

MARGARET NOWACZYK
HIS TRUE NORTH

ROBERT

When my devoted wife, the celebrated novelist Madeline Connor, plunged overboard into the Aegean Sea around the island of Delos, I froze. It was Philip who pulled her crumpled body out of the heaving sea. She was pulseless for four minutes and forty-six seconds—forty-six seconds too long. In medical emergencies, my internal chronometer kicks in and I know precisely how much time has passed.

I never saw what happened, as I was observing a pod of dolphins that surfaced portside. One moment she was shouting Philip's name, and the next she was floating face-down twenty-three feet in the wake of the boat, a plume of red sprawling from her occiput. Philip shoved me aside and dove off the deck. The skipper steered the boat around, and when they lifted her on board I started chest compressions. Her ribs cracked under my knuckles as I pounded on her sternum. She never regained consciousness.

PHILIP

I lay on my belly on the bow—up and down, up and down—as the boat careened across the whitecaps. The indigo waves were the tallest so far on the trip, and the boat bucked beneath me like a dolphin on speed. Madeline had been right: it was like flying.

The sea-spray needled my face, and the sun baked my shoulders. Images of Madeline tumbled in my head like shards of glass in a kaleidoscope—her red mouth sucking yoghurt off a spoon, her white ass in the inky sea, her green eye-rolls behind Bob's back. Her cajoling voice from the night before wafted into my mind, and for the first time since the beginning of this benighted holiday I felt alive.

When Madeline called my name, I turned around just as the boom

smacked the back of her head. Her eyes flew wide open. She must have cried—her mouth opened—but I didn't hear it over the wind flapping in the sails. Her body pitched forward, and she tumbled into the waves.

They tell me that I sprinted along the boat and dove off the stern, but I don't remember that. I do remember kneeling on the deck, holding Madeline in my arms for the first time in my life, and knowing that she was gone.

ANNA

I first met Madeline after Philip published that bestseller of hers. I remember thinking that she didn't look like a brilliant writer with her mop of untidy red curls, her eyes racooned in black kohl, and her saggy yoga pants.

After that visit, she invited us to fly down to Ixtapa for a weekend. Of course, I agreed; after all I had done for Philip and the kids, I deserved a break. But it was so embarrassing how Bob was always petting Madeline's hair and rubbing her shoulders. He stared at her like a schoolboy obsessed with his French teacher's silk stockings and not like the internationally famous thoracic surgeon he supposedly was. Whatever.

Madeline knew how to live, hiking Machu Picchu and sailing the Greek islands for her birthday. Bob would need company while she wrote, she told me, and he and Philip were such good friends. I never noticed, but I imagined myself under the glorious Aegean sun in a cloudless azure sky, swimming in the waves from which Aphrodite emerged. I *did* read Graves in seventh grade.

ROBERT

My wife had accompanied me to Greece on my lecture circuit before. We toured Acropolis and Olympia, but she wanted to visit the islands. All she cared about was the itinerary: Mykonos, Delos, and of course Santorini. "I want to sail the caldera at sunset," she told me. While she fretted if Philip and Anna would get to Athens on time, I considered everything she had overlooked: the weather, the sleeping arrangements, the food, etc. The problem wasn't money—it was safety.

ANNA

Delos delighted. Anemone-purpled, rosemary-scented meadows carpeted the hills, while ancient marble ruins lined the plain around the harbour. The streets and agoras were entirely paved, and the floors of the houses were tiled with mosaics. An amphitheatre crept up the shoulder of the hill. I wanted solitude, but for some reason the famous writer had glommed onto me. She chattered about Leto giving birth to Artemis and Apollo after her escape from Hera's wrath, as if I needed a lecture on Greek mythology.

So there she was, yakking about her "block." We strolled down the avenue of the lions, the six marble statues larger than life standing sentry. They didn't want to hear her whine either.

"Philip always knows what to say when I get stuck," she said.

On the horizon, the two giant penises in the ruins of Dionysius' temple pierced the sky with their rough, broken shafts, oblong shapes at their bases the size of beach balls. Madeline followed my gaze and smirked.

"Sexually liberated women get photos taken with those to prove that they are," she said. She held her phone up and raised her eyebrows at me.

"What would I want with a broken penis?" I asked.

Madeline's face paled the same colour as the marble. For a few heartbeats, her narrowed eyes searched my face; they were green as gooseberries, and she looked like a total stranger. Then, like a marionette yanked up by a string attached to the top of her head, she straightened, rolled her head, and laughed.

"Give it Viagra?" she asked.

ROBERT

Anna got seasick on the first day out, and we had to wait out the rough morning seas. On the second day, she refused to go swimming and only narrowed her eyes as Philip climbed out of the sea, as if counting the beads on his broad shoulders. She was probably embarrassed about her figure. Philip, on the other hand, had quite an athletic physique. I even pointed it out, but my wife said that she had never noticed.

