

Storm Variations

1

The thirty five foot sloop, *Justice*, left harbor on a quiet, sunny day. The weather blew a breeze from the west. Once around the breakwater, the single handed sailor hoisted the mainsail and watched it luff as he pointed his vessel into the wind. He winched the main tight. On the starboard side he released the roller furling and the large jib opened noisily. With one hand on the wheel, he easily pulled in the sail, and made fast the sheet to the adjacent cleat. He then sat on the high side, and, with his toes, steered the boat towards the tankers anchored far away at the mouth of the harbor. A puff heeled *Justice* over, ever so slightly. It was enough to excite the sailor on this quiet weekday afternoon.

2

The business channel forecasted a storm. A tsunami they called it. Aaron watched in the early morning as breaking news signaled his portfolio was weakening. Turning to his laptop, he noticed he was down two per cent. Not bad for an amateur, he thought. He heard some talking heads give out numbers like ten per cent and higher. With his money well intact, he confidently clicked, and bet a huge amount on what he knew with certainty was the bottom.

3

Angela looked at her husband sitting at the kitchen table. He was watching the news and eating toast. Out of the window she saw his damned bicycle sitting atop his SUV. It was a weekday morning. She waited for the weekend to be together, to at least do something together. So now he takes a day off on a Wednesday and she's not even included in his plans. Fine, she said well under her breath.

4

Dr. Gladstone did not receive the news well. The bank called and asked to see him. When he inquired as to the reason, they were vague. They suggested that his ratios did not match his forecasts. They said that they realized it was only the second quarter but that his low receivables, his high inventory and the cheques he has been writing to himself were worrisome. They want to talk. Dr. Gladstone, or Bill to his employees, friends and family, tried to compose himself. He knew he was walking a thin line. He had trouble with his company's growth in a dynamic industry. He just lost a great employee to a competitor, and now the bank called. He told them that Monday would be a good day to meet. They asked if he was busy that same afternoon. He acquiesced.

5

The *Justice* was now out in the bay. It was Wednesday afternoon. The breeze turned into a bit of a squall. The sailor, Matt, was wondering if he should reef. At least put in a Cunningham. He already rolled up the jib as a start. The wind came up quickly. He didn't like the looks of the clouds coming off the mountains. They usually prove to be fluky and unpredictable. He looked about and except for the few tankers at anchor, he was alone. Another gust heeled him over a little too much. A seagull cried nearby. It was flying motionlessly in the stiffening breeze.

6

Angela rolled her eyes when her husband said he was going for a ride with his 'mates'. In the past she wouldn't have minded. Now she resented it. She left the house almost immediately after he did. She had nowhere to go, but slowly made her way down the hill, through the park, and towards the water. Her dog, Cinder, ran freely beside her.

7

Aaron clicked on the buy tab when the pop-up asked him a simple yes or no. It was a good trade. He got up and went to the kitchen to pour himself a coffee. At the lower right hand corner of the television screen the Dow had stopped rising. He recalled it stopping at one hundred and eighty three. Absentmindedly, he watched an interview with Gladstone Industries. It was an old one. A Dr. Gladstone said that the genome potential is huge. The sky's the limit. Aaron walked back to his computer.

8

“We asked you to come in because we’re worried about the erosion of your debt to equity position,” said the bank’s account manager. He sat in the conference room with two assistants who were taking notes. “We thought that a chat earlier than later would serve both of us better in the long run,” he continued. Bill Gladstone’s hands began to moisten imperceptibly. “We noticed that the last few cheques that were issued began to touch the limit of your line of credit,” continued the manager. “Assure us, Dr. Gladstone, that the company will continue to meet its obligations.”

There was no banter, no polite chit-chat and weather talk. This morning it was sunny, and now, clearly looking out at the mountains across the harbor, he saw dark clouds rolling over the tops and into the city. Droplets of rain hit these windows on the thirtieth floor.

“Dr. Gladstone?” asked the account manager. Bill started as he heard his formal name in the quiet of the conference room. He began to explain the difficulties of the business and the opportunities. He noticed, for the first time, that no one brought him a coffee.

