive in fixing emotional and social problems instead of just listening was a deficiency of male behavior that she would point out frequently. This

David Fisichella

time, however, I think she was not so much waiting to sympathize with my febrile condition as contemplating the impact my illness would have on the start of her research cruise, only hours away.

She was wearing a light cotton tank top and shorts, her hair held back from her face by a clip. This was less about fashion and more an attempt to mitigate the oppressive August heat that permeated the stained cinderblock walls of the hotel. The air conditioning had lost its battle with the North African summer long ago. I was reluctant to get off the tile floor, which was acting as a heat sink for my already elevated body temperature.

“Would you feel better if you had something to eat?” Amy asked.

I stood up slowly. “Eating is probably what got me into this mess,” I said.

She handed me two packages of granola snack mix. “Can you tell me which one has raisins? I know how much you hate them, so I’ll eat that bag,” she said. Amy had a vision problem that prevented her from seeing things that small, so I had to read the labels. It was in fact the only reason I was there—to assist her with her research by being a good set of eyes. At the moment, however, she was providing most of the assistance.

The room seemed to be spinning in the opposite direction of my stomach, but as bad as things were, I found myself smiling. Two years ago I would never have imagined myself throwing up in a moldy bathroom in an obscure African country while preparing to go on a scientific expedition. I stood in front of the cracked mirror and looked at my now-gaunt face, proof that the most interesting adventures in life cannot be planned.

So how did an out of work engineer with no deep-sea experience, whose only exposure to oceanography was watching the Discovery Channel, find himself heading for sea as a member of a scientific party from a prestigious oceanographic institution? It all started with a blind man and a sailboat.

1

IT WAS SOMETIME PRE-1992. I can't remember the exact date, but it was spring and everything outdoors was covered in a fine coating of yellow pollen. The setting sun projected through the hotel room window, casting orange shadows from the furniture onto a painting of flying ducks on the wall. The glowing hues made the birds look as if they were fleeing an inferno of marsh grass. It had not been a good day. More accurately, it had been a typical day, which for the last few years meant that it was not so good. I cannot say I had gotten used to this, which was promising. If I had become complacent with life under a constant fog of ambivalence, I probably would not have done anything to change the situation. Complacency, apathy, routine—only words, but killer-of-men words. I wasn't ready to die, but I also wasn't doing a very good job of living either. I was existing, quite well by most standards; I had my own home overlooking Boston Harbor, a career for which I was well-compensated, and a boat. Hey, things can't be that bad if you have a boat, I often reminded myself.

The boat was a refuge. She was the center of my social life. The marina was the equivalent of the neighborhood pub, a place for gathering, drinking, and talking about trivial things that all seemed very important at the time. The boat also had the qualities of a good spouse: you took care of it and it took care of you. Certainly, there were times when I had to take head plumbing apart

David Fisichella

and stare into pipes coated with years of excrement, but the rewards of chasing a rising moon on a balmy summer night made up for those times deep in shit.

Lying on the bed and staring at the burning ducks made me realize that lately I was spending more time in shit than chasing the moon. The boat was 3000 miles away and I had just wasted four days of my life trying to convince a small business owner in California to spend more money than he could afford to remake a batch of tiny, inconsequential widgets that were a few thousandths of an inch out of specification, even though we both knew the tolerance was overly tight. It's too bad he couldn't have negotiated a cost-plus contract with us, as my company had done with the Defense Department. That way he would have been paid to make mistakes, just like we were. It felt dirty to be a part of it all, but complacency, apathy and routine, words never far away, were there to hide the grime. I had spent the last two years on trips like this—hotel rooms with duck paintings, companies housed in buildings of beige concrete situated in industrial complexes ringed with TGIFridays, Denny's, and Olive Garden restaurants. Without the automobile license plates it would have been impossible to tell what state I was in.

The company I worked for developed and manufactured weapon systems for the military. We fired missiles, blew up tanks, and manufactured RADAR to land jets on the decks of pitching aircraft carriers. It sounded exotic, but after a dozen years, the business had become distilled to the mundane production of many hundreds of small parts. The projects I worked on were in development for many years, if not decades, and were often ended abruptly when defense budgets were reallocated. A look back on my tenure there, and seeing thousands of hours of my labor made meaningless when a project was terminated based on the shifting political wind, only fueled the disillusionment.