Philip and Anna bickered about everything: how deep the water was, how fast the boat was going, whether Greek feta was better than Bulgarian, and so on. When one said black, the other immediately countered white.

“What a fabulous story,” Anna said after the skipper had regaled them with the tale of Petros, the pelican of Mykonos. “I’ve never seen a pelican!”

Philip rolled his eyes. “What about the zoo?”

“That’s *absolutely* not the same. Some pathetic defeathered creature in a cage is not the same as a real pelican on a Greek island. So insensitive! Like that time in Paris, when you said you didn’t want to eat snails.”

“As if eating invertebrates would make you less of a tourist.”

Anna stared at him, head tilted, her masseters working under the skin of her cheeks.

“Don’t pick your nose,” she said finally.

My wife would never speak to me like that—at least not in public.

ANNA

The meltemi came blowing soon after we set out, and the stupid small boat bobbed like a cork on the waves. The wind whooshed, and the hull *actually* groaned. I crept below deck to collapse on the berth, even though the skipper tried to convince me that looking at the horizon would settle my stomach.

As I lay on our berth, Madeline shouted above deck: “It’s like flying. A total cliché!” Of course she never got seasick.

At the end of the day, I clambered onto the deck just as we sailed into Andros harbour. White dovescotes dotted the sun-browned hills. Madeline and Philip perched on the small platform on the stern, swinging their legs in unison over the swells. Their bodies were glazed golden by the setting sun, a decorous foot of empty space between them. Bob teetered over with three glasses of retsina.

“Greece makes retsina almost potable,” Madeline giggled after she tasted it. She hugged Bob around the waist when he handed the other glass to Philip, leaning over her. Bob kissed the top of her head and nuzzled his face in her hair.

And I saw Philip’s face. He never looked at me like that.

PHILIP

I was her publisher for six years. She would sometimes phone me at night when she was blocked, as Bob couldn’t be disturbed. She was proud

of his work—his research stopped blood clots and the risk of stroke in thousands of people, or something like that, and he managed multimillion-dollar research grants—but when it came to Madeline, he was utterly at a loss.

We never talked about their marriage, but Madeline knew exactly what went on with ours. She even asked me once if I had ever cheated on Anna. I hadn't.

And she touched me. Anna never did anymore, but Madeline would press her finger to my chest to point out a stain on my shirt or brush the dirt off my nose. Only once, when she had too much prosecco after one of her readings, did she rub my chest and belly with the palm of her hand. "Pecs like shields and a washboard belly, phew," she slurred. I got hard instantly.

When I dropped her off at the airport last October, she asked me whether I ever thought about her "in that way." My pulse pounding between my legs, I lied and said no. Bob was a hard-ass and a bore, but I had too much respect for him to make a move on his wife.

"But she's such a cow," she blurted out. Then she squared her shoulders and said, "It will pass."

ANNA

The night before the accident, Philip's immobile back beside me, I heard whispers across the thin partition that separated our berths and pricked up my ears.

"I can make him ready, Bobby." Bobby? I had never heard her call him that before. Their berth squeaked.

"Stop it," Bob hissed.

"I miss my husband," she said, louder and clearer, and then there was silence and . . . sobs?

Philip's breathing never changed its rhythm. He slept right through the most exciting moment of the trip, which was typical.

PHILIP

Madeline never gave up. When she couldn't sell her first book, she phoned publishers directly and demanded to speak to them. After reading the first chapter, I knew I was going to buy it. Writing like that didn't happen often. On book tours she didn't just sign her books; she also wrote personal

notes and gave great interviews. Readers loved her and demanded more.

Four years ago, she stayed at our house for six days and nights while we edited her book. She slept in the boys' room. We sat with our laptops at opposite ends of the dining room table. Every hour or so, one of us would get up and brew coffee. There was no silent treatment, no slamming doors. I had forgotten that silence could be peaceful. When she left, I started to wonder what my life would have been like with her.

ANNA

When she visited during the Vancouver Writers Fest, all *lah-di-dah*, as usual, I saw them through the half-open door to Philip's study. She sat beside him at his desk in the cone of light cast by the desk lamp, bent over his shoulder as he typed, their heads almost touching. I wasn't jealous, as I knew she wasn't his type. She was unpredictable, moody, and childless—a consummate *artiste*—but Philip loved children.

We charted the course on the map later that evening, but the next day, after she had left, Philip announced that he was publishing two new books in July and that his new imprint would be in jeopardy if he left. We fought about it for weeks. Then one rainy morning in March he announced that he had bought the plane tickets. I wasn't going to argue.

Madeline had told us that the boat would have a bathroom and a kitchenette, and I was expecting cabins with beds and loungers on the deck. When the small blue-and-white sloop sailed toward us in the marina at Kalamaki, my face fell.

Philip hissed in my ear: "Don't you dare spoil it for her."

