

The last boat.

They came for the boat on the same day that she was told he would have to go into the hospice.

The palliative care nurse arrived at the house, took in the fact of his bruises and the black hollows of her eyes, and said he was going to the hospice for 2 week' respite. She was grateful to the nurse for taking the decision out of her hands. She felt near the end of her capacity to look after him at home. "We can't have you falling down like this on your way to the toilet," said the nurse briskly. "And your wife is going to collapse if she doesn't get a break."

He'd complained of course, the desire to spare her abandoning him at the eleventh hour. But in the end he'd agreed. Just for a few days.

While she was packing his clothes into an overnight bag, the doorbell rang.

They'd come for the boat.

It seemed he'd always had a boat. When she'd met him it was the first thing she'd learnt to accept about him. He loved the sea and he needed a boat.

At the age of eight he'd taken to the water in a homemade raft. When other kids were building billy carts, he was lashing wood to a drum and wrestling with the mechanics of flotation. The river was mercifully shallow. The bends built up with sand, creating shoals where he could play the mariner without alarming his mother.

At fifteen he would have gone to sea if they'd let him. Join the navy, see the world. He didn't much care about seeing the world but he'd have given a lot to see its oceans. Instead he'd been conscripted into the family business, groomed to take over from his father.

Going down to the sea in boats became a weekend activity. He'd never been a surfer. Fishing, swimming, messing around on deck: these were the things he loved. With his first pay check he put down a deposit on a tinny for sale outside the local bait shop. It would take him another three months to pay it off, the vendor waiting patiently for his money.

At twenty he was shipwrecked. Fishing for flathead with Tom, their boat started to take water.

Tom's girlfriend was on board. As the boat started to sink, her agitation turned into panic. He'd had to slap her to get her to come to her senses. They entered the water together and started swimming. He could see the line of the groyne protecting the harbour in the distance; he figured

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they were about a mile out. No life jackets. Together he and Tom had kept the girl afloat, holding her up when her strength fell away, urging her on.

He'd been on the cusp of his adult life then: the idea of drowning offended him. They took their time and kept their heads. One hundred yards out they were spotted by a flotilla of surfers who brought their boards out to meet them. Big grins all around. Photos in the paper. His lean, angular face smiles out at the future he'd retrieved.

A succession of boats followed. Moving from tinnies to sailing craft, he joined the sailing club, took a mooring and spent Saturdays racing on the river, Sundays socialising in the bar. By this time she had married him and become the bo'sun. For her the sea was an uneasy pleasure. But she enjoyed the anticipation of being moored off the island even as she gritted her teeth for the crossing. Sun, sand, a beer in the bar, crayfish in the pots. These were the pleasures they shared. She learned to hold the wheel steady and turn the boat slowly as they drifted for squid. She scrubbed the decks as clean as the kitchen floor at home. At night they slept side by side on the wooden bunk below deck and felt the silence.

Now she lies alone in the bed listening for the sound of his breathing which doesn't come. She is grateful for the respite from caring for him, guilty at her relief.

When he was in his mid fifties he found himself another shipwreck, this time alone in the waters off the island. But with the caution of age had come lifejackets, and he belted up before stepping over the side of the sinking boat. A combination of waves and luck brought him into the shore, scraping him over the reef and cutting his shins. Legend has it that he hitched a ride to the island pub and sank a couple of beers before he thought to ring the wife. Uninsured, he'd waited diplomatically for a few months before bringing another boat home.

This, his last boat, was the largest he had ever owned. It was a statesman's boat sitting high in the water. Outside the house, it dwarfed the bushes along the drive. While she was caring for him she couldn't work. The boat was tens of thousands of dollars tied up doing nothing. "My boating days are over," he said to his nephew, a rare acknowledgment of his decline.

The new owners were delighted with the boat. They wanted to come inside and greet him, tell him

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how happy they were to have bought his boat, what a joy it was to have found such a vessel. They couldn't understand why she shook her head vigorously, why she stuffed their cheque into the pocket of her shirt and bundled them off. As she turned back towards the house she hoped he had not put his new hearing aid in this morning, that he could not hear the sound of the departing four wheel drive as it scraped the boat's trailer into the street.

He met her at the doorway. The look of betrayal on his face undid her. "I'm so sorry," was all she could get out. "It's OK," he said after a long pause, "it's only a boat."

RobinTrinca

For Geoffrey and Jenny

Narooma, September 2011