

Bliss

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A gust whooshes across the boat deck. The rope mooring the vessel to the dock tugs hard against the rusting cleat. Norman and Myra's forty-five-foot Sea Ray Cruiser sways down and then back, a gentle reminder that they're actually floating and not sitting on the back balcony of some luxury condo. Myra turns her head, eyes a pair of wine glasses Norman forgot to bring below after lunch. She never used to get so frustrated with him, or at least it took a lot longer for the emotion to rise to the surface.

"Those glasses are gonna break into a million pieces," she says.

"Not unless they fall off the edge of that tray, there," he says, and laughs.

Despite the fact that Norman's once muscular abs are now a substantial paunch billowing out over his swimming trunks, and despite the fact that he seems to take her for granted at times, there's something undeniably attractive about him. He's feisty, willful, opinionated, and even wild sometimes. Norman has become the part of her that remains adventurous, an umbilical to what excitement life has left to offer. He is her tenuous connection to the distant

horizon, to that hazy edge of the world that isn't really an edge at all. Thirty-nine years of trying to be enough for him—her knowing that she is, but wondering whether he knows it, too.

Norman stops chuckling and glances over at Myra. She can't ever just go with the flow. If it's not the storm clouds, it's one of the kids, or one of the kids' spouses, or the grandkids, or the vodka running low. This afternoon it's two wine glasses on a silver tray that Norman has left perched precariously on an end table attached to the boat's rear railing.

The shadows of thick thunderheads creep in closer, their wispy cirrus forerunners already flirting with the light. Beyond them, towering, flat-bottomed anvils seem to sprout from the haze. Beams of sunshine spread over the marina in waves, speckling the boats along the dock in yellow daubs that bloom from the bright pillars of light.

"Why don't you put those wine glasses below, so they don't blow off," Myra says.

"Stow."

"What?"

"You say, 'stow.' You don't say 'put' something below."

Myra winces. "Why don't ya' stow the damn glasses below, jackass? You're not but a few feet away from 'em."

Norman grimaces in her direction.

The look doesn't stop Myra. "You wait too long and the wind's gonna kick up and then I'm sweepin' up broken glass all afternoon."

"You could do it yourself, you know."

Myra tsks her lips at him, but then she takes another sip of her martini and leans back in her chair. "I'm not cleaning it up if they break."

Norman knows that's not true. He is reclining in a chaise-longue-shaped seat that's facing toward the far shore of the marina boat channel, an artificial tributary off the Mississippi. A band shell is there, on an island across from the marina where their boat, *Bliss*, is now docked. They rent the slip year by year. Myra keeps telling Norman they need to find some place cheaper to moor the

boat, but it's more comfortable to stay put, so although he agrees with her every spring, Norman never acts to change things.

Myra relaxes, imagines the two of them are this vessel, afloat and yet tied down, anchored to something invisible. Does Norman see them this way? What lies beneath the bluster of his moods? They still laugh and talk and make love, but she can't help wonder whether he's happy.

There's a stir of activity at the end of the band shell stage. Two young men dressed in white-collared shirts and black bow ties are toting a large cake up the side stairs. Myra tips her sunglasses onto the end of her nose and gazes toward the bustle. "What do you suppose they're up to?"

"Some gay wedding probably," Norman says, and then he tsks.

"It doesn't have to be a *gay* wedding. It might just be a wedding. You know, like a normal wedding with a boy and a girl. They have as much a right to be miserable as the rest of us. And besides, how do you know they're gay?" Myra sets her glasses back into place.

"They look gay."

"Just because the caterer hires gay bartenders or gay waiters doesn't mean the people getting married are gay."

Norman blinks and rubs his eyes. The wonderful feeling of his brain cells submerged in alcohol nudges him into conceding the point. He adjusts his straw fedora so that it shades more of what's left of the sun, and then he takes another sip of his martini. The clouds coming in from the west are moving at an ominous speed. Even through his heavily tinted Ray-Bans, Norman can apprehend the threat in them. A cool wind, like the first cold front of the autumn, is blowing across the surface of the river, swirling up and over the deck of the boat. The smell of ripening leaves is in the air. This weather is confusing. September is the kind of month that doesn't really know what it's up to—can't tell if it belongs to summer or fall.

The two young men who've set up the cake are now busying themselves arranging tables and chairs and hanging decorations. A few more young men show up carrying hard-shell cases and lugging speakers into place on the stage.

“Oh, great,” says Norman.

“What? You’re gonna complain about hearing some music now?”

“I love music.”

“You love *your* music.”

“I can’t help it if kids today have no good sense of what a band should sound like. God damned rap ain’t music. It’s just talkin’ in rhythm.”

“It’s got soul,” says Myra.

Norman laughs. “What the hell do you know about soul?”

Myra harrumphs in his direction before taking another sip of her cocktail.

