

The Anxious Mariner (published in *Facing Fear Head On: True Stories of Women on the Water*, SisterShip Press, 2019).

By Lisa Mighetto

I am not what you would call a natural boater. I grew up in a desert town where my fellow Girl Scouts were “trailblazers,” not “mariners.” My friends engaged in many sports but none of them were sailors. Maybe that explains my lifelong fascination with water and attraction to boats of all kinds. The appeal has remained strong enough to carry me through various misadventures: ripping through the Golden Gate (small sailboat, high winds) trying to avoid the infamous Potato Patch; rowing a large fiberglass kayak in Puget Sound hoping to reach the shore before an expanding leak swamped the boat; navigating through a complex of reefs - and grounded sailboats - in search of a safe anchorage on Anegada Island in the BVIs; attempting to dock in the Swinomish Channel in currents so fierce that it took a crew of four plus a crowd of people on shore to pull the sailboat into the slip; a near knock-down on the west side of Vancouver Island; and crossing the Fraser River bar in seas so steep that I asked myself as I crawled along the floor of the cabin “What am I doing here? *Am I insane?*” All of these situations had this in common: I was afraid, if not terrified. And I was not at the helm.

For years I thought my fear stemmed from loss of control, of placing my fate in the hands of someone else. So I armed myself with training, information, and careful, painstaking planning. I attended countless sailing seminars. While the physics of sailing interested me, I found it difficult to move beyond theoretical to practical applications. It seemed like most people in the class had an affinity for the topic that I lacked. It took me a long time to grasp how concepts like “velocity made good” translated into more effective and safer sailing. My favorite term was “center of lateral resistance,” which always made me think of a place for free-thinking anarchists rather than how hydrodynamic forces affect the hull of a boat. My classmates were deep in concentration while I was musing, “I want to resist – *laterally.*”

I participated in sailing seminars designed for women. One leader, seeking to soothe the fears of those lacking experience and confidence, had this advice for anxious mariners: “when things get rough out there, say to yourself ‘it’s only wind; it’s only water.’” To me, that was like saying “it’s only a serial killer.” Wind and water are very powerful and capricious forces – and I knew what they could do. In any case, learning to take the helm, use the radio, reef the sails, read weather patterns, rescue overboards, and approach a dock as well as a mooring buoy helped with the outward signs of fear. I became more useful and competent, but I could not shake the anxiety completely. For me, it was a constant hum below the surface.

Sailing literature helped by offering recognizable experiences. Looking beyond technical manuals and online how-to posts, I poured over accounts by Tania Abei, M. Wylie Blanchet, Kay Cottee, and Jessica Watson as well as famous couples like the Smeetons, Hiscocks, and Pardeys. These writers present sailing as a grand adventure, for the most part meeting challenges with courage, grace, and strength of character. But what if you are not a thrill seeker or just plain brave?

Many writers suggest that the sea is best approached cautiously. Consider this chilling turn of phrase from *Surflife*, which recently viewed a series of unpredictable waves as “nature in all its beautiful evil.” Or this dark passage from Coleridge’s classic “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” which reads like a horror story about a tormented sailor pursued by a menacing ocean:

Like one, that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round walks on,
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows, a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread.

I often picture myself as “The Anxious Mariner” in a modern version of Coleridge’s poem. As summed up simply in *The Motion of the Ocean*, my favorite modern cruising book, “the sea is one fickle bitch.”

I started collecting stories from sailors I met on my cruises. While most described favorite anchorages and fun discoveries, some were downright scary. Even now the account of an evening sail on Lake Huron haunts me. It began as a tale of seasickness in a storm of unexpected intensity – and ended with a dead captain and an unprepared crew engaged in a desperate navigation and docking. The point of the sailor’s story: apparently terror can cure seasickness very quickly. What I took from it: a captain can be swept overboard, even with jacklines.

A similar conversation with an elderly mariner (old salt) at a yacht club bar began as a polite discussion of the Strait of Juan de Fuca and ended with a heartbreaking account of how his son lost his life on a solo crossing. Over time I detected patterns in disaster-at-sea tales. It seemed that often injury and loss of life occurs when sailors leave the vessel – voluntarily or involuntary. Life jackets are essential. And I have learned something else: the process of sharing experiences with other sailors produces empathy, camaraderie, and understanding.

My husband and I once met another couple while sailing in British Columbia. We bonded over dinner, rafting our boats. As the evening wore on we exchanged stories, and the topic turned to difficult passages. I confessed how nervous I was about navigating the currents and tides of BC and described a terrible crossing of the Strait of Georgia. For all my fear what really made me lose it was that I was unable to get the fiddles on the stove to work and could not make tea, as my boat careened wildly from side to side. The wife then began reminiscing about her mother, who had crossed the Atlantic in a small sailboat many years earlier. We were drinking wine and she became weepy. “My mum sailed all the way across the ocean,” she marveled. “*And she did it without fiddles.*” For some reason we both found this hilarious and burst out laughing. We are friends to this day.

At a sailing club function a few nights ago I thought of this writing competition as I listened to a woman talk about what it was like to sail through the Tacoma Narrows during a sudden squall. Looking around the table she ended by asking “*Why do we do this?*” The group erupted in laughter. The truth is that if you spend enough time on a boat eventually you will encounter a difficult situation – and you may well be afraid.

Why do I do this? Because it connects me with other people, with a community of sailors who, like me, are drawn to the water and to boats. There are wondrous and magical experiences: porpoises riding my bow wake, impromptu potlucks and sing-alongs with friends new and old, the thrill of racing, and quiet nights at anchor, watching the Perseid meteor shower or Northern Lights or Southern Cross from the cockpit. I have not conquered my fear, but I accept it. And my anxiety produces a heightened sense of awareness – when I am on a boat I am hyper conscious of all that is around me. I imagine this is something akin to what hunters and anglers experience. I encounter nature in all its sublime variety and my preparations indicate the level of my respect and awe, if not reverence. And I would not trade my sailing life for anything.