

The Greatest Storm

by Chrys Romeo

Nothing warns you in the beginning: you're super happy; the sky is immaculately blue; life is brighter than ever - the dream seems endless and love is perfect... and beneath that the other side lurks, soon to surface like oil above water, menacing clouds that gather in an instant, darkening every color above and below. The density of the turning point drops every time, saying there's got to be payment for those moments of bliss. You're bound to be taken to the worst part of it: drowning and getting lost in painful agony before you are allowed to find a better outcome. And that's simply because you dared to believe in the highs... the lows come after you. Just because you thought this was the one. This time, for sure, she was.

She was more real than anyone. She had eyes capable of immensity like the depths of the oceans, resonant of eternal night skies, flexible veils of changing clouds beyond which light beams would reflect the sunshine after a storm with such intensity that would unmistakably reach someone's soul in a blink of a second. She had that power, to reach out effortlessly, like snapping fingers. With just one look - just one smile - one word. She had the power to warm up - to melt - to charm away anything. The warmth, the shining eyes that couldn't hide love, the need for care and protection, the unpredictable smiles, the closeness of her soul, the simple direct way of being right there, the beating heart that made her more alive than my own presence in the middle of my conscious thoughts... her charming flaws made her even more lovable: her fears, anxiety, insecurities and imprecise irrational behavior sometimes turned her into a perfectly imperfect human being who had everything I'd ever wanted in someone and who, without realizing it, desperately needed someone to be there for her, to watch her, spoil her and protect her from a dangerous world - at least so was my impression of her, that was what she stirred in me. That's how I felt around her, instinctively willing to do anything and everything to make sure she would be happy. Moreover, it was because she had that caring heart that not many would show, or prove to be able to live with. In such a careless world it's a punishment to be walking around with so much love, because the biggest hearts give themselves away and get hurt the most. Of course, she was apparently just a girl who felt too much and could

become a dream right into anyone's mind, but she was more real than anything and how I loved that girl was beyond my own perception.

In a very short time she was irresistibly infused in my mind, breathing in my soul and stuck to the rhythm of my heart. Life. She was life itself. Miraculous, stubborn, breathtaking, unpredictable, modest, splendid, shy or demanding, confident and insecure, exuberant and moody, retreated or impulsive, but more than anything, with an inner beauty beyond compare, overflowing from the warmth of a real heart. I accepted everything and anything that was part of her being. I made no attempts to deny or disregard the slightest detail of the way she was. I wanted her in my life, no matter what she brought along. No matter who she was. No matter where she came from. For, where she came from, I had no idea.

Not at first, anyway. She just came. She just appeared out of nowhere, like a materialization of my deepest wishes. She climbed in my boat one day, and that was it. Really, climbed into the boat. Out of the water. Just like that. Like a child of the sea.

I must say I had started working on the bay a few days before. I was there because I was trying a new job in the tourist department: the doctors had told me I needed the sea air for my autoimmune condition. Besides, I had always loved the sea, so I tried it – went through two months of training and then on probation to get hired on a boat – one of those summer boats that tourists enjoy taking rides on. I was out with it late in the evening, by myself, to get used to handling the sails and everything. The sky was uncertain and gray clouds were gathering above the bay. It looked like a storm was coming. I was worried I would not get back in time, to align the boat with the others that the company owned.

And then, just as I was adjusting the fluttering sails, I heard that thumping sound and a splash – and then I turned to see what it was. Something had hit the boat. I turned – and there, right there... she was.

She was hanging on. With her elbows over the wooden edges, her eyes on me, smiling.

“Hi”, she said casually.

Water was dripping from brown locks of hair.

I stared, confused.

“Hi”.

And then I asked, not really believing she was actually there:

“How did you get this far?”

Her smile became more confident. Her eyes started gleaming, amused.

“Swimming”, she replied simply.

Her words reached me from the beginning. This girl had a power to reach to me so easily, so naturally... as if she knew my soul better than I did. Everything she said – or did – was just right by me.

“Can I come aboard? I don’t want to hang around here the whole night”, she said.

“Of course, jump over.”

She did. She wasn’t wearing one of those usual swimming suits, but shorts and a tank top. She looked as if she had fallen into the water, not actually planning to go out swimming.

“It’s good I found this boat”, she said breathing a bit tired and sitting in a corner, her chin on her knees, shielding herself.

“Why were you in the water at this time, this far away from the shore?”

“I was running from something”, she answered.

I looked in her eyes, to check if she was lying. Her smile hadn’t faded completely, but her eyes had become cloudier and more serious.

“From what?”

I thought she wouldn’t tell me, but she continued to answer, handing me the raw truth, as if to take a chance, checking whether I was able to handle it – because apparently she thought her truth was more than I could deal with.

“Someone was chasing me with a knife.”

I became more attentive. Her words seemed honest – uncoated, unfurnished. She was trembling a little – from the cold or the memory.

“Why would anyone chase you with a knife? Who was that? Do you know him?”

She nodded.

“It’s my stepfather. He does that when he gets drunk.”

I was forgetting about the sails by now. Her life story seemed beyond movies. I tried to control my voice, but my throat was getting dry and I could hardly find the words.

“Does that happen often?”

She looked away.

“Yes. One time, he got to me and stabbed my leg. Another time he chased me and my mother. We ran away barefoot in the snow, for miles

and miles. Our feet froze and we could have lost them. And many times he beat us up.”

I stood up and did the one thing that I could do at that moment.

I offered her a blanket. She smiled and wrapped herself in it, water still dripping from her hair.

“How old are you?” I asked her.

“Sixteen”, she replied.

“Two years younger than you should be, swimming around by yourself”, I tried to joke.

I didn’t expect her to be amused, but she reacted to my words by smiling more. She seemed to respond – and reach to me – more than any girl I had known before. She had just landed on my boat no more than ten minutes ago, and yet I felt so open and connected to her, as if we knew each other well enough to feel our hearts beating and guess our thoughts rhyming together with no obstacle in between.

“Do you have anywhere to go?” I asked her again.

She nodded, looking away to the shore, where the evening lights of the pier were coming up like little spots, trembling stars reflected in the distant waves.

“I’ll be staying with some relatives in town. That’s what I do in case of emergencies like this.”

She waited for a few seconds, then she turned her eyes to me again and I saw that shimmering light of hidden amusement:

“Good thing you have this boat, so I could climb and be rescued.”

I shrugged.

“It’s not my boat, I just work on it.”

She didn’t seem disappointed. She wanted to know something.

“Why then do you have that cap that says *captain* on it?”

I took off my cap and smiled at it.

“I like it a lot, so I wear it. I suppose I’m some sort of captain myself, when I’m alone on this boat.”

