At the Center of the Sailing World

**By Will Boast**

I.

**ON ALL BUT** the coldest days of that year, the neighbors could see him taking his wife for a walk. She was loved. Neighbors, colleagues, students, strangers in the grocery line or public library—no one in the small lakeside town had been able to resist the chatty little Englishwoman who’d taught history at the high school. When she opened her mouth and that canorous accent came pouring out, people had listened with smiles on their faces. They’d asked indulgent little questions about Princess Di and taking tea, about double-decker buses, rain, warm beer, and what it was like for Susan and Lomax living in this tiny place out in the middle of the cornfields.

Every afternoon at four, Lomax could be seen leading Susan down to the lakeshore path, holding her hand, sometimes going ahead and waiting patiently for her to catch up. She came dawdling along, stiff-kneed, lurching. They continued slowly on, Lomax nodding hello to their lakefront friends out on their decks and patios, Susan staring straight ahead, expressionless.

What she had recovered since the stroke was largely this—her mobility, the ability to swallow, point to things she wanted.

Six months in, the doctors and therapists told Lomax the window for further recovery was closing. Still, they said, she was young. Only fifty-four. There was a chance. Ten months in, in the wake of two smaller strokes, she began to lose what she had regained. The rest of her time she spent in bed with Lomax at her side. He’d all but given up work at his boat and sail company. He hadn’t been to the yacht club in months. In the first of Susan’s final days, they had regular visitors to the house. It was too much for Lomax, seeing these kind people already grieving over his wife, speaking softly to her and asking questions as if she could respond. He started keeping the curtains closed, the phone off the hook. As the months wore into summer, days went by and the only faces he saw were the boy who delivered the groceries and the hospice nurse who came in the afternoons to change Susan’s sheets and give her a bath.

The service was long. So many people came to the podium to remember Susan—her vivacity and intelligence, everything she’d done around the village and for the community, all the stories from her classroom, her voice, her laugh. It was an entire catalog of a lost woman. Lomax, sitting center in the front row, had to smile and nod through it all. Susan’s relations hadn’t been able to afford the airfare to come across for the funeral. Lomax had offered to pay, but they wouldn’t accept. He’d already agreed to send over half her ashes for a memorial in Bournemouth. As for his own family, only his older sister, Geralyn, came. He held her hand through much of the service. On his other side sat Top, his business partner, and Top’s wife, Linda. Afterward, everyone seemed to linger, hesitant to say a final good-bye. Lomax waited patiently until the last handshake, the last hushed condolences, until the door finally closed behind the last guest.

At home that evening, sitting on the screened porch with glasses of white wine sweating down their sides, Top and Linda half-asleep on the wicker love seat, he buried his head in Geralyn’s shoulder and sobbed into her blouse.

“Come on, Max,” she said, gently scolding him. “Come on, now. It’s over. At least it’s over.”

**He was forty-eight,** broad across the shoulders and chest, with a full head of thick brown hair and dark, almost glinting, brown eyes. In the past few years he’d begun to wear the kinds of clothes that middle-aged men, no longer trying to counterfeit their youth, wore to hide the crest of their bellies—golf clothes, business casual. But when Susan had been bedridden, when it was rare that he ate a meal large enough to fill the sink with dishes, when he seemed tired all the time and came down with a snuffling cold every other week, the old Lomax had been carved out of him. His jaw line reemerged, the concavity of his cheeks, the wings of his collarbone. He found himself digging around in the attic for his old wardrobe, something, anything, that would fit. At a cost, he was more the man who had crewed all those champion boats than he’d been in ten or fifteen years.

After the funeral, Geralyn stayed on for another week—a strange reminder of home. Home was Ditchling, a quiet village on the South Downs in Sussex, where Lomax hadn’t spent more than a fortnight since age seventeen. He’d been a quiet, aloof boy, had failed miserably at school, then worked for a year at a baker’s rolling out the dough for sausage rolls. On not much more than a bored whim, he moved to Brighton, found a job at the marina, and quickly discovered a talent for sailing—an agility and sureness on deck, a sense for the subtle shifts in weight and wind that he’d never felt on land. He came into his life almost without trying, and in his twenties and thirties traveled the globe crewing in Grand Prix races: Antigua, Honolulu, Newport News, Port Huron, the Isle of Wight, Mackinac, Bermuda, Bahia. He held no particular allegiances. American, Australian, and Kiwi boats—he’d gone wherever the money had taken him.

He met Susan in a bar in Auckland—petite, outgoing, impulsive Susan. Six years older than he was, a wild girl, as she said herself back then, who liked a drink and a snog. She’d quit a job in London to go backpacking for a summer with two of her girlfriends. When the girlfriends left for Singapore at the end of that week, Susan stayed behind. The first time she saw him, she later told Lomax, with his sunglasses, his sun-bleached hair and tan, she’d thought he was American. The girls were completely gone on you, she said. Lucky me, though. Very lucky me. The two of them lived an itinerant life together, Lomax flying off in charter planes for races, Susan waitressing in whichever port of call they’d made a temporary home.

A call came one day from Top, Lomax’s skipper on the America’s Cup boats and the closest he had to a best friend. Top was moving back to his hometown in the Midwest to start building sport boats. Zenda was a place you could grow to love, he said. Lomax told him it sounded like the middle of nowhere.

“More than nowhere,” Top said. “It’s Wisconsin. More cows than people, and so much corn they give it away on the side of the road. How many years of competition you got left, Max? Two, three? Bow out gracefully. The way the world works these days, we can run this thing from anywhere on the globe.”

For fifteen years, Top and Lomax built and sold several hundred boats a year, their renown growing steadily, good fortune following good fortune. Their company brochures referred to Zenda as the “center” of the sailing world—a joke on the town’s land-locked obscurity and a winking acknowledgment of their successes despite the fact. Lomax continued to travel as the public face of the business, his catalog looks, mellow Sussex accent, and laconic demeanor speaking to their customers of everything that went along with buying a “Top 24”—effortlessness, sophistication, entry into an old guard club of sportsmen and gentlemen.