Norman continues, “Marvin Gaye, Barry White—that’s soul. Not that rap shit. It’s just yelling.”

“Jesus, you sound just like your old man. Only he was saying the same thing about the Beatles.”

Once again, sucking the little rivulets of alcohol from between the creases in his lips coaxes back a rebuttal. Norman smiles. She’s right. He does sound like his old man.

“What do you suppose kids today would be getting married for?” he asks Myra.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, most of ’em don’t have any religions anymore, and there’s no society lookin’ down on ’em if they wanna screw their brains out all day.”

“Norman!”

“C’mon! They’ve got birth control, and even if they didn’t, abortion’s legal. Really. What would possess kids today to wanna get married?”

“I can’t believe you sometimes. You’re an old bat!”

“What?”

Myra and Norman both sip their drinks. Daydreams of their twentieth-anniversary Caribbean cruise keep Norman occupied, his thoughts swimming in memories of warm breezes and rum punch. A half hour drifts by. Norman’s eyes droop, but he catches himself and shifts position so he doesn’t wind up

falling asleep during the day. There'd be no getting to sleep at night if he allowed himself to nap during the day.

Clouds have all but obscured what's left of the sunny afternoon. Norman looks back across the water. More assistants and servers and guests are milling about the band shell stage. The sound system is plugged in, and the sound guy is playing a song Norman has never heard before. He has to admit, he kind of likes whatever it is that's queued up. The next tune's catchy as well. He doesn't seek out new music. Hasn't in years. He never goes to clubs, or listens to the radio, or watches videos or YouTube, so there's no way for him to come across new groups. Maybe he should look into that. He really likes the third tune now too.

A steady wind is blowing. Air swirls around them like a cool embrace. Norman's got to move before a chill sets into his bones. He looks over. Not much left in the bottom of his glass.

"You ready for another?" he asks Myra.

"I'm always ready for another."

Norman labors to rise from the lounge. He grabs Myra's cocktail glass and heads below toward the minibar.

"Why don't you take those two wine glasses down, too?" Myra chirps after him.

Norman ignores the request, but Myra can't help herself. She worries over soon-to-be-broken things, things that can't be repaired. The one time Eric, their youngest, got arrested for pot possession, she treated him as if he needed to be in rehab. And why not? Once down the wrong road, it's hard to turn around. And who knows where some roads lead? Perhaps she's lived too sheltered a life, wasted too much time living in the past. But the past is comfortable, steadfast, and never changing. Besides, it's not wrong of her to love the best parts of her life. Myra's always cradled memories as if they were children that have never grown up.

Norman navigates the two steep steps down to the lower cabin and ducks behind the bar to fix the next round of martinis. As he tips the vodka bottle to pour out a shot, a sudden wave makes the glassware on the bar tinkle. The boat

bobs up and then back. Wind is kicking up good now. Won't be long before he'll be cooped up below with Myra, waiting for the front to move through. The thought of spending hours down in the cabin playing pinochle with his wife makes Norman cringe. He spears two olives from the jar and plunks one into each glass, then heads back up top, drinks in hand.

"Ooh!" Myra says when Norman sets her martini on the side table next to her outstretched hand. "That's nice."

"What color nail polish is that? Is that new?" he asks, reclining back in his seat. The dark polish goes well with her full figure and shadowy hairstyle. Myra still can't talk herself into letting her near-black locks go gray.

"They call it 'Midnight,' but it's really just a dull lavender," Myra says holding out her left hand, palm away from her.

"Purple."

"They can't call it purple, stupid. They'd never sell it if they called it that. What's romantic about purple?"

"Exactly," says Norman, and then he laughs out loud, thinking about the multiple meanings behind his answer. Myra laughs, too. The laughing accelerates into a rolling guffaw that ends in Myra reaching over and grasping Norman's shoulder near his neck. The two of them get such a kick out of one another. Not that anything either of them says is necessarily funny. It's just funny the things they find to laugh about together. Years and years of quips and shared experiences, serious events spun into humorous memories, the joy retrospect brings—almost as if everything that's happened to them has been compressed into an easy chuckle and another drink.

Heavy gusts blow across the deck of the boat, and the wine glasses at the edge of the railing rattle, one of them actually shifting closer to the edge of the tray.

"You should get those before they spill."

Norman takes another sip of his cocktail. The vodka, laced with just a hint of vermouth, eases toward the back of his throat. The warmth of it going down is like comfort, the cessation of care.

“You know, in Eastern philosophy they say that you should never think of objects as permanent. It’s not that the glasses *might* break. Someday they *will* break. That’s a given. Trick is, you’ve got to think of the glasses as already broken.”

“I’ve been thinking of them that way for the last half hour.”

“Maybe you’re a philosopher and you don’t know it.”