Matt put a proper reef into the main sail. The jib was furled completely. *Justice* flew at six knots. The sailor now stood spread legged, both hands on the wheel. The dark clouds on top of the mountains were even more threatening. Out at the mouth of the harbor, the tankers slowly changed directions as they hung on to their anchors. Matt tacked over to port and kept heading towards the large ships. He donned his life jacket and noticed that behind him appeared a white line of foam and turbulence. He reached for his glasses and looked back at the mountains. A wall of water was rushing towards his position. He put the binoculars in their holder and came about. As he did so, a crab pot buoy appeared alongside, and before Matt knew it, he was caught in the line. *Justice* sailed to a sudden stop. The boat was stern-to and without steerage. Matt saw the wall of water and wind bearing down on him. The rudder was useless. He leaped out of the cockpit to take in the sails.

Angela and Cinder made their way through the avenues of her neighborhood. Her husband's days off from work have become de riguer. She carelessly crossed the street. Tears started to flow. Did he think she was stupid that taking a day off in the middle of the week to go for an afternoon bike ride was normal? Previously, it was the odd Friday, or Monday, but the middle of the week? She knew he worked hard and that there was a genuine need to unwind, but this, this was not right. She had enough. The feelings that churn the stomach, that give off waves of despair, were so draining.

She stopped thinking and realized they was down at the beach. The water always calmed her. She loved playing with her dog, throwing some driftwood for him to chase. Today she might pass on that. Whitecaps were whipping up the sea. She saw a lone sailboat far out in the harbor. Angela sat down on a log and massaged her misery.

11

At his desk, Aaron noticed that the Dow held steadily at one seventy five. He had enough. He got up again and walked out on his veranda. He left the corporate life some time ago. At the time he wanted to stop and change his life abruptly. He was experiencing panic attacks and chest pains and general malaise. Now, with his life in a little bit more control, things had calmed down. What he was doing served to fill a need, to allow him to compete, to keep his brain active. He walked along the expansive balcony and pulled up a white canvas chair. He sat down and put his feet up on the round glass table. Aaron thought the heck with his computer and trades. Tomorrow is another day. As he faced the southeast morning sun he never noticed the clouds slipping over the mountains behind him.

12

Bill Gladstone looked across the table at the man who was talking to him about ratios and required reporting procedures. He was thirty years old. Bill wondered what happened to his previous manager. That one was experienced and knew Bill's business inside out. As the young banker continued to talk, Bill glanced outside and saw the city. He looked past the buildings, past the park, and out beyond at the harbor. It was one of the largest natural harbors in the world. For once, just once, he wished for a break from this incessant life of running Gladstone. He wished he was down there somewhere, away from the banks and the shareholders and employees. He longed for a moment that he couldn't define. He was certain, however, that the moment wasn't this one.

13

Matt was anxious but calm. Crab pots were dangerous and he knew that, literally, he was in a bind. With the rudder disabled, and with his boat hooked to some fisherman's crab line, he'd better do something. He could see the line astern as the boat was swept ahead of the gusting wind. The wall of white water, off in the distance, was threatening. *Justice's* transom was taking a beating from the waves. He grabbed the knife from the scabbard attached to the front of the cockpit. He doffed the life jacket and lowered himself into the water to cut the line. He had no choice.

14

Broken-hearted, Angela wrapped her coat tighter around her body as she sat on a log at Jericho beach. Her thoughts drifted back, back towards the beginning. She thought about the men in her life over the years, the choices she had made. As she did so, she kept being interrupted by the scene developing in front of her. The sailboat in the distance was having trouble. The mountains were darkening on the other side of the harbor and the boat, a bright white spot against the green backdrop, lay unnaturally against the oncoming wind. She was glad for the distraction and looked about to see if she was alone on this sad Wednesday afternoon.

15

Aaron wanted to go outside for a stroll. He took one more look at the television screen to see how the market was coming along. In the corner, the Dow Jones was down eight

hundred points. Aaron looked closer, not believing what he saw. He sat down hard at the kitchen table. There was bedlam on the exchange floor. Each channel had the same news. What was happening, he thought. He couldn't sell the trade he made just a few minutes ago. Eight hundred points, now eight twenty five, almost wiped him out. He thought the worst. As relaxed as he was a moment ago, he was now frightened. He glued himself to the set and surfed the channels searching for an explanation.