The surprise was how readily Susan settled in Zenda. She went to a university in Milwaukee to get her teaching certificate. In the community she ran the garden club and took over the traditionally male task of organizing the Venetian Fest fireworks. In their fifth year in Zenda, Lomax and Susan bought their lakefront home. Susan got herself a cat, a secretive calico that eventually wandered off. Lomax had the company shop build him a little play boat, a thirteen-foot dinghy he named *Elizabeth,* and they used it in the summers to make the short trip between their pier and the yacht club. When they became citizens—they had wanted to vote to put Reagan back in office—they hung a Stars and Stripes from the mast, just under St. George’s Cross.

**Lomax stood with**Geralyn in the international terminal at O’Hare. In the week following the funeral, she had busied herself receiving visitors to the house, taking in the plates of sandwiches and sliced fruit, the pies and cookies, keeping everyone entertained out on the patio, serving them tea in the June heat. In that brief time, she had been as big a hit as Susan, and several people, having forgotten that Geralyn was Lomax’s sister, commented on the likeness.

“Quick good-byes,” she said at the security point, her shoes already in her hands. “Norman and I will see you in a month or two, won’t we? Your nieces would like to see you too.”

He mumbled something about how much he had to do around the house, Top needed him back at the office, the last of the orders for next summer, a regatta they were sponsoring in August . . .

Geralyn stood up on her toes and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Do what you feel you must, but come home for a week. Susan wouldn’t want you going to ground on us.”

He lay on top of the sheets that night, too exhausted to get up and turn on the AC. The silence of the house floated depthless above him. If he lay there shouting and screaming through the night, he thought, no one could possibly hear him.

At three in the morning, he found himself down in the entertainment room, where his trophies, cups, and plates lined the shelves on three walls. With the windows open, he could hear the constant swelling thrum of cicadas, the sloshing and gulping of the waves against the pier. He found a rag and a bottle of polish. There was only the faintest patina on each piece, but it was tedious work, and by sunup he wasn’t half done. He sat slumped on the sofa, dreaming he was out searching the woods for Susan’s cat.

**The yacht club** was a grand affair for Zenda. It sat snugly in the center of Button’s Bay, gleaming in its stucco white, bearded with a long, immaculately tended lawn that ran down to a narrow strip of beach and three wide, white piers. A massive bronze anchor sat in the center of the lawn, a relic salvaged from the bottom of Lake Michigan from the wreck of an old trading ship.

On a few occasions, Lomax met Top and some other sailing friends at the club and stayed for an hour or two drinking Foster’s beer. The other men were in their thirties and drank heavily. Toward the end of an evening, they only wanted to hear Top and Lomax talk about their racing days. The weeks and days spent living in the bubble of an ocean cruiser, existing on dehydrated food and no sleep, knowing the exact stink of everyone onboard, every physical and mental tic, the way eight men wove together through the rush and clamor of a sprint, main sail booming, cranks ratcheting and whirring, every back straining to keep a boat balanced on a knife edge . . . Lomax felt so distant from that time, it was only by deadening effort that he could drag up the details of a particular race. Without Susan nearby—even when she’d been across the room with her own friends, it bolstered him, made him confident and talkative—he suddenly found the male company at the club distasteful and tiresome. He’d heard all their jokes, and their stories often seemed like depressingly familiar iterations of his own. All of the past seemed now like the same endless race.

But even more than the men at the club, it was the women he wanted to avoid. He knew how most women, especially American women, responded to him. He knew a furtive, appraising glance by now. He was too quiet to be a charmer, though everyone had always seemed to expect that from him. Marriage had come as a relief to him; he’d proposed to Susan three months after they met.

He fell into a solitary routine, working around the house in the morning, jogging or riding his exercise bike in the afternoon. He looked in at the office once or twice a week to check on a handful of boats whose progress interested him, but the thought of dealing with customers was too much. If he went to the club, he went early and had dinner alone on the balcony, where he could look out as the setting sun bled into the rippling mirror of the lake. The waitress who worked Tuesday and Thursday nights, a pretty girl about nineteen or twenty, hardly had to ask for his order. Chicken florentine, small salad, two, sometimes three glasses of white wine.

One evening, he found himself staring out at the waves, the big willows nodding at either end of the little beach, the anchor bulking darkly against the short, bright green grass, its wind-polished edges reflecting the late sunlight. The world was tidy and well burnished. He lingered with a last swallow of wine in his glass, feeling somewhere between satiated and desperately miserable.

The waitress came up, asked if he was finished, took his plate. She stood there another moment, hesitating. She was a wiry, tall girl with black hair worn back in a tight ponytail and a dark complexion that made three tiny pimples on her forehead stand out brightly. She stood there with her water jug, looking down at him with a stormy expression—annoyed or confused, he couldn’t tell which. There were no other customers in the restaurant. A couple of boys in polo shirts and white shorts sat at the table farthest from Lomax drinking Cokes and wrapping silverware in cloth napkins.

“You’re from England, right?” the girl said in a nervous rush.

He only nodded yes and smiled politely. He thought he must have looked fairly pathetic sitting there if she felt obliged to talk to him.

“Someone said Ireland or Australia.”

“No, you’ve got it right.”

“I knew it wasn’t. There was this other English person I met once—this woman who came to my school and gave a talk?” She said it like a question, asking whether he knew her.

Lomax remembered the big box of slides Susan had lugged around to some of the grade schools in the county, the little speech she’d practiced in front of him one night in the kitchen. “Where did you go to school?” he said reluctantly.

“Delevan.”

“Then that was my wife.”

The girl’s expression brightened. “I asked if she’d ever met the queen. I was only ten, I wanted to know.”