I turned around and steered it towards the bay. Talking to the girl had distracted me and it was getting dark. The sun had set and thick clouds had taken over the horizon completely. The waves were getting more agitated, rocking the wood, splashing against it relentlessly.

When we arrived in the bay she jumped ashore.

“Thanks for the ride”, she said and I could see her eyes glimmer in the dark once more before she ran off.

She had left the blanked on the edge, like a warm memory in the night.

I realized I hadn't even asked her what her name was – how she was going to get home – if she needed anything. I remained there, worried about her, with so many words and questions unasked – and unanswered.

I was glad I had met her, glad that I knew such a girl existed: with eyes reflecting the ocean and the night sky and the sunshine after the greatest storm.

To my surprise, the next morning I met her again.

I was just starting to unfold the sails when I heard her cheerful voice behind me:

“Good morning!”

I was more than happy and relieved to see her.

“Good morning! How are you? Did you get home safely?”

“Sure, I was just fine. No worries.”

In time, I would get used to those words of hers.

She jumped aboard again. She was more relaxed than the evening before: she was almost exuberant. Her white t-shirt would be easily confounded with the white sails, in the morning sunlight. It was one of those mornings when everything seems perfect and life is brighter than ever. What I didn't realize was that she was brightening up the morning, just by being there.

She was walking around the boat, checking everything out, in her slim black jeans and sunglasses, looking like a tourist on vacation, without a care in the world.

“Where are we going today?”

“We?”

“Can I come with you? Are you going to take people on board?”

“Yes – and no. Not yet. I'm still on probation. After the weekend, I'll be on official rides.”

“So you haven't got the job yet?”

She wasn't evaluating the situation. She was trying to understand it.

“I did. But I must practice more.”

“What can I do to help you?”

I stared at her. She was eager to do something – anything. Her offer was honest.

“Are you allowed to be here?”

“Yes, sure. I’m allowed. No worries.”

She noticed my hesitation.

She took out her phone and extended it to me.

“Here, call my aunt if you don’t believe me. She’ll tell you.”

I didn’t check. Maybe there was no aunt. Maybe she had run away from home. But I decided to trust her instead. If she needed to be there with me, she could stay.

“Okay... ummm... what’s your name again?”

“You didn’t ask me last night”, she smiled. “It’s Amber.”

How simple. How complex... at the same time.

“Okay Amber, you can untangle the ropes over there and we’ll get going.”

“Yay!” she threw her arms up in enthusiasm and ran to the ropes, dutifully.

It was so comfortable having her on the boat, so fit, as if she already was a part of it... a part of my dream of a new life.

We sailed out to sea, to clear water and clear blue sky. It was such a beautiful day, I couldn’t believe life was so bright – and I had a girl like Amber on the boat.

I must say that being ill had always reduced my chances with girls. They were afraid of the whole situation – of being with someone with an uncertain future. The doctors didn’t know what would happen to me, if my immune system would go on or fail – and when. So I didn’t get much company from the girls, not for long anyway. It always ended with them leaving me for some other guy with a healthy present and a secure future. But that wasn’t why I was enjoying Amber’s presence so much. It was just because of her. Because she was perfect the way she was... perfect in my eyes. And it was like a great gift of life to see her there. She was touching the water with one hand, dreamily enjoying the view, enthusiastically waving at seagulls and at the people on the shore, who had no idea what was happening and why she was shouting at them.

“Helloooooo!”

She was like a child with a super toy, and the boat was her new discovery. I was watching her, happy to see her so happy. I knew she didn’t have the chance to do that too often. From what she had already told me, life had been too rough to this girl who felt too much.

I let the boat float slowly and came to the front, where she was watching the water.

“Look at those schools of fish!” I said, as the slippery shiny groups were swaying with the currents under the boat.

“You know”, she said, “I didn’t get to see the sea until this summer. When I was little I used to have these plastic toys to play in the sand – in shapes of starfish, octopus, seashells... I used to dream of the sea a lot, but we never went anywhere during summer. I learned to swim in a river. And when my parents started building around the house, I would take wet cement in those shapes, stick them to the wall in my room and let them dry. I went back and forth with those plastic shapes and filled the wall with sea creatures. After they were solid dry I painted them – and painted algae around them – and the wall in blue... can you imagine? At night, in half darkness, I could see the sea on my wall, in my room... I could almost hear the waves whispering while the starfish was glowing magically... it was so beautiful... I miss my home so much.”

She was silent for a few moments. I stood there, completely conquered by the view of a room with a sea on its wall – a room that a girl had reinvented with so much imagination and soul. It would be only later, when I would struggle with the pain of being without her, that I would realize – that from the first moment I met her, she decorated and changed the walls of my life too, in the same way she had reinvented her room. She would change and reinvent my whole world into an unbelievable dream – and she would leave her fingerprints in my heart, silver fire cemented like those sea shapes in half darkness, glowing and whispering mysteriously, unforgettably...

At that moment, I watched her in admiration. This girl was amazing. And I had been so fortunate to meet her... and to find that she wanted to be there with me.

“Where is your home actually?” I asked her, since she had mentioned missing it deeply.

“I’m not from this town. It’s far away from the shore – ten hours away, in a village on a hill... I’m staying with my aunt now. My mother and I wanted to rent a house here but my stepfather came after us and now I’m staying with my aunt and my mother went to another city, looking for work.”

She stood there, leaning on the wooden edge, her eyes hidden behind the dark sunglasses. I didn’t know if there were tears or not, but her voice was a bit shaky. She didn’t flinch a smile. She seemed to be lost in thoughts. My immediate wish was to be able to protect this girl from

whatever made her sad – from her past – from her uncertain present. I didn't say anything.

"Look!" she noticed a seagull land on top of our sails and her face brightened up a bit.

I took out my camera to zoom in the seagull. As we were both leaning on the edge, she grabbed my wrist, gently and unexpectedly.

"Watch out, you'll drop the camera in the water."

Her gesture had been so natural and caring that I was again speechlessly conquered by it. She didn't cease to amaze me with everything she did – she said – and she was...

"Here", she helped me, passing the safety string of the camera around my hand. "This way you won't drop it when you take pictures".

I smiled.

"What would I do without you?"

She returned the smile.

"I'm here to keep you safe. Don't you know? You can bet on it."

We spent the rest of the morning taking pictures of seagulls, waves and the distant shore. When we got close to the pier she started shouting again at the random passengers, at other boats, greeting them with cheerful enthusiasm, apparently for no purpose and no specific reward, just as children wave at cars and say hello to signal to others their presence in the world: because in the beginning, everything around is interesting and worth a cheer. Some people would stop to glance at us, others would wave back, and others made gestures I was glad she didn't notice.