16

Dr. Gladstone excused himself from the meeting. He walked out of the conference room, down the hallway, and to the elevators. Once on the ground floor, he stepped out into the sunshine. A strong, dry wind was in the air. He took off his tie, unbuttoned his shirt and breathed in the fresh air. He strode confidently to his car in the parking lot and hopped in, driving directly towards the beach. Only a few years ago he played pick up volleyball on that same stretch of sand. Now, he just wanted to remove his shoes and feel that sand on his bare feet.

17

Aaron was second guessing. One hour ago he was basking in having protected his principal. The Exchange halted trading. Sheer chaos. There was no comfort. Even if they opened trading again he couldn't salvage his position. Bravely, he got up from the kitchen chair and clicked off the small, thin television set. In the hallway he put on his jacket and walked outside into the afternoon sunshine. The market is going to close soon anyway. He breathed in the fresh air.

18

Angela strolled slowly to the water. Cinder ran along the beach in anticipation of the chase. He was a herding breed, smart and enthusiastic. Angela picked a small piece of worn, smooth, cedar bark and threw it into the swells, a few feet away. The dog easily retrieved it, deftly avoiding the crashing harbor waves. He dropped the piece of wood at Angela's feet and asked for more. She threw it again. In the corner of her eye she saw a lone bicyclist, all decked out in colorful spandex, pedaling his way on the road, parallel to the beach park. She turned back towards the water. The sailboat seemed closer. The dog barked, demanding more.

19

Matt knew he was in big trouble. The wall of water that seemed to have appeared from nowhere was almost on top of him. The gusts became a steady squall, approaching sixty or seventy knots. He had cut the crab pot line loose and had climbed back aboard on the transom ladder. He stood soaking wet. The boat was free but the rudder was jammed. It was too late to jump down again, and too dangerous. *Justice* heaved in the waves. The wall of water, at least four feet high, was coming on quickly. Matt let out a tiny triangle of a sail from the roller furling. Maybe it would be enough to stabilize the boat when the williwaws hit.

20

Bill drove his car away from the downtown core and westward along the harbor causeway and out to Jericho beach. On this Wednesday afternoon the traffic was sparse. He took the proper exit and drove the speed limit within the park. A gaggle of bicyclists were weaving their way up a hill, a group of men and women in their thirties. They looked fit. He reminisced once more, and parked in one of the numerous lots that served the beach area. He wasn't alone. A woman near the water was playing with her dog. He

saw a sailboat in the distance, not too far off the shallow sand bar. Bill knew the area well. He raced dinghies there as a youth and was as comfortable on the water as he was in a boardroom. A white wall of water stood out plainly from the waves. It seemed to be moving towards the beach. He stepped out of his car and walked down onto the warm sand. He left his shoes and socks on the passenger seat.

21

Aaron walked out of his condo building, and made a beeline towards the beach, just to the north. It was a warm, blustery day. He picked up an afternoon coffee and tried to forget the painful slide of the stock market. Once at the beach, he saw a white boat very close, in by the shallows. It didn't seem right. There were two other people standing by the water, a man in a suit with no shoes and a woman and her dog. Both were now watching the obviously foundering boat. Aaron fingered his cell phone.

22

The wall of water was still coming at Matt. He thought there was an almost imperceptible diminishing of the wind, but the gauge showed otherwise. Behind the onrush were two or three williwaws. The water and the williwaws hit simultaneously, knocking down the *Justice*. The mast and boom were in the water. The williwaws passed through the boat and Matt felt a chill, the violence of the wind taking his breath away. As he struggled his way in the rigging, he saw figures on the beach at the water's edge. He expected to be there shortly.

23

Angela almost screamed when she saw the wind and the small tornado-like spouts of water come bearing down on the beach. She was frantically calling for Cinder who continued to swim out towards the stick she finally managed to throw a proper distance.