The moment arrived when he ought to have told her that Susan was gone, that familiar dance—the explanations, the awkward apologies and murmured sympathies—that always seemed to leave nothing to say afterward, that always seemed to simply embarrass him.

“We did meet the queen actually, at an RYA race in ’82.”

“That’s what your wife said.” She took a gulp of a breath. The ice in the jug sloshed against its sides. “You’re kind of famous around here, right? I mean, I heard you sailed around the world?”

“Not me. That sort of thing’s for the elderly and people with too much time on their hands.” He paused. Even he heard the snobbishness—a professional discussing things he considered beneath him. Never mind that he and Top made a good deal of money from just those sorts of customers. “You’re interested in sailing, then?”

“Sure, I mean, it’s pretty. All those bright white boats out on a nice day. But I want to travel. That’s all I want. Just go all over the world. Everywhere.” She stood there looking down at him expectantly, waiting perhaps for him to ask about all the places she intended to go.

“Well, then, good luck to you,” he said blandly.

She looked disappointed but smiled, a thin, uncertain smile that revealed a pointed canine crooking out of a row of closely packed teeth. Another man Lomax’s age might have taken a casual, proprietary interest in the girl’s future. But Lomax was of the opinion that people sorted out their own futures or, more generally, had their futures sorted out for them. When she came with the check, it occurred to him that he might try to draw her out again. He tipped her 30 percent instead.

After that night, he only saw the girl on a couple of occasions, and on one of those she was sitting at the bar wrapping silverware. Then she disappeared altogether. On a blowy evening, nearly two months after Susan’s funeral, he and Top were standing at the end of the main pier watching the last of the boats come in. It took a moment for Lomax to remember the girl’s name—Yvette—from her name tag. He asked what had happened to her.

Top pushed up his sunglasses. There was a tricky cross-breeze. He squinted to watch a boat coming in and massaged the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger, the same frustrated gesture he used to make when a cruiser he was skippering was running slow. Top had a long history with the club, took a hand in its operations, and didn’t much like talking about it—gossip traveled fast around the lake. Lomax thought he wasn’t going to get an answer, but then Top said flatly, “We had to let her go.”

These things happen, Lomax thought. People came and went in those sorts of jobs. “She was always very charming with me.”

Top looked straight at him. “There were some complaints.”

For a reason he couldn’t name, Lomax felt oddly dismayed by this small piece of news. Had he been rude to her? Had someone seen them talking and thought she was bothering him? Top dropped his sunglasses back onto his nose, turned to look out at the boat that was tacking in. It was a 24. Its big, loose luff spinnaker waggled hesitantly out in front as the crew tried to make the dock. Lomax started to say something else, but then Top called out to the boat.

“Christ, cut that thing in here”—a savage note came into Top’s voice—“you’re missing the whole damned pier. Bearing away! Jibe! Jibe!”

**When Susan had**been bedridden she’d wanted certain of her possessions constantly in sight. A favorite scarf, a favorite sweater, the garden club tote bag she’d carried her books to school in for years—she’d moan or whimper if she didn’t have them. Over those last, long months, she sometimes seemed more interested in those threadworn things than in him. They were the first things he had boxed up and hidden away in the attic. He could hardly believe he so resented a tote bag.

He had started with some industry—throwing out the old sheets, her bath towels, her makeup—but his efforts quickly began to fail. He wandered from room to room, afraid to disturb anything, full of antic energy, yet too slothful to dust, vacuum, or empty the dishwasher. Geralyn called every Sunday morning at eleven, waking him from dozing. It was five o’clock her time, and on the other end of the line he heard the clatter of plates and saucepans as she got Sunday dinner ready, Norman in the background calling to their two teenage girls to set the table.

“Everyone’s been very good at the shop,” he said. “But I won’t get anything done when they’re all treating me like a poor widower.”

“If you haven’t felt like working,” Geralyn said, “then enjoy yourself a little. You’ve given Top fifteen years already, haven’t you? It’s his company, not yours.”

“I don’t know what else I’d do. Work is work. I’ve had plenty of enjoyment out of life already.”

Geralyn breathed a sigh through the phone. Lomax knew she didn’t have patience for tragic pronouncements. He wasn’t fond of them either.

“Sell the house,” she said. “Take a long holiday. You’ve got the means.”

“Maybe I’ll buy another boat. Another big boy’s toy. The*Elizabeth II.* The *Diana,* maybe. The *Camilla Parker.”*

She ignored his sarcasm. “Buy a flat somewhere. Shake yourself up a bit.”

“I might sail around the world.”

“Oh, Max, I don’t want to nag. I’m worried about you. *Norman* is worried about you.” She sighed again, but now her voice was tender, as if she were talking about something from the distant past. “But you always land on your feet, don’t you? It’s infuriating for the rest of us, but you always do.”

She meant to tease and reassure him, but he chose to hear her words as a complaint. “I’ve got a life here, Geri,” he said irritably. “Have a little faith in me, please.”

That afternoon he swung the *Elizabeth*past Top’s pier, hoping to catch Top and Linda at the lake. He slacked the sail and drifted, thinking they would come down any minute. The water was very glassy, and he could see the white posts of the pier and the maples on the near bank reflected, stretched out and gently quivering in the wavelets tipping their way toward shore. After a few minutes, Top and Linda’s big white Akita came down the lawn, barked at him, then wandered back up to the house. Lomax dozed for a time, woke himself, waited another half hour, then brought the *Elizabeth* around and headed for the club.

He dropped anchor just inside the no-wake buoy, took off his shirt, and swam to the main pier. When he pulled himself up, he saw a young woman in sunglasses and a blue two-piece suit stretched out on a towel sunbathing. She gave him a casual, dismissive sort of wave. It took him a moment to recognize his waitress.

“It’s Lomax,” he said, as if to remind her. Then he realized he’d never introduced himself at the restaurant.