I looked at the clock. I should have been writing my report of what I had found, but I couldn't bring myself to put the words on the paper. I didn't know what to write. As an engineer who looked at

SEVEN-TENTHS

manufacturing processes, I could summarize most of what can go wrong in two dozen standard phrases: “The procedure was correct, but wasn’t followed”; “raw material not within limits”; “operator error”; the list went on. In the beginning, it was fun, like a puzzle. Figure out what went wrong and then fix it. Somewhere along the line the job lost its challenge, then its meaning, and as I lay there in that hotel room I came to the realization that I wasn’t very good at my work anymore.

The thought of picking up a pen and reaffirming this revelation wasn’t appealing. At this moment I needed to do something that didn’t remind me of failure, either mine or someone else’s. Since I didn’t have my boat to retreat to, I settled for a sailing magazine.

After an hour of reading about the adventures of others sailing in and out of exotic ports I came across a sidebar article. Only a few paragraphs long, it read more like an advertisement. The Carroll Center for the Blind in Newton, Massachusetts, was looking for volunteers to sail as sighted guides for the blind. I read the section quickly and moved back to the main article about the vagaries of clearing customs on some remote pacific atoll, but my mind kept wandering back to blind sailing. How would a bunch of blind people navigate around the harbor without running into something, or make sense of all the lines that typically cluttered a boat’s cockpit?

I kept turning back to those few vague paragraphs in search of clues, but there was nothing to be found except a phone number. I looked at my watch. It was 7:50 p.m., not quite 5:00 back in Newton. I picked up the phone and caught Arthur O’Neil as he was walking out of his office. Arthur, it turned out, was the director for the Carroll Center’s Outdoor Enrichment Program and organized the blind sailing program. “So how does this work?” I asked.

“First, I’ll determine your sailing abilities. Then pair you up with a team. The guys on your team will teach you the proper guiding techniques,” he said, sounding a bit rushed to get home for the evening.

David Fisichella

“I’ve done plenty of sailing, but never with a blind person,” I said.

“Don’t worry, there’ll be plenty of time for practice before the first regatta next month.”

“What do mean ‘regatta’? Blind people will be racing these boats?” I asked incredulously.

“Yeah, it’s a lot of fun, really. Come down and give it a try. I think you’ll like it. I gotta run. We start next Saturday at nine at the Courageous Sailing Center. I hope to see you there.”

I managed to get some cryptic directions from him before he hung up, and with more skepticism than enthusiasm I told him I would be home by then and would check it out.

My flight returned to Logan Airport early the next day. It was a red-eye from LAX, and as I stood looking into the mirror in the men’s room at the terminal, I knew why. The puffy, bloodshot orbs that looked back at me confirmed what I already knew. It was time for a change, but to what?

The cab ride to the house took all of 10 minutes. I opened the front door and dropped my small suitcase on the floor. A calico cat lay in a sunbeam, stretched out sideways as if in mid-stride. She was fat and didn’t stride much these days, and in keeping with her sedentary lifestyle, didn’t even lift her head when I walked by. The other cat, the small black one, was nowhere to be seen. She was probably perched in her favorite window, stalking birds she could only dream of catching.

My wife, Lisa, was also not around. She was working, or more probably shopping, since she only worked sporadically. The not-working part didn’t bother me, but the spending part did. It was becoming a serious issue in our relationship, but not the issue that was sending us over the precipice. What was dissolving our 10-year marriage was suicide: Lisa’s. Lisa was diagnosed as an insulin dependent diabetic a few months before our wedding and in the 3650 days since then she had never admitted to herself the seriousness of her condition. Lisa saw insulin as a hormone that made her gain weight, not one that kept her alive. The trajectory of all our

SEVEN-TENTHS

lives moves in the same direction—toward death. Lisa’s problem was that she was determined to get there more quickly than I was. This attitude could lead to only one outcome. I was watching her kill herself ever so slowly by not taking her doses and not monitoring her blood sugar. I had spent a decade cajoling, bribing, yelling, whatever it took to get her to take care of herself, but nothing I said or did made any difference. Any talk of children was out of the question. Lisa was in no condition to bear children, and even if she was, I was not going to bring children into this world only to have them see their mother die at an early age. This, I told myself, was yet another of my failures. I didn’t have what it took to help her or find someone who could. Being willing to help and being able to help didn’t seem to connect. For whatever reason, I had failed her. I was quitting, and felt guilty for it. I was out of ideas and the only thing left to me was anger.