However, I didn't try to interrupt her game. It was like a gift just to see her so happy, as pointless as it was to wave at those clueless people.

"What are we doing now?" she asked me when we were finally ashore.

She turned out to be suddenly glued to my schedule, but I didn't mind. I was very much enjoying her company. It was more than perfect, for some reason. And I figured she had nowhere better to be, at that moment.

"It's lunch break. If you want, you can have lunch with me."

"Okay", she said.

She seemed to agree to everything I would say and it made it seem so easy to do anything with her by my side.

“However, I must warn you that I don’t eat too much”, she added while we started walking along the dock.

“Why not?”

She shrugged.

“I can’t. I was a few times in hospital because of it – I keep fainting and I fall down, blacking out. But I still can’t eat.”

I knew enough of hospitals myself , for other reasons– I’d had my share of them.

“That’s not good”, I said and she smiled at my worried frown.

“I wanted to run away from hospital”, she grinned, “but the guards ran after me and brought me back. I only made it to the gate.”

Everything she was saying was either terribly appalling or completely mesmerizing. It seemed that her life stories evoked unimaginable depths of struggle, pain, distress and in spite of it, her presence inspired overwhelming caring, warmth, compassion and joy. At least that was how I felt – and I would soon be aware that it was in her nature to bear the burden of such deep contrasts. The more she sank in despair, the more she would long for endless love, for a love that would erase every memory of suffering...

I was determined to get her to eat something – anything. She would not starve or faint as long as she was with me, I promised myself. The least I could do was try.

She turned out more stubborn than I’d imagined. As compliant as she had been to follow through with chores around the boat, the more determined she proved to be when it came to the subject of eating.

We picked a table at a restaurant outside on the dock. We sat down, facing each other. She was shielding her eyes with sunglasses, prepared to defeat me in the attempt to feed her.

“Okay, let’s see...”

I checked the menu.

“How about some fish soup?”

She shook her head.

“Potatoes?”

“Maybe”.

“Steak?”

“No.”

“Salad?”

“Yes.”

I ordered the fish soup for myself, planning a trick. I ordered potatoes and salads for both of us.

She wanted fries. I preferred mashed, but I decided to go along with her.

So we both had fries. The soup came first.

I took the spoon.

"Listen, would you do me a favor and check if this soup has enough salt?" I asked nicely.

She smirked a little. I could not see her eyes behind the sunglasses, but I sensed she had guessed my game. She said nothing. I plunged the spoon in the soup and extended it to her, with a napkin underneath, the way you would feed a baby who can't handle eating on its own. She had no choice but to go along with it. She sipped the soup a bit reluctantly, but nevertheless calmly and patiently, almost gracefully. I could only adore her at that moment. I smiled.

"So? Does it have enough salt?"

She shook her head. I sprinkled some salt in the soup; then I grabbed the spoon again - and did the same thing, extending it to her mouth.

She said nothing and sipped it, watching me mysteriously from behind the sunglasses.

"What about now? Enough salt?"

She nodded.

"Yes."

"Would you please have another spoon to be sure?"

She shook her head. I thought at least she had tried a bit of soup, so I let her chew the fries. Which she did, about three of them. Three pieces - and a bit of tomato salad. And that was it.

"You can't be serious", I told her.

"I can't have more."

She was absolutely determined.

I thought I would continue negotiating another time. For the beginning, I knew I couldn't get a better result.

I looked around.

"This is like those rich people on the beach", she said watching the dock, grinning.

"Why do you say that?"

"I saw it on tv. People with yachts and house boats. I think there's lots of them here."

We looked at them. And then we saw the lights in the distance, on the hill. There were letters lit up by electric wires, huge metal shapes in the summer heat, on the rim of a hill, with the name of the town, probably a tourist attraction.

“Look! It’s like Hollywood!” she exclaimed.

I wondered why I hadn’t seen the sign before she came. Why was it that she made me see things that were already there – but without her I hadn’t been aware of their existence. I realized later why - because she had made me more alive.

“Let’s go there, shall we?” she pleaded.

I was up for an adventure.

“Okay, let’s go up there.”

We got up and started walking toward the hill.

“Do you think it’s too far away?” she asked me.

“I don’t know... it doesn’t matter. We’re going there now. It will get closer by the minute.”

I was so happy to walk with her along the pier. I had never felt so right with any other girl that I had dated – and this girl wasn’t even my official date, but there we were, going on what felt like a date. And then she noticed a small shop with toys, souvenirs and scarves. She stopped, glancing nostalgically at bracelets and earrings. I was sure a girl of her age would long for anything colorful and dangling in the sun that would have metal or plastic to shine. I was also very sure she didn’t have much money. And for a moment, I wanted her to have the best day of her life – to enjoy what she couldn’t usually afford. I said suddenly:

“Let’s get something for your birthday.”

“But it’s not today...”

“It doesn’t matter.”

She breathed with a new surge of unexpected thrill. The idea of really getting something from that display of trinkets enchanted her mind. We went together to have a look at the bracelets and pendants.

“This one”, she said shyly, picking one with a crab on it.

“Okay”, I said determined. “This one it is.”

I could tell she was so happy and a bit afraid to show it, as if she feared it would spoil it and make it disappear if she enjoyed the present openly. But when she placed it around her neck, the silver line glistened in her eyes with pure delight. I was again so happy to see her that way. I knew it didn’t happen often in her life. I just knew.

She said hesitantly:

“You should get one too. Like mine.”

I didn't ask her why she thought she needed us to have matching pendants, but it was my turn to comply to her wish, as she had done the entire day with me.

“Okay, I'll get one too. How about this with a fish?”

It was also silvery and glistening in the sun. I tried to put it on, but my clumsy fingers weren't used to that kind of stuff. The chain was too fragile, the lock too small.

“Let me do it”, she said and before I could reply she was behind me, gently tying the pendant around my neck.

I realized every gesture we had shared that day had an unexpected level of intimacy, as if we had been around each other forever.

I was once again speechless, walking after her like in a daze.

She still wanted something else. She fumbled in the pockets of her jeans and took out some change. She watched it with uncertainty, pondering on how to make best use of that small treasure that she had probably kept with strict determination. She wanted something specific. Something important. I saw her staring at a box of rings. Silvery, shiny, with engraved ornaments, carvings in metal with mysterious meanings. I saw her talk to the vendor and choose one, after careful examination. I thought a girl would do that, buy herself a ring once in a while. But then she did something unexpected – again. She came to me, trying to say something she was a bit shy to voice. She touched my arm, pleading almost under her breath:

“Wouldn't you like to get a ring too?”

