

Choices

He plunges into water, cold, black, deep.

The shock drives the breath from him. He is caught in a tangle of lines, a sail forms a shroud, the ocean is conducting a burial. He fights to free himself, fights for life, fights the urge to fill his empty lungs with something, anything. One breath, a voice tells him, one breath, a moment of pain and then it will be over.

Oblivion.

He must not breathe.

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He takes a breath.

Cool, fresh air heavy with salt and iodine.

His eyes are open, his heart pounds. He can taste his fear: sour, bitter, foul. He wants to retch, from this and from sheer bloody tiredness. Yet all is normal; the boat has not rolled, he is in the cockpit, the wheel lashed. The flat grey light of dawn reveals the restless ocean, ceaseless, writhing, inky-black, green-tinged and white flecked under a sullen sky. That is his world, no birds, no fish, no dolphins playing at the prow, no other vessel in sight, just him and the boat, alone, ploughing relentlessly onwards.

He has woken from one nightmare to another.

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Overnight an email has arrived.

"Press release: Andrew Mann leads as the fleet approaches the wild Southern Ocean and the Roaring Forties. Despite poor weather and heavy seas, the revolutionary, superlight monohull, setting new standards for production yachts..."

He cannot bear to read the rest. It's all superficial sound bites, marketing, selling a dream to those with more money than sense.

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He knows the truth, he's lived it for the last three days. Three days without proper sleep, three days forever on edge waiting for the inevitable. The boat is fast but it's also frail.

The memory haunts him. The scream from the self-steer as the gears stripped, him being thrown from his bunk as the boat slews violently sideways as the helm swings free. The bullet-crack from the keel as the timeless sea stresses space-age carbon almost beyond limit.

It wasn't his fault he tells himself, it was the boat. But he knows he was pushing. He always pushes. Life at the limit, there's no other way.

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It's 36 hours before he has the courage to call his crew chief.

'Neil, it's over. The self-steer's wrecked and I've overstressed the hull.'

He's too tired to counter the tirade that follows but when there's a break in the four-letter torrent he adds: 'Whatever, I've no spares, I can't repair it. If I go into the Southern Ocean like this the keel will come off and I'll die. I'm retiring.'

'You bloody well aren't,' Neil snarls. 'Retire and we're all broke, finished. The boat builder won't pay us.'

'But-'

'No buts. You're not retiring. I'll get back to you.'

The satellite phone goes dead.

He's alone again. The boat sails on, relentlessly south. It used to feel solid, lithe and lively. Now it is odd, spooky, uncertain, as delicate as a cracked eggshell.

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He thinks of Claire.

The last day.

She is stood at the window, arms crossed, watching the children play in the garden.

'I'm packed,' he says. 'Should I go and say bye to the kids now?'

He reaches for her but she shrugs him off, turns away.

'Do what you like,' she says. 'You always do anyway.'

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The sail cracks and flaps, he feels the hull strain almost as a physical pain, as if it's an extension of his being. The wind has shifted, the boat is riding the waves from an awkward quarter. Carefully, oh so carefully, he adjusts the course, re-trims the sails. The boat settles, his tension eases.

He has the same thoughts going round and around in his head with no solution. Without the self-steering he can't leave the helm for long. Lashing the wheel only keeps him on a constant course, it can't deal with the ever-shifting wind. When the wind shifts it stresses the keel, the weakened keel that keeps the boat upright. If it breaks off the capsize will be instant and violent, there would only be the slightest chance of reaching the life raft.

No self-steer means no sleep bar dozing, day after day. If he sleep he dies. Yes, he could take down the sails, heave-to under bare poles but, in race like this, that would be the same as giving up. He'd drop behind, he'd lose. There'd be no win bonus, no sponsor's cheques. No money means bankruptcy, no more racing, no more career. He'd lose the house. He'd lose Claire and the kids.

His choices: a quick death or a lingering one.

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Neil calls and offers him a third.

'There's a way,' he says, 'listen.'

He does. A charter boat from Capetown, its crew well paid to keep the secret. A rendezvous, spares for the self-steer, an engineer to fix it.

'No one will ever know,' Neil says. 'You've no choice. You want to win, don't you?'

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He does want to win. He needs to win.

He would break the rules though. Single-handed, non-stop, round the world. No outside assistance, no-one else on board.

But who would know?

The cheat's excuse: no-one can win honestly, everyone's doing it, you have to win. It's only a problem if you get caught and you won't. Inject the steroids, take the drugs, break the law, lie, cheat, steal, win.

Win.

'I want your answer tomorrow,' Neil says.

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It's tomorrow now. He alters course. He places the call.

A gap opens in the clouds, he sails through a shaft of light. Momentarily his boat his set in shimmering diamonds.

His call is answered at the third ring.

'Hello?'

'Claire,' he says. 'I'm coming home. Life starts here.'