In my marriage, as in my job, I knew it was time for a change, but didn’t know to what. Where I was wasn’t good, but at least it was predictable. This was another warning sign: I was in a bad situation and justified it because it was familiar. I was one step closer to the abyss. I looked out the window to the boats resting on their moorings. Tomorrow was Saturday, the day I was going to meet up with Arthur O’Neil. The idea of being out on the water with a boat full of blind sailors was suddenly very appealing.

The next morning I got in the car with some trepidation about what I was about to do, but also with a sense of adventure I had not felt in a long time. My image of the blind was personified by Ray Charles. Blind people either played pianos in smoke-filled nightclubs or ran concession stands in federal buildings. As I drove to the marina, I wondered how they would fit the baby grand in the boat.

At the wharf I found the entrance to the Courageous Sailing Center. Appropriately named, I thought. I didn’t know what would take more courage, getting into a boat with a blind guy at the helm or being the blind guy and having to rely on me to tell him where to steer. Arthur must have identified me by the apprehension on

David Fisichella

my face. He came up and introduced himself. “Welcome to the SailBlind program,” he said, his wide smile radiating from under the brim of a faded ball cap bearing the name of a regatta sailed years ago. Arthur showed me around the facility and introduced me to a number of guides and blind sailors. I was so overwhelmed I forgot each one’s name before the handshake was over.

We continued our progress down the pier. At the end, leaning against a wooden pile, was a man with a cane. He was in his forties, with a worn pair of Sperry Topsiders on his sockless feet and a pink polo shirt neatly tucked into khaki shorts. His face was turned up to catch the warm rays of the sun, which, even this early in the summer, had already freckled his pale skin. Arthur introduced him as Doug, one of the people I would be sailing with. The three of us chatted for a few moments before Arthur excused himself to attend to something.

“So, where do you live?” Doug asked.

“Winthrop. It’s on the other side of the harbor.”

“No kidding?” he said. “I moved there a few months ago.”

I realized this may have been part of Arthur’s plan in pairing us up. It wasn’t very easy to get to Courageous from Winthrop without a lot of bus and train connections. He probably figured we would drive together. That was fine with me, but I was hoping he paired up his teams using more important criteria than geography.

“How long have you been sailing here?” I asked.

“A few years. It’s been great. We’ve raced in a bunch of places, even went as far as New Zealand for the World Blind Sailing Championships last year.”

Arthur hadn’t mentioned anything like that. This was beginning to sound like just the thing I was looking for. “What happened to your previous guide?” I asked.

“People come and go,” he said without offering any more details. Before I could press him for more information, there was a tap-tap-tap from behind me and another man with a cane joined us.

“Hey Dougie, what’s happen’in,” he said in a thick Boston dialect that was somewhat slurred. Most of the sound came out his

SEVEN-TENTHS

nose in long, drawn vowels. “So you’re Dave. Pleased to meet’ya. I’m Don. Art told me you were here.” He slapped me on the back in lieu of a handshake. Don was rail thin, with jaundiced features and dark thinning hair combed straight down on all sides of his head. He was wearing a clunky pair of wraparound sunglasses and a tee shirt with the sleeves cut off. I couldn’t tell his age, but my guess was he was younger than his features made him look.

Doug pointed his cane in Don’s direction. “Watch out for this guy. He likes to joke around at other people’s expense.”

“Hey, that’s not true,” Don said.

“Once he put his glass eye into his beer and told the guy next to him at the bar, ‘keep an eye on my drink while I’m gone,’” Doug said to me.

“You come up with a good prank once, and look what happens,” laughed Don, seeming pleased with his reputation. This was shaping up to be a fun boat.