I was left speechless by her question. I was willing to grant her any wish. I didn't think it would be something that would mean so much – a girl like her wanted me to have a ring. I had never liked rings on my own fingers – ever. But I wanted to indulge her - anything she asked. Besides, the idea of a girl asking me to get a ring was something that had never happened to me before. I welcomed the new surprise as another miracle of the day.

“Okay. Which one?”

She looked at the box, concentrating.

“One like mine”, she said, passing from one to the other, taking them in her fingers and checking the patterns.

She was relieved I had accepted her wish so easily, without any protests. I felt her trust in me increase significantly.

I understood the ring had to be exactly the same as hers. I wanted it that way too.

I let her choose.

“You find it.”

“One with these flames. Here it is.”

She picked it for me and I accepted it without a word. I would say I was rather happy – more than happy to do it. I didn’t mention the meaning of it – us having matching rings – and she didn’t either. We already had matching pendants - and now matching rings. And neither of us said a word about what it meant, but we were both happy about it. At least that was how I felt, at that moment. Somehow, I knew we had matching souls too...

I slid the ring on my finger. The metal felt strong and it reminded me every second of its presence. I wasn’t used to wearing something like that. But it made me aware of another presence that I already loved a lot, beyond my own awareness: Amber, walking by my side, wearing a similar ring.

The past day had been like a fairy tale and I was so grateful for it.

I was so happy she needed me to have a ring. I was so enchanted she needed me to go with her to the sign on the hill. I was absolutely blissful I had met her. It was like a dream - and I hoped it would never end. And more than that: it was so real, it made me more alive I had been in years.

On our way to the hill we passed by a fountain that was sprinkling water from a dandelion shape – one that blows into tiny floating specks of light.

“Let’s make a wish”, Amber said joyfully, jumping on the edge of the fountain.

She still had a small copper coin left.

I had a bigger yellowish coin.

“You make a wish”, I said.

“Please do it too!” she pleaded, taking my hand and dragging me towards the fountain.

I laughed.

“Okay, fine.”

She threw her coin in the water, rather quickly.

Then she came by my side, to instruct me how to throw a wishing coin. She turned me around.

“You have to stand with your back to the water. And throw it over your head. Come on!”

I smiled. This game was funny. I wanted to believe it had some truth in it: that the fountain was magical, that the gesture would be prophetic and I would ensure my wishes to come true.

“Look”, I said. “My coin is bigger than yours. How many wishes did you place on yours?”

“Three.”

“Then, I should have five. Do you think that’s fair?”

She laughed.

“Fine, make five wishes. But do it already and throw the coin.”

I thought about it: what to wish for? I had always longed for true love - that was undoubtedly one of them. I also wanted to be healthy and I wanted health for the people I cared about. I wanted to be good at what I was doing. I also wanted my own boat one day. I thought that would be enough. And at that time, I figured the love wish had already been granted somehow. Meeting her had been magical. I already loved Amber more than I thought I could tell her - if she hadn’t already guessed by the way she lit up my soul with her presence. Spending the day with her had been beyond magical. I knew she was too young for me - almost ten years between us - and I was also not guaranteed to be well in the next years, or the number of them... but I wanted her to love me too, despite any apparent obstacles of our place and time. Life was a gamble anyway. It was unexpected. It could turn out right -why not? I believed love could erase whatever it was that would rise between us. Love was miraculous. Love had that power. Anything was possible. I was willing to wait two more years for her to decide if it was more than a game - being with me. I was willing to wait even more years to get healthy by the sea - and I wanted her to be there in time. I hoped she needed me. And I hoped she would somehow remain in my life forever, because I needed her like crazy - even after just one day spent by her side. I hoped she could love me too, as much as I already loved her. It wasn’t a plan: it was a wish I asked for with my entire soul.

“I’m not telling you what I wish for”, I warned her.

“Of course not. Go ahead.”

“I also want to have a boat”, I said and flipped the coin over my head.

I also want a new life, I thought.

“Wouldn’t it be great”, she said while she was walking by my side toward the hill in the distance, “if we could go swimming together? Just the two of us, to a swimming pool.”

“Oh you’re tempting me with it, you have no idea...” I smiled. “Of course we could. I love swimming.”

“It’s settled then. I love swimming too. We’ll go swimming.”

“We need to find a swimming pool first.”

“We’ll find it.”

“And we need to get to that hill first...”

“We’ll get there.”

Could this girl get anymore perfect? I thought. I loved the sea – she loved the sea. We had matching sea pendants. I loved swimming – she loved swimming. We wanted to go swimming together...

It’s too good to be true, my mind attempted to wake me from the euphoric confidence. *No, it’s too real to be untrue*, I decided. I couldn’t think otherwise. It was more real than anything.

“Do you know where we’re going?” I asked her, because she had taken charge of direction, walking with confidence through the narrow streets.

The hill was almost out of view. The houses were crowded, blocking the horizon on both sides. There were just narrow streets, paved with stones – and crossroads.

“Which way now?”

“That way”, she pointed.

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Have you been here before?” I asked confused.

“No”, she said simply. “But I just know where it is and which way to go.”

“How do you know?”

“I don’t know how, but I do. I can’t explain why. I know things. I predict them sometimes. It’s something about me – I just do. I was probably born with this.”

“So I should trust you that you’ll get us to the hill?”

“Of course. You’ll see. No worries.”

She continued to amaze me each time she did something.

The girl was precious. I was already convinced.

We did get to the hill, as she said. The direction had been right.

We looked up at the stairs that led to the top. There were probably thirty-forty-fifty stairs... or more - a long way up.

"Let's have a race to the top!" she said and I joined the game, being sure I would win.

"Okay, I'll count to three. One, two..."

But she had already started, jumping two stairs at a time, faster than I had expected. I did my best to catch up with her, which I eventually could, at the end of the climb - however, she triumphantly stepped on the last one ahead of me.

"I win!" she grinned.

"You cheated!" I said, out of breath.

I hadn't expected so much speed from a teenage girl.

"No, I did not cheat!"

She was laughing.

"Look, we'll have another race down and this time we'll start together. Okay?"

"Okay."

We walked around to the big metal letters. We found that we could only get behind them - in front there was an abyss that was too dangerous to try. So we just watched the town from above and took pictures of it, from behind the huge letters with its name.

"Let's have a picture with out hands", I said.

We put our hands against the sky - both with a ring of silver fire.

"My fingers are longer", she said.

"That's because you have painted fingernails. My hand is wider though."

Our hands looked so honest and symbolic projected on the blue sky, with our lifelines showing clearly in daylight, high up on that hill, that it was like another miracle of a mysterious power that had brought us together.

I decided to keep the picture as proof I hadn't dreamt everything, in case I would wake up the next day and see her gone.