She propped herself up on her elbows. “How’d you do that?” She pointed languidly at the top of his head. “Your sunglasses. You swam in, and they’re still on.”

He reached up and felt for them. “I didn’t even notice. They’re always up there.”

“That’s a tiny boat. I’ve seen twenty other boats go by, and they were all bigger.”

“If it was any bigger I couldn’t sail it by myself. Where are your clothes?”

“In my car. Why?”

“Yvette,” he said deliberately—he wanted to say it with as much understanding as he could—“this is a private pier.”

“I’m just getting some sun,” she said flatly. “I can’t even swim.”

“Listen, I’m not going to kick you off. But I’d look out for the manager if I were you.”

She sat up and started peeling skin off her forearm. “It’s his day off.”

“You’ve got a nasty burn,” he said dumbly. Starting from her shoulders, her skin was mottled pink. She was sweating a good deal, and he couldn’t keep his eyes from lingering where it beaded the tops of her breasts and dampened the edges of her swimsuit. “Have you found more work?”

“I might start helping my mom. She cleans houses. She works for a service.”

“Do you live with your parents?”

“Yeah.”

“What does your father do?”

“He works at that mink farm out on County B.”

He knew the place she was talking about. When the wind was to the east, the sour smell of the farm blew all the way to Zenda. The thought came all at once:

“Come clean for me. I don’t have a regular person. I could use the help.”

“Okay,” she said, “I’ll find your address in the phone book.” As if it had all been decided long before. She lay back out on the towel, adjusted her top. “I remember your name from your credit card.”

At home Lomax sat on the patio with a Foster’s. He took two sips, put it down, and then forgot all about it. After a time, he got the Lexus out of the garage and drove into the country. On either side of the road, fields of mustard glowed with the light shining off the waxy leaves. He stopped at a gas station. Inside he waited until he was the only customer, walked up to the clerk, pointed to a rack of magazines behind the counter. “That one, top left.” He didn’t know the title and hardly cared. When he got back, he took it up to the bedroom and flipped through a few pages. He felt Susan’s presence all around him. After a minute or two, he felt so ashamed he threw the thing away.

II.

**She came an** hour late, a bucket full of cleaning supplies held in the crook of her arm. She wore jeans and a boy’s Oxford with the sleeves rolled up. Lomax, in his shorts and sandals, was better dressed for the work. He’d already straightened up the bathroom and the kitchen in anticipation of her arrival.

“I’ll start wherever you want.” She put the bucket down in the middle of the kitchen. He watched her looking around the room—the marble counters, brushed-steel appliances, cast-iron cookware hanging from the pot rack, the photo on the fridge of Susan and him in dinner wear at the Auckland Yacht Club. “It’s clean. You keep pretty clean for a guy.”

“You have to keep everything in order onboard a cruiser. You couldn’t move otherwise.”

“Yeah, but this is a pretty big house.” She took the supplies out of her bucket and lined them up on the counter. All the bottles were still full to the top. “I need to use your mop.”

“Have you done this before?”

She looked around again, searching for a place to begin. “Everyone knows how to clean.”

“I thought you helped your mum.”

She smiled when he said “mum,” but then her expression went blank again.

“Only sometimes. That’s why I had the job at your club.” She sprayed the countertop with cleaner, swiped at it with a rag from her bucket.

“I’m going off for a run,” he said tentatively. “Let you work in peace.”

“Have fun,” she called over her shoulder. “Don’t get a burn.”

He went out in the heat of the day with a nearby park as his aim. A pain in his knee started nagging, but he ran through it. When he finally stopped for breath, his knee was throbbing. “Fine,” he said to himself. “Fine. Go back the slow way.”

He called out as he came through the door. No one answered. The air seemed charged, as if he were entering a stranger’s house. The mop was propped against the fridge door, a smear of soapy water dragged after it. He found the girl sitting on the couch in the living room, head in hands. Before he could ask what was wrong, she pointed to the corner, where a small vase lay on the carpet broken into three clean pieces.

“Another thing I fucked up,” Yvette said and then burst into tears. At the sound of her crying, panic thundered over him, and for a moment he couldn’t move or talk. Then, underneath the panic, something else came welling up, a giddy feeling almost like joy, and he wanted to laugh or cry out. He fought to calm himself, to keep his voice from shaking.

“It’s all right,” he said, kneeling to pick up the pieces of the vase. “Never mind.”

“Was it hers?”

They met eyes for a moment. “Just a trinket. I think we bought it cheap in a market in Trinidad.” Her tears heaved up into sobs. “Come on,” he said in what he hoped was a kind but stern voice. “Come outside, get a breath of air.”

They went down to the shore path. There was a chop on the lake and only a handful of boats on the water. They walked along the path without meeting anyone. It was midweek, thank God, and most of his neighbors were away. A half mile from Top and Linda’s house on Black Point, Lomax stopped to turn back around.

“I want to replace it,” Yvette said, rubbing her red eyes with the heels of her hands. “You don’t have to pay me.”

“Don’t be silly,” he murmured.

She stood looking at the opposite shore, trying, perhaps, to spot the buildings of the club. They were in the other direction. “Nobody owns a stupid lake,” she said.

“That little stunt on the pier . . .” He didn’t know what else to say. “Well, I suppose I would’ve been the same at your age.” Though it had always been Susan who felt uncomfortable around the yachting crowd.

He led them back along the path. The wind was whipping up. The rushing of the maples lining the shore seemed to be everywhere. A sharp, metallic taste burred the back of his throat. Nerves, perhaps, but he felt strangely light and clearheaded.

“Are you off to school come autumn?” he said.

“School’s a waste. I want to know about real things.”

“I didn’t go in for academics either. I was a jock.”

“I want to go all these places. I have these guidebooks—I look at them all the time. All I see is the inside of our dirty-ass house.” She spoke hurriedly, her breath hardly catching her words. “All my brothers ever want to do is drive their stupid cars around and hang out in the Burger King parking lot.”