She watched in horror as she saw the small sailboat go over onto its side. The lone occupant was climbing the rigging and hanging on for his life. “Cinder”, she yelled and the dog turned with the driftwood in its mouth.

24

Aaron ran down to the water’s edge to watch the phenomenon. He heard the woman frantically screaming for her dog. He saw the boat tip over. It didn’t capsize but for a few seconds it lay on its side. With his running shoes on he stepped into the water as if he could do something and help the man on the boat. He turned towards the woman and heard her say “Good dog, Cinder, good dog,” as her blue-gray colored dog came to her. Instantly, the cold arctic-like wind hit the beach head on. Aaron leaned into the gust. The boat slowly righted.

25

Bill Gladstone knew what was happening. He saw the williwaws and hoped that the boat would survive. On the way from downtown he heard something on the radio about an unusual weather pattern. At the time he didn’t pay attention, he was too busy thinking about his own life and direction. He walked barefoot towards the water. Like the other two at the water’s edge he stood and watched. He braced himself for the high speed gust that was coming towards them at eighty mile per hour. It hit like a slap in the face and then was gone. He turned and saw the woman crouching, protecting her dog. He saw the second man in the windbreaker taking it full on with a smile on his face.

26

As quickly as it had come, the hurricane force gust abated. In less than a minute, within the confines of this harbor surrounded by mountains, the sea became flat. The sun came out and the clouds opened. Matt sat becalmed, his rudder in a fix. With his thoughts

crystallizing into action, he grabbed his knife from the scabbard and jumped over the side once again. Under water he cut the crab line and freed the rudder. Surfacing, Matt climbed the transom ladder and sat in the teak lined cockpit. He turned on the ignition and steered *Justice* out and away from trouble. An ever so gentle rub of the keel against the soft sand of the shallows signaled the luck he had that sunny afternoon.

27

Angela protected herself and Cinder from the wind's landfall. The waves rounded themselves to a standstill. She got up from her crouched position and snapped a leash on Cinder in case anything happened again. Looking away from the sea, away from the picture of the sailboat that brought her there in the first place, she turned and walked towards the causeway. A figure, pushing a road bike, was walking towards her. She heard the clickety-clack of the man's shoes. When she squinted and shielded her eyes, she saw it was her husband.

28

Aaron stood at the edge of the beach looking out at the white sailboat, now upright and shining in the sun. He looked at the stranger to his right. The man had a Blackberry phone to his ear. "No I'll be gone until Monday," Aaron heard him saying. The man in the suit finished the call and pocketed the phone. "Interesting experience," said Aaron. "It's something that's very rare in these parts," the man answered. "I see our friend out there survived." "Wasn't that something?" asked Aaron. "He's lucky he didn't lose the boat." "A few more feet and he would be high and dry," said the man in the suit.

Angela's husband laid down his bike in the grass by the beach. He was pleased to see her. He was finishing his ride when he saw the strange wind on the water. He saw his wife and Cinder crouching. Serendipity, he thought. He walked up to her, put his arms around her and told her how nice and unexpected it was to see her. She glowed in his embrace. As they made their way out of the park, Angela looked back at the sailboat. She saw the two men standing at the edge of the sand, talking. She turned and squeezed her husband's waist.

Bill Gladstone saw the stranger approach him. They conversed about the sailboat and the storm. He was pleasant enough, Bill thought. Then the stranger asked him: "Would you mind very much looking at that phone of yours and seeing how the market did this morning?" Bill was obviously puzzled but took out his Blackberry and accommodated the request. He clicked on the New York Times icon that he used as his portal. He scrolled down to the Business icon and then to Markets. It showed down twelve points at the close. "Down twelve," answered Bill. The stranger thanked him. "Not too bad for a volatile day," he said. "Much appreciated," he continued. "Interesting experience all around. Have a good day." Bill nodded. The man, with a windbreaker slung over a shoulder, walked towards the townhouses. Bill took one last look at the sailboat and the lone sailor that was just kissed by lady luck. Maybe a bit of that would rub off on him, Bill thought. With a lighter gait, he walked towards his car. The sand felt good between his toes.