On the way downhill we raced again. This time I won, and she pretended that some people were in her way to slow her down. I thought it was fair for each of us us to win once.

"We'll have a race when we go swimming", I proposed and she agreed.

"It's a deal."

In the evening she went home and I returned to the boat.

I was wondering if I would see her again. But it was a certainty.

And the next morning, she was back to the bay.

“Hey *captain*”, she said teasingly. “Watcha doin’?”

“Nothin’. Preparin’ to sail out. You comin’?”

“Yep!” she said enthusiastically and jumped aboard.

And there it was again – a heavenly ride, in a beautiful summer day. Only this time, the instructor was with me, to check up on how I was handling the boat.

He also had a sailor cap with Captain on it. Only mine was better – his was faded, colors gone. His hair was white, his eyes bored and astray. He didn’t ask me who Amber was. I figured he’d imagine she was my girlfriend. And while he was steering the boat, Amber and I took a picture together. To my surprise, she was very cuddly when she did it. Her arms went around me naturally, one of her hands touching my shirt, which was extremely thrilling for me because no other girl had been so affectionate while striking a pose with me... none of them so close... none of them so willing to surrender to a charming embrace for an endless second. It was exhilarating. It was heavenly to hold her, so warm and so in need of a caring someone to be there. I was so glad that it was me.

However, the old man must have noticed that about her – that she needed attention. That she had a natural crave for protection and she was receptive to people’s feelings. And he must have wanted her for himself, because at some unexpected moment he called her to steer the boat. I don’t know why he assumed she was available. It must have been her open instinctive need for a response.

She was enthusiastic about leading the boat through the waves – the power in her hands, making it go wherever she wanted. But my eyes were on the old sailor and the way he stood behind her, pretending to keep her arms steady, to show her how to turn left or right. I became anxious – nervous – restless. I could not interrupt it because she seemed to have gone there willingly. She seemed to enjoy being the one to steer the boat. I couldn’t help wondering if she noticed the way the old sailor stood next to her, if she allowed it to continue because she had power over the boat. I was wondering if she enjoyed the attention because she needed so much affection and she charmed everyone she met – with that unspoken need in her eyes. The fragile sensitive soul, lost like a wounded seagull in a storm. I couldn’t stop wondering if it made any

difference to her from where she got the love – from the people on the pier she waved at – from the captains of boats she shouted at – from this old instructor – or from me. I was so afraid the ring hadn't meant too much to her and it was just another game – and she would continue her search for love, protection and safety through the entire world of billions of people. What could she see in me? Why would she choose me? She could have had anyone, much better. She could have every man at her feet. But really - that boring instructor? It made me uneasy to watch them, so I got closer and stood there defensively. He saw me and he knew my statement – *watch out, this is my girl*. He knew I was against him taking advantage of her. It felt so wrong, even more when she didn't care to notice. I sat there not being able to intervene.

"That's enough, we must get back to business", I said at some point, trying to sound casual.

She looked at me, smiling. There was much more going on behind those sunglasses. She knew what she was doing. She was playing him. She was enjoying her power not only over the boat, but over the man too. And then, she saw me and she understood. She ended it. It was another unexpected decision. She got up from behind the wheel and came to sit by my side, relaxed and devoted, as if to say "*I'm yours. No worries*". The instructor understood that she had chosen me over him and went to have a smoke. I felt a bit relieved, but still anxious of being abandoned.

She was there. She wasn't going anywhere. She knew how I felt. She must have seen it. We exchanged no words about it – there was no need. This girl was perfect, despite anything.

We went to the front of the boat. After a while, she started waving again at random boats we were passing by.

I wondered what it was she wanted from someone. And I thought about telling her of my illness. How could I find the words though? She didn't even seem very interested to talk about my life. She found it easier to tell me about her past. But I knew I had to let her know about my truth. If she was to remain with me, she had to know.

"I'm not well", I started.

"What do you mean?"

She was still smiling, but she was becoming more serious.

"I mean I have a condition... my immune system is self destructive. The doctors don't know when it might malfunction."

"I noticed you're not breathing right, that's why I beat you in the race. Is this why?"

"You didn't beat me, you cheated."

"I'm faster, admit it", she grinned.

Then she seemed to return to deeper thoughts.

"So what is it you have?"

She didn't want to inquire a lot about it, as if she preferred not knowing too many details. I wondered if she accepted it the way it was. She wasn't willing to talk about it too much though. I tried to find the right words, though it was difficult.

"It's not contagious, don't worry. It's something I was born with... and I don't know how long I'm going to live with it. I might get better in time."

"Is it like HIV or something?"

"No, not exactly. But people are afraid of it... most girls, generally."

She looked ahead, at the endless sea. Her ponytail fluttered above the waves. And then she said simply:

"I'm not afraid. I'm not most girls."

And that was it. She was silent the rest of the day.

I thought she would give up. I thought I would not see her again. I was almost certain. When we said good bye I held her and she suddenly flung her arms around me, getting me so close to her warm presence, in a grip that felt like our souls were breathing together, an embrace that could have been the best I'd ever had – and I would have been so happy, except I thought it was the last time I could feel her that close. I didn't want to let go. But I had to. She must have felt the same.

"It's not fair", she said.

"I know", I answered.

"Guess what... " she whispered in my ear. "I got one of my wishes yesterday"

"Yeah, me too".

I didn't mention which one. She didn't either. I had a feeling it was the same.

I wanted it to be the same – another wish without a coin this time...

And then I watched her walk along the pier. She turned back once, waved at me and I waved back. I could feel the heat vibe between us, like an invisible magnet.

That's it, I thought. It's over.

And yet I had received so many presents from her short stay - more than I had expected. I was grateful no matter what the outcome would be.

That night I remained in the boat's cabin and I cried like a baby. The pain of not seeing her again was clenching my throat, burning my lungs, stabbing my heart. I just crumbled to the floor and cried myself to sleep way beyond midnight. It seemed so unfair to meet this perfect girl - I knew she wasn't perfect, but she was perfect in my eyes - she just felt perfect to me, the way she was - and it was an abyss to feel so good by her side and to know she would be gone from my life the next day.

I let the darkness engulf me.

The night stormed above the bay and the boats hit each other in the dark, with waves of despair.

The third day I got a phone call.

"Hi", the voice said. "It's Amber."

I didn't know if I was going to be insanely happy or uncertain of it. Was it a random call? What did it mean?

I took it as it was. I couldn't expect a sixteen-year-old girl to know what decision to make. Her presence was good enough. I couldn't ask for more.

"So what now? What are you doing?" I said.

"I'm at my aunt's, busy with cooking and washing and other stuff."