The three of us spent the next few hours out on the water. The wind was light and the sailing uneventful. Both Doug and Don were very patient with me. Just the act of rigging the sails had me hunting for ways to put into words what I’d always done without thinking, and the words did not always amount to anything intelligible. Once on the water everything began to fall into place. Don sat forward of me and trimmed the jib. I handled the mainsail and Doug focused on handling the tiller. I began to learn how and to what extent Doug and Don needed to have things described. They also taught me the correct commands for giving direction. Being consistent was essential. When the winds picked up things would get hectic, leaving no room for miscommunication. As we drifted around the moored boats in the harbor, I learned a lot about what brought Don and Doug to this place.

Both suffered from diabetes and were blind from retinopathy, a complication of the disease. They told similar stories; blood vessels in their retinas ruptured, destroying the surrounding cells and slowly taking the view of the world with them. As I listened to Doug and Don, I could not help thinking of Lisa suffering the same fate.

David Fisichella

There were other parallels. Like Lisa, Doug lived the early part of his life in denial about his diabetes and soon became one of the “angry blind.” Doug would stumble through his day with a red-tipped chip on his shoulder, devastated at the loss of independence yet abusive to those who tried to help him. I was angry too. Angry at where I’d let my life go, and listless about doing anything to change it. Doug found an outlet for his anger in racing sailboats. I could relate to that. Racing a winning boat requires concentration and focus. There’s no place in the cockpit for anger. The angry skippers are the ones always looking for crew.

Within a short time I learned to become Doug’s eyes on the water. I became good at describing our relationship to other boats, looking out for large waves, and guiding him into the dock at the end of the day. As the helmsman, Doug was always in control of the boat, steering by the pressure on the tiller and the wind against his face. He provided feedback to Don and me on how the boat was handling so that we could trim the sails quickly. Doug’s greatest challenge was filtering my occasional right-left dyslexia, a condition that had not been noticeable until I needed to tell a blind man which way to move the helm to avoid hitting a buoy.

Don worked hard at trimming the jib. On blustery days he taxed his thin arms trying to bring the sail in tight, always giving everything he had. He also talked a lot. When the wind was light, I swore all that air coming from his mouth helped move us along.

By the end of a few weeks in the Sail Blind program I had learned a lot about blindness. Most of the people on the team who were considered blind had some useful vision. It was hard to find someone in the group who could not detect the difference between day and night. I also got to practice what I knew about diabetes. My unofficial role as guide to two diabetics was to watch for signs of low blood sugar. It was not unusual for me to look aft and see Doug at the helm on the verge of unconsciousness, his blind eyes staring off into space. At those times I would pry his

SEVEN-TENTHS

fingers from the tiller and hope that he was alert enough to drink some juice. In the beginning, this felt like a mountainous responsibility, but over time it became one of the things that brought us together.

Eventually we become a true team. When I said “up a little” or “you’re pinching” Doug knew exactly how much to change course. Conversation was minimal in the boat during a race. Like a long-married couple, we anticipated what the other person was going to say before he said it.

Doug, Don, and I continued sailing together for the next few years, traveling to regattas around the country and even as far away as Australia. The three of us became good friends, though Doug and I developed a more complex bond. I think it was due to his intensity. Don was carefree, happy with a disability check and a cold beer. Doug wanted more. I could appreciate that.

Doug died suddenly in 1994 just as things in his life were improving. He passed away in his sleep from an insulin reaction. I never told him how much I appreciated his companionship, but I think he knew. People would say, “Isn’t it nice what you do for Doug?” They didn’t understand. By that time, I wasn’t “helping the poor blind guy”; I was sailing with a friend. He never wanted or needed pity from anyone, and, I learned, neither did I. I wanted things to change, and I was the only person capable of setting that change in motion.

When I first met Doug my life was on the edge. Peering over the precipice into a valley of depression, I saw an image of what awaited me if I didn’t do something, anything. The solution was adventure. It didn’t have to be climbing Everest or anything so dramatic. My adventures needed to be only small challenges to wake me from a day of sleepwalking from task to task. I found this adventure in meeting new people. I found it sailing with a friend whose blindness did not define him in my eyes any more. And I found it at a party, in a most unexpected way.