PHILIP

The night we moored in a cove on Mykonos, Madeline fizzed like the prosecco she was drinking. We dined on deck as the orange sun hovered over the horizon. She flirted with the skipper, rubbed Bob's shoulders, and told risqué jokes. I wished I were Bob—or the skipper.

Afterwards, I couldn't sleep. Anna lay next to me, her alcohol-tinged breath cloying. I climbed on the deck. The night air cooled my face; above, the Milky Way splashed across the navy-blue sky. I dove off the gunwale into the blackness of the water. When I couldn't feel my arms anymore, I

headed for the beach.

“Adonis emerging from the sea foam,” I heard as I waded onto the pebbly beach. Waves lapped at my ankles. “I gotta learn you some myths, dude. You’re all mixed up.” Madeline relished sounding dumber than she was.

She was lying on her belly beside the rocks that edged the narrow strip of sand. Her tan lines glowed in the moonlight.

She patted the rock next to her. I sat on the other side of the boulder.

“You two are destroying each other,” she said after a while. “Take the kids and leave.”

I snorted. “A woman’s nothing without her children. She’s sacrificed her career for them, or so she tells me all the time. She tells them, too.”

She got up. The narrow pelt between her legs and her large nipples were black, as if they sucked in all the light. I looked away, but not fast enough. Madeline laughed.

“This is Greece and the middle of the night, dude,” she said and ran to the sea. Her ass was round and too big for her small body. As she swam out toward the boat, her white arms flapped in and out of the shimmering water. She was a lousy swimmer, but she loved her life.

ROBERT

As if Anna’s moods weren’t bad enough, Philip never respected the open laptop rule my wife had. He kept on chatting with her when she tried to write. I could tell she was annoyed, even if she pretended to be interested. There was no room for anybody between her and her writing—or between her and me.

PHILIP

Madeline’s head slipped from my hand, slicked with blood from the gash in her scalp. Then she lay splayed on deck, Bob shoving his fists into her chest and yelling at her to breathe. When Madeline’s chest shuddered and she gasped, I vowed that I would come clean about my feelings to her, Bob, and Anna—the hell with the consequences. This would be followed immediately by a promise that if she were all right, I would forever keep my mouth shut. Whoever grants our prayers has a lousy sense of humour, as I cannot do either.

ROBERT

As I scan the monitors tracking my wife's breathing and heart rate, I hear her voice as distinctly as if she had spoken: "Fuck off, egghead, I know what I'm doing." She had said that when I suggested she might want to ease up on the drinking and smoking. But she was a writer—Virginia and Anaïs rolled into one. Her friends phoned me to pick her up—stoned, drunk, or both—and I always did. I crammed for exams while she slept off hangovers. I mixed rehydrating solutions for her when she woke up. I took her out to dinners in expensive restaurants, where she winked at the waiters. I drove her to open mic readings in smoky underground cafes, where she vied for the attention of a few disinterested patrons staring morosely into their beers.

My wife fell in love with me after we had been married for two years. "You have such a great smile when you relax," she said after I had passed my fellowship exams. "I fell in love with it." Our marriage wasn't always perfect, especially when her writing was being rejected by philistines, but for the last six years she's been the most supportive wife. At conferences, she charmed the funding barons; at home, she never interrupted my work. She was my rock.

Last December, I suggested we buy a *mas* in Provence, where she could spend the winters and write.

"Oh, Bobby," she said, wrapping herself around my back. "You're always so thoughtful!" I began inquiries into French real estate regulations that evening.

What am I going to do without my Maddie-girl?

ANNA

The last morning my stomach was solid as a rock. Madeline bounced onto the deck last. She eased a spoon out of Bob's hand, dug out a dollop of his yoghurt, slobbered the spoon clean, and handed it back. Bob looked at it as if he didn't know what it was, then shrugged and started eating again. They didn't fool me—I knew their marriage was a sham.

"Paros is next," the skipper said as the Mykonos harbour diminished into a heap of shimmering white cubes. I could still trace the arcs the five windmills cut in the sky. "The wind's so high, the sea will be rough."

Philip slipped out of his shirt and splayed himself on the tip of the boat,

face down, his hands dangling over the water.

“Anna!” the skipper called out. “Help me secure the boom line.”

The braided synthetic dug into my skin with each gust of wind. My wrists cramped, but I felt strong like never before. The skipper bent to secure the winch line, and it was then I saw her standing on the other side of the mast. She was staring at Philip, leaning forward as if walking against a strong wind, a starved look on her face . . .

The boat jumped a rogue wave, and the skipper shouted a warning. Madeline swung around, and her eyes held mine. She languidly raised her arm and called out Philip’s name. The understanding punched me in the stomach—she was in love with Philip.

I opened my fists, and the line slithered across my palms, the winch rat-a-tat-tatting like a snare drum. Even before the boom swung around, I knew how hard it would hit her head. I did study physics.