"Why do you have to do it?"

"There's nobody else at home. Someone has to."

She paused. Then she said:

"What about you? Where are you?"

"I'm on a rock."

"What are you doing there?"

"Watching the sea."

And thinking of you, I wanted to add. It was true. I was up there on a rock, on the shore, contemplating the sea and reveling in how much it reminded me of Amber. Wondering if she was a sea creature and had somehow returned to the waves, to a hidden existence, an unknown world beneath the depths.

Yet she was somewhere in town, cooking something.

"What are you cooking?"

I could feel her smile.

"Some kind of octopus cookies. You know?"

“No, I don’t. How do you do it?”

“You take some flour and sugar and mix them with... well... many other things. You mold them into octopus shape. It tastes good, I assure you.”

“Be careful you don’t drop the phone in the flour”, I smiled.

“I won’t. No worries.”

I was talking to her and it seemed enough for the moment. She was there. She hadn’t disappeared from my life – not yet anyway.

“So when do I get to see you?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I’m very busy around here these days.”

I felt my heart cringe at the thought she didn’t want to see me because of what she had found out about me. It was a possibility.

In the next week she kept calling me – or I would call her – many times during the day. I missed her presence, but her voice was comforting. I was becoming addicted to hearing her with me the entire day. I never went anywhere without my phone, which was highly unusual and new for me. I hadn’t considered the phone so important before she started to call me on it. I needed to know what she was doing –if she was ok.

“Hi, what are you doing?” I would ask.

“I fell asleep a little” and she yawned.

“Should I let you get back to sleep?”

“No”, she replied immediately, reluctantly, with a sleepy adorable voice that made me wish I could just be there to hold her.

The girl had no idea how much I loved her and how every insignificant detail meant the world to me. I was so glad she preferred talking to me instead of going back to sleep.

“And you?” she asked, yawning again. “You’re sitting on a rock, right? Looking at the waves.”

“Right.”

She laughed.

“I knew it.”

It was so easy to melt into those conversations, timeless, endless minutes and hours that transported me into an ethereal zone, some place with soft horizons, pillows, fluffy clouds, where everything appeared before my eyes from the words she was saying – and the words would flow in the air, passing me by, so close that I could extend a hand and touch the letters, spinning and swaying in rays of light. Sometimes, I would be afraid she might get bored of talking to me, but I

rarely ended the discussion. I let her find a reason to hang up. No matter where I was or what I was doing, I always picked up if she called and I never told her off, never turned her away. I couldn't let go of it. And we would talk about everything and anything... I was aware I hadn't spoken so much on the phone to anyone. I mentioned it to her.

"I don't do this often, you know – talk on the phone so much. Why do you talk to me?"

Her reply was simple.

"I like people who understand. And you're so understanding, so sincere, like no one else. That's why I like talking to you."

She said nothing about love. Maybe it was implied. Maybe I was lying to myself about it. And yet this girl had the need to talk to me. I decided explanations didn't matter.

I was surprised when the phone calls stopped. My mobile was silent. I didn't want to disturb her by calling – I tried once and since she didn't answer right away, I pressed the button and didn't try again. What if she didn't want me to call her? I had developed a fear of being rejected – a fear of bothering girls who did not want me. So I was never too persistent with phone calls. If they wanted me, they would show it – they would reciprocate – reach out – I told myself. So I usually let them make the move to express interest, otherwise I wouldn't dare call too much. With Amber, it had been a lot of moves from her part, until I felt secure to call her back. When she stopped it, I couldn't insist. I felt I didn't have the right. She had to be the one to do it. I limited myself to a safer bet.

I just sent some text messages, which went unanswered too. It was just as unexplained as the way she had immersed herself in my life – only to disappear abruptly. I waited and waited. I was anxious. I was sad. I was worried. I kept sending text messages, telling her about the sea, about my swimming, about anything that came to mind... I was sure she didn't want me in her life anymore and that was why she had decided to end the connection. I was evaluating myself and knew she had no reason to choose me over someone else. Maybe she had met someone new. Maybe I didn't mean that much to her anyway. Maybe her relatives had confiscated her phone. Maybe her mother had come to take her away. Maybe she had grown tired of me – bored of my voice. Maybe she just didn't want to talk to me anymore. I kept asking myself what I did to upset her. I had no idea.

And then one day, just when I had finally given up, I got a text message.

It said: *call Amber because her phone card has no more minutes on it. I'm her hospital colleague.*

I was just going out, turning the key in the lock when I read it. I froze right there on the doorstep. Hospital?? I dialed her number immediately. She answered in a sleepy voice, slightly amused.

"Hi"

"Hi Amber," I said worried out of my mind. "What happened? Where are you? Are you ok?"

"I'm fine... staying in this bed in the hospital. "

"What happened?"

"I fainted and the ambulance came to take me here. I got sick."

"When was that?"

"On Sunday... a few days ago."

I understood the situation was different than I had imagined.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to interrupt your activities. It's nothing. No worries", she smiled.

"What do you mean no worries? Where are you? I'm coming there right now", I said determined.

"No, don't..."

"I won't if you don't want me to. But why are you sick? Have you eaten enough? Have you eaten the wrong things?"

"I was probably in the sun too long... and not hydrating enough... They keep running tests every day, but they're not telling me anything. And this hospital food is terrible, I can't eat. It has no salt. I can't eat without salt."

It was just another detail that I couldn't eat without salt either. But I was getting used to our peculiar similarities.

I was standing there, phone in my hand, with this overwhelming urge to fly to this lost girl and hold her away from harm, out of that hospital... and I knew I couldn't do anything about it. I felt helplessly in love.

"Good thing that I convinced this nurse to give me some salt", she continued talking and I could feel her smile.

I smiled too. Amber could convince anyone of anything. I knew she had a way with people – her vulnerable lost *please help me, please love me* subconscious signals that familiarized her instantly with

anyone's protective instincts – everyone she met wanted to adopt her in a few seconds from getting acquainted, from three year old toddlers to teenagers, random workers, nurses, doctors or retired sailors. She had that impact on people: her aura was a strong glue that they stuck to immediately. She felt too much – and it reflected back on her, from everyone she encountered. They were conquered – tamed – charmed.

“I think this entire hospital knows me now”, she smiled again on the phone. “I’m the girl who fainted and who won’t eat. They’re taking turns watching me and making me gulp down their food.”

“It’s good they do. You have to eat something.”

We kept talking for almost an hour. I was so happy to hear her again - I had missed her voice and presence immensely. I could feel she was glad to hear me too.

I went to the beach that evening and called her back to let her hear the waves. I placed the phone above the water.

“Can you hear the splash?”