“Well, don’t worry. It’s the same boring people all over the world.” He laughed, as if including himself in that category. She looked at him skeptically, hungrily.

“Tell me about one of the places you’ve been,” she broke out. “A meal you’ve eaten, even. I want to know all about it.”

He was saved by the chugging of a jet ski. The craft and rider, thumping across the waves, came into view. “Christ,” Lomax said, “I’ll have that racket all afternoon.”

“Must be tough.”

The little, pointed tooth reappeared.

Lomax laughed again, a gentle, unrestrained laugh that surprised him, it sounded so unfamiliar. The girl stopped and looked back toward Black Point, where the whitecaps converged and the surface of the lake frothed to a clean, powder white. She stood there, held by the view, as if it were the most striking and not the most ordinary thing. Lomax couldn’t help picturing her then inside a small, dark house, like the ones he’d seen on the outskirts of Delevan—the television loud and flashing bright in the corner, something frying noisily in the kitchen, someone shouting or a baby crying, her father stomping in at night, reeking of the mink barn. He wondered what a girl like her could really hope for. Stable, pleasant work, some romance, maybe in a few years a child or two she could show off to friends. And then a dull, weary journey through all the rest. By the time he and Susan had finally stopped their globe-trotting and settled in Zenda, they were both too old for children. Susan put her energy into her teaching. Neither of them was the sort to complain or talk about their regrets, and if one of them was left here alone now, well, they’d always known it could happen. It didn’t help anything to talk about regrets.

Yvette rubbed her eyes again, kneading the last tears from them. When she looked at him, her face was lit by happy embarrassment. Her eyes shone with a vitality it pained him to see. “Come on, let’s go,” he said and started back toward the house. She lingered another moment.

“Jesus, it’s beautiful here!” she called over the water, almost as if she was calling out to an echo. And to his surprise, one came faintly back. “. . . beautiful here . . . beautiful . . . ”

**He didn’t expect** her to return, but she came again, the next several weeks, with her bucket of supplies and her boy’s shirt. He let her pick her away around the house, staying out of her way, working upstairs while she cleaned downstairs. He heard her whistling or singing the words to pop songs he didn’t recognize, then the sound of chairs being shifted around, the creaking of the mechanism that wrung out the mop, the television’s chatter. It was strange to have the silence of the house pierced so casually. He came down one afternoon to find she’d rearranged half the furniture in the living room. “It’s more open this way,” she explained. In the other sitting room, she straightened and organized Susan’s bookshelves. She offered to iron his shirts, said she liked ironing. But she left creases. He spent an hour redoing them after she’d driven away in her red hail-pocked Sentra.

The shop floor manager called one morning about a difficult order. Stephen was a fine craftsman, but he had almost no ability to explain design to people who weren’t in the business. Lomax hesitated a few days before calling the customer, a nervy young guy in San Francisco who’d made his money in software and thought his technical mind meant he understood boat physics. “No, of course, we can recut the hull,” Lomax said patiently. “I wouldn’t recommend it, but we can do it.” The customer told him he’d checked with the competition. They would’ve done the boat he wanted for thirty grand less, and they wouldn’t have bitched about it, either. Lomax felt his cheeks going hot.

“Why don’t we meet halfway?” he heard himself saying. “We want to keep your business.” And then he suggested a truly absurd discount. He couldn’t stand to see any boat, even a complete disaster, get scrapped. For the rest of the day, he stalked around the house muttering to himself.

But it had felt good too. It felt good to talk about boats, even with someone who didn’t know a thing about them.

**He’d given Yvette** a front door key. He called down when he heard her letting herself in—“Don’t mind me! Just up here getting a few things done”—and resumed his anxious pacing. He’d started on Susan’s closets again, stuffing black bin bags full of clothes, piling up the hangers on the bed, making a separate heap of things he’d indiscriminately decided to keep. After an hour, he felt his body thrumming—exhaustion or excitement, he didn’t know which. He went down and put on the tea, interrupting Yvette in her cleaning, chattering to her in a voice that sounded curiously high-pitched in his own ears—about the weather, the drought they were supposed to get, and how many miles he’d done on his exercise bike that morning. “I never really got the exercise thing,” she said. “But that sounds impressive.”

“I’m trying to impress you, am I?”

“The guys in my school always talked about how much they could bench.”

“Well, some of us don’t lead very exciting lives.”

She leaned against the counter. She wore a red tank top and gray sweat shorts with the name of her high school across the thigh. It was late summer now, and she was very tanned. Her complexion had cleared up considerably, and she’d let her hair grow long. She crossed one tanned leg over the other at the ankle and leaned there grinning at him.

“You’re the boss at your company, right?”

“More of a glorified salesman,” he said.

“I bet you’re persuasive.”

“Only one rule in sailing—the guy with the most expensive boat wins.”

“Sounds like a fun sport.”

“They haven’t ruined it completely.” He laughed. “Not yet, anyway.”

He went back to Susan’s things, feeling strange, like he was vibrating. Yvette called up that she was finished. He heard the Sentra moving up the driveway. He sat on the edge of the bed staring at the black bags—fifteen of them—resolved to take them to the Salvation Army and get rid of them. But that night they only found their way from the bedroom to the attic.

The next week, Yvette brought a bouquet of white daisies, put them in water, and left petals all over the sink. She had a little folio of CDs with her, and as she did the dishes she turned the volume up loud on some hyperactive dance music. He made her a turkey and avocado sandwich and a cup of tea. She ate standing at the counter, flipping through a fashion magazine Susan had subscribed to and that kept coming even after he canceled it. Sometimes after Yvette finished, she stretched out on one of the patio chairs. From the upstairs window, he could see her dozing in the sun in her blue bikini, the magazine steepled over her lap. Once she’d worn Susan’s wide-brimmed straw hat, and looking down he’d thought for a moment it was his wife, and his heart leaped up, not with joy, but terror that he could be so easily mistaken.