“Or maybe I’m just the wife of a jackass and I’m trying not to envision a future where I’m on my hands and knees cleaning up broken glass.”

That makes Norman laugh, and him laughing makes Myra laugh, and they laugh together as the storm clouds approach, all the while sipping at their martinis and watching the young people across the river prepare for the upcoming nuptials. The stage is awash in guests, and soon the music rises and an older-looking man with graying sideburns is walking the bride down the aisle. The younger man waiting there next to the minister looks tense, but even from across the channel Norman can see the devoted look on his face.

Light rain starts to fall. Droplets plink one by one onto the boat deck, creating damp patches that ebb and flow, then congeal to form bigger patches. Both Norman and Myra sit up straighter as the ceremony begins. The dull rumble of distant thunder rolls through the thickening air.

“Why’s this weather got to ruin things?” Myra says.

“It’s trouble—it’s good.”

“What?”

“Sure. It’s what makes a day memorable, seals the events in your brain. Think about it. You always remember the ants at your picnic or the bully on your playground. Wait and see. Years from now they’ll look back on this and laugh, precisely because it wasn’t perfect.”

“Hmm.”

Norman lifts his glass to toast and points it toward the couple. There’s an ozone smell in the air. Larger droplets are now falling from the dark sky. At the edge of hearing, a voice wafts toward them. “Glad to see everyone,” then something about the bride. She’s a cancer survivor. Something about her last

five years in remission. Norman's heart flutters. Seventeen years ago Myra had a scare—lumpectomy, then radiation. They caught it early and she's made a full recovery, but to this day Norman cannot shake the fear that stirs in him when he hears the word *cancer*.

The couple across the river recite vows, exchange rings. The wind is kicking up again. The wine glasses on the boat's railing stir, their bowl-shaped reservoirs knocking together, sometimes both of them ringing clear, at other times one dampening the other's tone. Norman eyes the two vessels tottering next to one another, imagining his wife's woe were they to topple. He turns to Myra.

"It's still a beautiful thing, two people making a commitment." He rests his cocktail glass on the deck beneath his feet and eyes the wine glasses, listening to them sing at one another.

Myra wipes a tear from her eye the moment the bride's "I do" reaches her ears. A blustery wind howls through the crowd and echoes inside the band shell as the couple kiss for the first time as man and wife. The breeze whips across the channel and blows in one steady whoosh against the boat. The deck rocks beneath another wave. The wind gust along with the sway are finally enough to upset the wine glass tray. One of the glasses tips rim over base and falls toward the boat deck. Norman leaps from his lounge and snatches it from the air a moment before it would have shattered. The other wine glass follows along in the first's wake, but Norman grabs the second with his left hand. He stands up a little straighter and then turns to Myra, a smug grin pasted across his lips.

Myra's still crying, but smiles as she dabs at her cheeks. "I haven't seen you move that fast in forty years, old man."

"Didn't know I had it in me, did you?"

"You don't know everything."

Instead of toasting the couple across the channel, she lifts her martini in Norman's direction. Wine glasses in hand, Norman takes a deep bow. Raindrops are pelting down all around them now. Chuckling, Norman turns to scan the ceremony. The couple must have already made their exit because all that remains is the mayhem of servers and guests ducking for cover, the bridesmaids trying

to rescue flowers and pieces of the decorations. Banners twirl and flutter in the gusty winds. Exit music blares from the sound system. Most have taken shelter under the band shell's overhang along with the DJ.

"C'mon," Norman tells Myra. "Let's get this stuff below before it all blows to hell and gone."

"Stow it!" Myra tells him, rising from her chair, retrieving Norman's cocktail glass from below his lounge.

"Right, I meant 'stow.'"

"No. I just meant fuck off, old man!" says Myra laughing, shaking her ass from side to side as she trots away in front of him. That makes Norman laugh, too. Surprises.

She's never boring. He wonders how it's been for Myra, this marriage. Is she happy? If she is, will she still be after this boat's just a memory? All the money and accomplishments don't amount to much if the future is gray. And Myra gets into a blue funk when she's got nothing to keep her focused on the horizon. He won't let that happen. Next year he'll retire, maybe take the boat all the way down the river and out to the Florida Keys. What would she think of that?

As Norman follows his wife down into the cabin, the wine glasses kiss off one another and ring out—a clear, even note that slowly fades. Marriage—one story with two points of view.

The storm has arrived. Rain stirs up the dense air, the leafy smell of autumn blowing cold and damp across the boat deck and down into the safety of their cozy hideaway. Norman closes the door behind them with his elbow. The latch clicks into place. He sets the wine glasses down on the mini-bar and picks up his hoodie, the words "Master of the Seas" emblazoned on the back. He catches up to Myra before she takes a seat and drapes his jacket over her shoulders.

"Where's the damn playing cards?" he asks.