“Yeah, I can... Is there an application on the phone to send waves in here?”

“It won’t help you if I submerge the phone under water, but if I could, I would press send and you’d get the wave in the room this instant.”

“I need a shark too, by the door, to keep these doctors away.”

“Okay, I’ll go looking for a shark for you.”

I would have given her the entire universe if I could, wrapped it up and sent it to her hospital room, galaxies and oceans and everything...

Instead, I sent her pictures with the sea at sunset and I hoped my description of the changing colors on the shore would decorate her hospital room with a better view.

On the next days I kept calling her and telling her about the sea, the shore and everything that went on down the bay. It felt somehow unfair that she would be in a hospital bed, trapped in hours and hours of medical tests, smell of medicine and waiting for a diagnosis that didn’t come, while I was walking freely on the pier, enjoying the sea air, touching the water, plunging in the waves... until one day, she told me she still had the ring.

“I thought you threw it away”.

“Never. I never took it off. I still have it with me. Nobody’s taking this ring off”, she said stubbornly and I was so happy, I decided I would do something special.

I went swimming with my ring. I watched it in the greenish water, shiny, silver flames reflecting the light through the swaying waves. I was determined I wouldn’t lose it in the sea. I wanted to take it to freedom: to let the silver flames taste the salty water, the glimmering sun sparkling through crystal emerald waves, the endless immensity of it. And I figured, if my ring was soaking in the sea, maybe a part of Amber’s soul was free to be there too – because we were connected...

I was doing whatever I liked. Yet what I would have liked most was to bring her back to freedom... back to the shore.

She was isolated in that hospital room. Nobody visited her except for an uncle who only checked on her once every two or three days. Everyone else from her family had a reason not to be able to get there.

We were talking on the phone – hospital room linked directly to the open sea horizon.

“One day I’ll build myself a house on the beach...” I told her.

“Yeah, I can see it... it would be so great...”

“I’ll make a hut of reed...”

“I was just going to say that!” she exclaimed, realizing we were imagining the same thing.

It was another proof we were right together.

Her voice was getting melancholic.

“One of my uncles has got a house on the beach. He’s a fisherman. He opens the door and steps on the sand... But I’m afraid to go there because my stepfather’s also there and I don’t want to be anywhere near him. He invited me, but I’m not going.”

Her determination concealed tremendous fear and trauma. I wondered what I could do to make this girl’s present better than her past.

And then I decided. While she was just telling me about how she was hungry and she wasn’t allowed to leave the hospital room to get something to eat, I took a chance.

“Listen, I’m coming there to see you. Just tell me where you are – what floor, what number?”

She seemed to accept the idea of a visit from me. I could tell she didn’t want me to see her like that, but she knew there weren’t many options left. I ventured enthusiastically:

“What do you need? What shall I bring you?”

“Nothing... just water. I must drink a lot of it.”

“What else?”

“It’s very boring in here...”

“How about a book?”

“Oh, that would be so great...”

She sighed with relief.

Another detail on point: she loved to read. I enjoyed books myself.

The girl was too perfect.

So I went there with food – the best snacks I could think of – and two books – love stories and sea adventures – seashells I’d picked from the water or found ashore - with my best outfit at that moment. And the best smile I could display.

They wouldn’t let me in. They allowed no visitors.

“Who are you looking for?”

“Amber. Her name is Amber.”

“We have no Amber here.”

“I know she’s here. Please tell her to come down the corridor.”

“Only family members can visit”, the nurses said. “Who are you?”

I couldn’t tell them I was someone she’d met on the water - on a boat out to sea.

I had to think of something else.

“I’m her teacher”, I said. “From school.”

They watched me in disbelief – then they inquired about the contents of what I’d brought her. And then I pleaded again to at least let her come to the door to say hello. They finally agreed to it.

“Only for two minutes. And you can’t go in there.”

I waited in the hall, my heart racing fast.

When she came through the door, unexpected sunshine lit up that hospital gray corridor; its black and white tiles on the floor suddenly became a seashore with splashing waves. She stood there in front of me, her warm presence a new miracle each time I saw her. She was adorable just like that, in her pink pajamas. I could have seen her in any situation – anytime – anyhow – and she still was indescribably precious.

“Hi” she said and smiled, reaching my soul as she had always done – instantly, overwhelmingly, totally.

I would have given anything for that smile.

“They wouldn’t let me see you” I complained

“Yes, they’re like that.”

They were watching us suspiciously from the desk by the door. Amber and I smiled at each other in complicity. *They* couldn't get between us.

"I told them I'm your teacher."

"Good idea."

She grinned at my cap.

"*Captain*", she said amused and her eyes sent me those beams of light above the clouds after the greatest storm.

"You know what I took with me in the water, when I went swimming?" I asked her.

"What?"

"If you don't guess, I won't tell you."

"Give me a clue."

"Something you wear with you."

"A bracelet?"

"No."

"The pendant?"

"No, but you're getting close."

"I don't know... what?"

"Look at your hands. What do you see?"

"A watch?"

"No. Keep looking."

"Nail polish?"

I laughed.

"I don't have that on my hands."

"What else... the ring??"

"Bingo."

I didn't know how she felt about it. But we both extended our hands and we both had twin rings on our fingers. It was like a promise we had just discovered. The rings were brilliantly majestic in that hospital corridor.

I couldn't leave, so she was the one to turn around and go - after she unexpectedly kissed me good-bye on the cheek.

"Thank you!"

I kissed her back. Her skin was warm and real - a lot like relentless sea waves reviving the rocks, natural and mesmerizing. She laughed, walking away and looking over her shoulder, enchanted and amused by my gesture. It was something else she was taking with her in

that boring room, to change the perspective of her life in long hours of empty waiting.

“What are you doing?”

“Reading.”

“What?”

“A book you gave me, of course.”

“Which one?”

“I finished the one with sea adventures and Ill be reading it again tomorrow. Now I’m halfway through the love story.”

“Do you like it?”

“I do. Very much.”

Why did she always say the right things?

“You know, I also write my own blog at home. I have so many notebooks...” I heard her confess, out of the blue.

Too perfect... Hadn’t I already said that many other times?

I could envision her handwriting across notebook pages. Feelings, thoughts, her life mirrored in it... I was burning to know.

“And when do I get to read one of them at least?”

She giggled.

“Oh, that’s private...”

“Yes, I know...you’re a private person... but if you don’t show me your notebook I won’t show you my captain’s log either.”

She seemed surprised.

“You have a captain’s log?”

I forgot to tell you. This is the captain’s log.

“Yes, I do. Imagine that... so I think it’s a fair trade – your notebook for my log. Otherwise, you won’t see it.”

I could feel she was getting curious. She fell for the blackmail.