“The expert’s guide to luscious lips,” Yvette read aloud to him. “At thirty-five, she changed her life by switching to soy.” She giggled. “Sixteen top secrets for driving him wild.” She licked the crumbs off her lips as she skimmed the articles. “I always wanted to be a model. Mom always said I should. But my teeth are messed up. I don’t know, maybe I’ll go to beauty school. Take out a loan and learn to cut some fancy hair.”

“That sounds a sensible idea,” he said, measuring his words carefully. Hearing her speak so idly about her future plans made him somehow heartsick.

“What, you don’t think I can do it? Or do you think cutting hair’s too trashy?”

He hesitated before answering. “I think at your age you can do anything.”

“Jeez, thanks!” she said, rolling her eyes. “Some advice.” She put down the magazine. “What did your wife do before she was a teacher?”

His reply came reluctantly, but he gave it. “She worked as a waitress, but mostly we lived cheap and waited for the next race, traveled a little in between.”

“You guys were lucky.”

“Yes, we had a lot of good fortune,” he said softly. “A long stretch of it, anyway.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to say . . .” Her face went flush. “I mean, she was really young for a stroke, right?”

“Some people are just susceptible. That’s all they could say in the end.”

“What was it like when she was sick?”

“It was quiet. Sometimes it was hard to believe she was still shut up in there, in her body. . . . It was very quiet,” he said again.

And for the rest of the day, he found himself quietly repeating Yvette’s words—*You were lucky.* What had Susan said to him all those years ago? “Lucky me. Very lucky me.” But Susan was the one person who’d never made any demands on luck, whose personality was too great and generous to require it. He thought of the mink farm, the dark little house on the outskirts of Delevan. And then he thought of Ditchling and the shabby red brick semidetached he and Geralyn had grown up in. Yes, he’d been lucky; his career had taken Susan and him around the world. But he had never steered. He’d left that to Susan. The whole time he’d just been following in her wake.

**On the phone**with Geralyn that Sunday he was unusually talkative, asking questions about Norman and the girls. A card had come in the mail from Top and Linda, he told his sister. Top was celebrating his sixtieth birthday the weekend before Labor Day. “Yes, I know about that,” Geralyn said. “Linda wrote me. She writes every other week. I think she misses Susan, and I’m the surrogate.”

“I never noticed you two making friends.”

“Well, you had other things on your mind at the time.”

What he didn’t mention was the note Top had scrawled on the back of the invitation. *Haven’t seen much of you, Max. But here’s my big day. Got to drag you out for a night at least.* And then, below that, even more hastily scribbled: *Need to see you, buddy.* He could almost picture Top massaging the bridge of his nose as he wrote it.

“Perhaps you’ll meet someone at the party,” Geralyn said.

“Geri, it’s a little soon, isn’t it.” In that typically English way, his questions were statements; his statements, questions. “Besides, I’m not interested in meeting anyone.”

“Stretching out the grief isn’t heroic, Max. You were a widower the day Susan had the stroke. We all knew it. You knew it. Put yourself out there a little. Susan was larger than life. She drowned you out a little.”

He didn’t protest. It was true, and it was exactly what he had loved about her.

**The following week,** he came downstairs with some cheap costume jewelry he thought Yvette might like. Better that than throw it away. He called her name, but she didn’t respond. He found her sitting at the dining room table. In front of her was a photo album. She had it open to the middle, a page of photos of Susan and him sitting on a white sand beach with banana plants in the background.

“She looked just like that,” Yvette said, pointing to a photo in which Susan was especially beautiful. “It’s weird how pictures make everything come back. I even remember her voice. Hearing that voice took me, like, a million miles away.” He stood looking over her shoulder while she paged through the album. Susan in front of a waterfall, her chestnut hair frizzy with mist: Bali. Susan in a party frock, mouth wide open laughing, bottle of champagne dangling from her hand: Port-au-Prince. Ten or so pages spanned at least as many countries.

“You guys are really pretty in these photos. Shit, you were fine. All these places . . .” A little smile spread across Yvette’s face, her thin lips just covering the tooth. “It’s like another planet. No corn or anything.”

“It can be beautiful here too,” he said, almost whispering. “When the mustard fields glow in the sun . . . ordinary beauty. Sometimes you have to learn to appreciate it.”

“Sure. Minks and everything. They’re pretty when they’re dead.”

He didn’t know whether to laugh. He could feel the closeness, the warmth of her body. He pointed to a photo of Susan and him leaning against the rail of a terrace with an amber sunset and desert as backdrop. “That’s Al Jubayl. Closed to Westerners. They wanted the team to sail an exhibition.” Her finger followed his, brushing against it. “And this one?” He looked down at their two fingers lying on the page, pointing to another picture of Susan when she was young and beautiful and strong.

He pushed the album away suddenly and moved into the living room. Yvette rose from the table to follow, and before he could say anything, she had her arms around him, her head on his chest. She took his hand, clumsily interlacing their fingers. “Don’t worry.” The words sounded dully in him like the muffled blows of a hammer.

“Yvette, I don’t want you to misinterpret—” She pressed closer, and he felt himself straining toward her. Under his khaki trousers, he felt himself growing erect. He closed his eyes, trying to force those images of Susan from his thoughts. *She’d made herself sick.* Yes, she’d done it to spite him—for taking her from her home, her family, for everything his itinerant life had denied them. They’d never had children; he would never even consider it. She’d lain there in that bed all those long months, wasted and shut inside herself, just to spite him. He saw her again, her head turned into the pillow, a tear sliding down her cheek. Oh, for fuck’s sake, why not? Why couldn’t he just take what this girl was offering?

“You don’t have to worry,” Yvette said. “I’m old enough. I want to help.”

“Yvette,” he said, “please.” He carefully took his hand from hers and separated the two of them. She stood almost perfectly still, staring at the carpet. “Yvette, I think I ought to send you home now.”

