

Trouble Crossing

by Richard Lewis

Trouble ran through Claudia like letters on a stick of Brighton Rock and she seemed intent on sharing its sickly taste with others. She was the wife of my best friend Tom, someone who possessed the patience of a saint. Claudia always knew best and could argue that black was merely another shade of white; just as you were about to reply to something she'd said, out would flow another endless tirade. Words dripping from her mouth like a leaky tap, giving everyone the benefit of her superior knowledge.

I knew she'd had a hard time growing up and being the eldest, probably bore the brunt of her parents combative relationship. Her father was an eccentric character who wore two pairs of trousers, one the right way round, the other back to front. A man who would erupt at the dinner table, complaining the food was not to his liking. On one occasion hurling a plate of curry across the room, painting a lovely orange ark across the newly papered wall. Her mother, no shrinking violet herself, responded by stabbing him in the hand with her fork.

Claudia must have lived in fear that one would eventually kill the other. All these years later it was as if she was still carrying her parents' troubles, like an invisible kit bag, causing her to see problems that didn't exist. I tried to be supportive but one was seldom able to do her a good turn without some thoughts of strangulation.

I remember the time my wife Sally and I foolishly agreed to sail over to Brittany with them. The four of us locked in that cramped space for a fortnight. Whatever were we thinking of? Being no sailor, just the sight of the thirty foot sloop was enough to make me queasy.

From the start it was a disaster. We'd dropped anchor in the bay just off Southampton harbour, waiting for the tide to turn before sailing over to St Marlo. The boat pitched back and fore as if some great sea monster were rocking us from below with his mighty hand. None of us were hungry but Claudia insisted on making a stew and as soon as I saw the boiled contents slopping back and fore on the plate I knew I was going to throw up.

I jumped into the rubber dingy attached to the stern and rowed to the shore for relief from the sickening feeling. Standing on the welcoming shingle I contemplated not going back but couldn't do that to Sally.

Finally having returned, I braced myself for the unenviable twenty-four hour, overnight crossing and we set sail for France. It was a relief to be on the move and for a few hours the sea was calm enough but we had to put up with Claudia lecturing us on keeping the already ship-shape ship, ship-shape.

Then six hours later on entering darkness, a storm blew up and I was soon communicating with Harold.

Leaning over the stern, calling, H.....A.....R.....O.....L.....D

All three of us being ill, we languished below in our coffin shaped bunks and tried to sleep, leaving Tom up top to navigate the craft, secured by safety harness. Having finally drifted off we were rudely awoken by the deafening sound of a ship's klaxon, blaring out directly overhead. Jumping out of our bunks we scrambled up to the deck to the unbelievable sight of a huge tanker bearing down on us through the darkness. Tom who must have momentarily nodded off was frantically trying to manoeuvre the vessel out of the tanker's path. The three of us held on helplessly while Tom tried to swing the craft away from the menacing hull. Unable to alter its course the tanker seemed determined to slice us in half but thanks to Tom's skilful seamanship it mercifully missed us by a matter of yards, throwing us about wildly in its wake like a bobbing cork.

It was the last straw. Sally and I vowed that when we reached St Marlo we'd be getting the next ferry back home.