“Okay, okay. I’ll think about which one you can read...”

“That’s a promise, remember.”

“I will.”

“And you also owe me a swimming race.”

“That’s right... we’ll do that one day.”

She yawned.

“The nurses are on my back 24/7. They moved the desk to see me better. They’re watching me now. But I pretend not to notice, I keep on reading... flip the pages... No worries.”

Indeed... No worries. I smiled.

And yet why was I worried sick when she stopped calling me again?

It was right after she'd told me she was going home.

"They're letting me out tomorrow", she announced on the phone and her voice was a bit distant, for some reason.

I knew she was eager to get out of there. It had been almost two weeks of staying in that room.

"My aunt will come and pick me up. I can't wait!"

And then she said.

"I'll call you later."

Something uncertain was in her voice. I couldn't guess what. The girl was so secretive sometimes... so private, so hidden.

I waited. But the phone call never came. I thought she must be busy getting home, being happy, meeting her friends again, her relatives... then in a few days, my uncertainty and anxiety went through the roof with each passing hour of silence. Maybe she had gone to another place. Maybe her mother had come to take her away. Maybe they told her to stop talking to me. And maybe – she didn't want to talk to me anymore, because I had no certain future and not much of a present either. But I had been there for her the best way I could.

So why was it that when I found myself in a hospital she was gone? As I got to the emergency room myself, on that stormy night, I realized she probably didn't care enough for me to know what was happening in my life. Here I was in hospital myself, and she wouldn't call. She didn't care. While I had been there for her, she was absent from me now. I was sitting on the hospital bed, with my burning head in my hands, sinking in pain and desolation. I couldn't breathe right – I still had sea water in my lungs. My heart was racing like crazy. I was so dizzy that the floor swayed menacingly. I had to close my eyes, sinking in what felt like an endless fall. My mind felt like a frozen insect trapped in glued amber - beautifully and irrevocably wasted, unable to move, not allowed to change anything. That was it. She was gone. She hadn't answered my text messages. And she probably had found someone she preferred instead. It didn't matter anymore why. The hard truth was in front of me: it was my turn to be taken to emergency and she wasn't there. She wasn't anywhere. She had disappeared without a word. Why again? It didn't matter.

It didn't matter either how I had arrived to that room with a small window, smelling of medicine, crowded with moaning patients in the dim light of the night. Suffering was the other side of life. Experiencing it opened a different perspective: on pain, absence, danger, the uncertainty of another day. I stood there sinking in the greatest storm of my soul - and there were no sunbeams to shine me out of it from beyond the clouds.

A day before, I still had hope.

The company had decided I was through with probation time and they were going to let me take tourists across the waves, in the boat - by myself. I would be the true captain of it - a real captain. On that night I had to take the boat out to sea again, just for another ride. It was routine, but I had to do it. I needed to make sure everything functioned properly because early in the morning there wouldn't be enough time for it.

So I left the bay, into darker waters, away to the horizon. My mind was already troubled by Amber's stubborn immobile absence that burdened my thoughts with worries, frustration and anxiety. I kept watching the waves in the distance, intentionally unaware of the gathering thick clouds running across the sky. Layers and layers of them darkened the hour. I should have known something big was up, but I was too lost in my own thoughts of unanswered resolve. I must have been ridiculous to think a girl like Amber could love *me*. I was nothing. I was no one, with no real future. I had been delusional about it. She probably had given me enough signs to realize she didn't love me the same way, but I didn't want to see it. I had been blinded by my own dream. I was thinking while steering the boat even further, to where the waves were getting higher by the minute. I wasn't good enough, I kept repeating to myself why, why, why? I probably had a subconscious drive to challenge myself against the menacing dangerous water: was I good enough? Could I prove myself against the waves? Could I?

And I clenched my teeth, going straight into the storm that was already raging through the sails, tearing at the sheets. I didn't even think when I heard the cracking sound. I also heard the siren howling through the whirlwind and I ignored the lighthouse that kept blinking desperately in the distance, on and off, covered by high dark waves. I had been abandoned - rejected - again - not good enough - not worth it - nothing - so get me to the storm - let's have it! Throw me right into the bosom of the raging sea - let her power drown me and rise me up as

she wants! I was willing to test my own strength against it, as a last resort to prove myself worthy of something - to prove myself to life itself. Come on, life! I deserve this shot. I deserve a chance to upgrade myself in your eyes, let the storm come and get me! Be what may be. And then you'll either let the sea engulf me forever or just give me my reward - my wish - you'll give me Amber - back for good. I had no such hope, but it was something I could at least say to myself, in bitter words. I didn't know if the sea had heard me. I didn't know if Amber was actually her daughter. But the last thing I saw, when I looked into the whirling storm, was that it had eyes - those magical eyes - the immensity of oceans and galaxies, staring at me from the depth of the cloudy sky - staring into my soul - breathing life. "Race me", the eyes roared at me. "Race me, swim!" echoed the dark oceans in the depth of the storm. And I jumped at it.

The next thing I knew - I woke up in the hospital emergency room. I was still alive. Still. Not sure for how long, but still there, barely breathing. I didn't know - I couldn't remember who had won the race. And I didn't even know why I had met Amber - or who she really was. Maybe those eyes were meant to take me to my greatest storm - to the storm inside my soul. The one that challenged me to prove worthy to my own self. Maybe the eyes had saved me from it, by bringing me to it - through it. The eyes of the sea - the powerful eyes of the storm... the greatest storm ever.

You might think the greatest storm is not this one: that there've been greater storms in the world - natural calamities, tornadoes, tsunamis, earthquakes with thousands of lives lost... wars with millions of souls gone... blasts of human evil producing catastrophic consequences... poverty, suffering - and the list goes on and on.

I'll tell you to look closer at each of these storms - and you'll learn something. Each time there's not an outside force that rips everything apart. It's not the ripples and reverberations of destruction that comes from a fight with an external enemy. The enemy is always within. The challenge is inside you. The storm only takes you, tears you apart and throws you back at yourself, to challenge yourself - to become better by it. This is what life does. That's what the sea did to me. The greatest storm of facing the challenge of proving myself to life - proving I'm worth it.

You probably want to know if I ever met Amber again. I could tell you I met her two years later and we still had the silver fame rings on our fingers. I could tell you she had been the one to pick me from the waves and take me to the shore. It would be possible, why not? You'd like that, wouldn't you? I could tell you anything close to a happy ending... but is this really the point?

This is a *captain's* log. It doesn't matter what *captain*. I'm going to take it and throw it out into the sea – and then I'm gonna be walking on the shore until the waves throw back at my feet a notebook with feelings and thoughts of the greatest storm ever encountered...