“I still have to vacuum.”

“That’s enough for today.”

“It’s what you pay me for, isn’t it?”

“I can finish the rest. I can manage.”

He found his checkbook in the kitchen and wrote out a check. He heard her gathering her things and dropping them in her bucket. As they moved around each other, he felt himself trembling. It was all he could do to keep from pulling her to him again.

He walked her out to her car. It was a clear, bright day, and a flat glare came off every surface. They stood before her hail-pocked car, the divots in the hood making little pools of light. Yvette looked up at him. Her expression darkened. He could see her testing what she wanted to say. Her lips moved, but no words came. She began again. “I didn’t want it to go that way. It’s just that I wanted to ask you . . .”

“What is it, Yvette?”

“I want to go to your club. As your guest.”

He smiled thinly, shook his head as if it must all be a joke.

“Don’t be silly, now.”

“Why? There’s no law against it.”

“Yvette, please.”

“You let me into your house. I know you like the company.” She looked at him again and something flashed behind her eyes. “I know what you really pay me for.”

“This place would be a tip without you.” He faltered, tried to summon up all his charm. “An utter tip. You’re a great help. But I can’t—”

She hauled up her bucket, opened the trunk, and dropped it in with a clatter. “No, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have assumed— Shit,” she said to herself, looking away. “Shit. It’s just a job, right? Another shitty job. This house creeps me out anyway.”

“You’re a great help to me, Yvette. I really don’t think I could manage . . .”

“No, I get it. I’m the help. I’m just supposed to disappear.” She got into her car, fumbled for a moment pulling the big foil sun reflector off the dash. The window was rolled halfway down. “I didn’t mean to confuse things for you.”

“Yvette,” he said. “Yvette—”

She looked up at him then, a look so injured and questioning he couldn’t say any more.

“You all think you’re the center of the whole fucking world, don’t you.”

“Yvette, please don’t—”

She chunked the car into gear, pulled up the drive in a purling of gravel, and went out of sight in the trees. Her brakes whined as she stopped at the top of the drive to turn onto the road, and then the car stalled out. He heard her turn it over once, then twice before it caught again. And then he heard nothing but the wind in the treetops. She was gone.

**That Sunday Geralyn’s**call woke him early. “Sorry, Max,” she piped into the phone. “We’re off to the cinema for the afternoon. Have you seen it on the news? The summit? ‘Yo, Blair.’ Makes you ashamed doesn’t it?” She was trying to get in enough small talk that their conversation wouldn’t feel rushed. Even these calls—his lifeline to the world in the weeks after the funeral—had become routine.

“Ashamed about what exactly?”

“To be associated with either of them, I should think.”

“Could I give a damn about any of it, Geri? Really?”

“Excuse me, but what’s gotten into you?”

“You don’t have to bother checking in on me all the time. I can get along all right. You can bully your own family for a change, can’t you?” He heard scuffling on the other end of the line, the kettle beginning to whistle and then the dying note as it was taken off the burner. He made a feeble attempt to apologize, but Geralyn cut him short. “I don’t know what you’re on about, Max, but we’ve a nice family day out planned, and I won’t have you ruining it for me. I’ll talk to you next week when you’ve settled down a bit.”

The following Tuesday, though he wanted to see Yvette and explain again, he left a note and a check on the dining room table. When he came back late that afternoon, the kitchen floor was still wet and there were footprints tracked through the rest of the house. The fashion magazine, which he’d left out for her, lay untouched on the counter. He took up the mop, but after a few minutes the air in the house felt so close he couldn’t breathe. He went outside, following the shore path, looking out at the late afternoon sun quivering on the placid water without seeing it at all. Supposed to be healed by now, he kept thinking. Supposed to be moving ahead. Luck had pulled him through his life, and now it had stranded him here in this stillness, these horse latitudes. For a week, he hardly left the house. He kept the curtains drawn, the phone off the hook.

He left a note for Yvette. Perhaps it was better for both of them, it read, if they put the job on hiatus. He’d never been good with words, he said, but he wished her good luck with future endeavors. He was sure she’d do well. He put the note in a little beige envelope he found in Susan’s bureau, left it on the counter with a check for fifty over the usual amount, and then went out all day looking for a pair of trousers to match any of the coats he had already. He’d lost even more weight in the past several weeks. He wandered the aisles of a succession of men’s shops, feeling the sleeves of the jackets, glancing at price tags, wondering how it even mattered what he wore to Top’s party. When he got back that evening, the high smell of bleach hung in the air. The house had been cleaned immaculately. In a state near to panic, he dug through the scraps of paper he kept by the phone. She’d written down a number where he could reach her. He’d never had to use it. Why couldn’t he help her? He could give her the loan she’d talked about. She could go to beauty school, get her teeth fixed. He could give her some advice. He could give her that, at least. A teenage boy answered on the fifth ring.

“Who’s this?” the voice said. “Where you calling from, man?” It was Mr. Barrett, Lomax said, calling for Yvette. “Oh, you’re that English guy. The guy with the boat, the dude wining and dining my sister.”

No, no, Lomax said. There was some kind of misunderstanding. Yvette worked for him. Was she in? He needed to talk to her.

“Shit, Barrett,” the teenage voice said, “how old are you, anyway?

III.

**The club was** lit up for the party. A huge cluster of balloons tied to the front awning dipped and swayed in the breeze. In the entryway, there was a photo spread of Top at various stages of his career. Lomax stood scrutinizing it, listening to the voices and laughter, wanting very badly to turn around and go home.

There were seventy or eighty people in the banquet room. He’d never seen it so full. A whole room of people who were going to reminisce about Susan, ask how he was, how he was coping. Or maybe, four months later, it was too late for all that. Somehow that seemed worse. His grief was already old news. He found Linda standing with a small circle of women and said his hellos. He felt the women’s eyes on him, heard himself responding to Linda, and a moment later forgot what he’d said. He excused himself, stepped out onto the terrace, and stood under the floodlight in a cloud of gnats, hand cupped over his mouth, forcing himself to take deep breaths.

Someone came up the lawn, a shadow detaching itself from the other shadows. He wore a pressed shirt with a fleece vest over it, a sun-bleached ball cap. He paused on the threshold between the darkness and the floodlit terrace. Behind him, the anchor stood in silhouette against the gray sky and the dark water.

“Hiding out like me?”

“Happy birthday,” Lomax said to his old skipper.

Top came onto the terrace and leaned against the stucco wall. “Too much for one day. Been turning old for a long time, but here it is. Don’t go taking stock of everything when you turn sixty, Max. It’ll wear you out.” The two of them stood there with the insects darting around them. The lake was there, the sloshing of the waves, the dark outline of the anchor against the shifting, crawling dark. “Took some boats down to the Chicago show last week. Some nice boats down there. Stiff competition this year.”

“Every year.”

Sound carried strangely near the water. Murmuring voices came across the lake, the cracking hiss of beer cans being opened. Someone shouted out a woman’s name—Kathy, Katie, something like that. “Got a speech ready?” He wondered if they in turn could hear him and Top talking.

“Short and sappy. Get it over with. Get back to life.”

“I’m trying to remember what that’s like.”

Top reached in his pocket, took out a pack of cigarettes, lit one. “Cheer up, buddy. It’s about time.” He exhaled the smoke from his nostrils in two long plumes. The flies swam away and gathered again.

“When did you start that up?” Lomax said. But he knew Top had always secretly smoked. He’d known it for years.

“As good a time to tell you. Linda’s nagging me again. Give me my swan song time, Max, but I’m on the way out. There’s the whole operation to run if you want it.”

“Of course.”

“You can tell me no for once in your life.”

His stomach felt leaden. He’d always thought this would be a happy moment. He’d always dreamed of bringing the news home to Susan.

“I’m telling you yes.”

Top knelt down, carefully ground the cigarette out on the terrace, dropped it into a potted plant. “Time for all of us to get back to living,” he said and turned to go inside. “Let’s go face the firing squad.”

“Skip,” Lomax said and touched the sleeve of Top’s shirt. “I wanted to ask you . . .”

Top paused there with questioning, impatient eyes. Everything was settled, that was how Top worked—yes or no. There wasn’t anything else to discuss.

“That girl who was fired from the restaurant. What were the complaints?” Nothing changed in Top’s expression. “Tall girl,” Lomax went on. “Pretty. Yvette, I think her name was.”

“Oh, her. Worried about her again? She was begging rides from members, hanging out on the pier all day. This is a club, Max. People want to be comfortable.”

When they went inside, someone put a Foster’s in his hand. Lomax moved from conversation to conversation, talking mostly about Top, telling the same handful of stories to each group, sometimes breaking off in the middle to get another drink.

He found himself talking to a woman he didn’t know. She was a friend of someone or other, staying in their guesthouse for the weekend. She lived and worked in the Loop, came to Wisconsin whenever she could get away—so picturesque, the lake, such a quaint little town. Yes, of course, Lomax said. Very quaint, very charming. The woman laughed, though he wasn’t sure he’d said anything funny. She was in her late thirties. Her hair was dyed blond, and she wore a good deal of carefully applied makeup. If she was not quite beautiful, it hardly seemed to matter to her. Her name was Tara. Tara Stark. She talked quickly, saying repeatedly how bored she was at the party. After several more Foster’s, there seemed nothing he could do but listen.

At some point in the night, there was a toast to Top, a series of boozy speeches, more toasts. Lomax watched his friend standing awkwardly at the front of the room, listening to all the fond jokes, praise, and accolades, smiling and nodding uncertainly as if he had heard of the man worthy of this event, a celebration of a life and a career, without having actually met him. At some point in the night, Lomax and Tara slipped out into the parking lot. The drive was only a smear across his memory. At the front door, he fumbled with his keys while Tara stood giggling at him. A moment later, he had her pressed up against the kitchen counter, her sundress up over her waist. “No, no, that’s no fun”—she shook her head dramatically, her blond hair, brown at the roots, fell over her eyes—“take me to bed already.”

They went clumsily up the stairs. He sat on the edge of the bed, reeling. She pulled him to her, kissed him roughly, but he pushed her away. “What?” she said. “What’s wrong?” She put her arms around him, clung to him.

For a moment, he resisted, but then the weight of desire was too much for him to hold back, and he fell to the bed with this woman he hardly knew, and in a blank frenzy, he used her until his hip bones ached.

**He woke in** the night still drunk. He thought for an instant that it was Susan lying next to him, but then his giddiness settled. The smell of sweat and semen filled the room, and for a moment he couldn’t help luxuriating in the idea that he might wake this strange woman snoring in his bed and do it all over again.

Then the memory of another night slid forward.

It had been early in the process—the doctors had called it that, a “process”—when there was still an outside chance Susan might recover. That night, when he touched her like he had been used to, she didn’t understand what was happening. She struck out at him feebly, hitting him in the chest, the face. He had to grip her by the shoulders and hold her down. Afterward, he lay there in the dark beside her a very long time. Finally, he’d gone into the bathroom, found a face towel, and used it to dry her tears.

He put on his T-shirt and shorts, went down the hallway, and steadied himself while he tried to get hold of the pull-down stairs to the attic.

Down at the lake, he put the tote bag, sweater, and scarf in with a black bag of clothes. He went out onto the pier and started to unmoor the *Elizabeth.* When he stepped into the boat, the drink and the motion of the waves nearly toppled him. He righted himself again and pushed away from the pier. He worked methodically putting the sail up. When the wind caught it, he felt a sudden hollowness bloom in his chest. He looked toward the middle of the lake—the black expanse swaying before him—took the tiller in hand, and set his course