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ATLANTIS SHORT STORY CONTEST

WINNING STORY

Wavedancer

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Word Count: 2.149.

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Wavedancer

Shimmering reflection of the setting sun looks like steps on the water reaching a tiny boat bobbing gently in the calm waters of a small bay. Clare is reclining in a cramped cockpit sipping tea and watching the sun slowly disappearing behind the tall city buildings. An occasional grimace is the sign that she is still getting used to a bitter taste of plain black tea. An involuntary but inevitable glance towards the city brings a sharp pang to her heart.

In one of those tall buildings in the distance there is the office Clare no longer calls her own. She used to pace the length of that room on the tenth floor and to relieve stress watch the river and the boats sailing by. On a clear day she was just able to make a mere speck of her own boat moored in the bay below.

How strange it sounded to call it “her own boat”. It was left to Clare by her grandfather. Saddened by his passing and astonished with his generosity, she was bewildered that his choice of all his numerous grandchildren fell on her who even did not know how to sail. It has been many years since she was on that boat. Gramps would take a bunch of his grandkids, Clare among them, for a day sailing and fishing on the harbour. They had great fun even when there was no fish to catch. Back on the mooring they finished the day by jumping off the boat and swimming around.

What was she going to do with the sailing boat? She could hardly remember what it looked like and there was no time in her hectic life to go and check on it. A thought of selling it occurred to her before she was made aware that Gramps’ gift included a clause not allowing her to sell the

boat for five years. So Clare let it be and forgot all about it until a year later she was reminded of her boat ownership when a notice of registration arrived in the mail. She paid the rego and then decided to visit the little boat.

Clare was not sure what she had really expected by coming to see it. This boat was so out of the world she inhabited. She lived in a modern city apartment and her life was filled with work, travel, gym sessions, friends and parties. She was thirty, had a dream job and a promising career.

Clare parked her silver Mercedes and looked across the bay. At first she found it hard to identify her treasure among much bigger yachts, then she recalled that it used to be closer to the shore. It was there, rolling on the mooring, looking smaller than she remembered it. She was then faced with a problem of getting to it. A bunch of dinghies, most of them the worse for wear, was nestled under the rocks on the little beach at the bottom of the park. Which one was Grandpa's and how to get it out of a tangle of other similar dinghies? Clare did not quite know, so she turned a few boats searching for clues until she noticed a little wooden dinghy tucked in the farthest from the water's edge. It was a small timber contraption with the paint peeling off and the words Tender to Wavedancer almost faded away. Surprisingly, the dinghy was lighter than she expected yet she needed some effort to turn it upright. A pair of oars was padlocked to a cleat. *The oars, of course. She had not even thought of that. Padlock. Where was a key for the padlock? Did she bring the keys? So many things to think about.*

Her rowing was pathetic. She knelt on the seat of the dinghy, and using only one oar she dipped it on one side then on the other side, more like paddling a kayak than a dinghy, she nearly

capsized but eventually managed to traverse a short distance from the sandy beach to Wavedancer. She climbed up and stepped right into seagulls' droppings. First shock over, she unlocked the hatch to the cabin.

Clare had to bend her willowy figure to get inside the boat and open her green eyes wide in an effort to find her way through the dark interior. She was overwhelmed by a miasma emanating from the small musty cabin and fumbled to open tiny, smudged and scratched portholes. Soon the air was breathable and the sunbeams started dancing on specks of dust and mould, revealing piles of stuff everywhere. She stood confused in the middle of the cabin thinking how everything looked different and much smaller than in her childhood. Perhaps what was missing was Gramps pottering around, his grubby appearance and grumpy demeanour masking a romantic at heart. She looked around one more time, did not want to touch anything, shut the boat, rowed back to shore, stored the dinghy and drove home.

When Clare occasionally mentioned that she owned a boat people would say that she was rich. Everyone almost certainly imagined a big swish yacht or a luxury motor cruiser. Wavedancer is but a wooden sailing boat built by Gramps in a big shed in his backyard. It is 24 feet long and over time Clare has learned to immediately add: 'That's about 7.3 m,' which was usually met with 'Oh!' It is a modest, simple boat, and if it could be sold, probably not worth more than an average small car. So the small boat was left to its own devices, neglected in a city bay, in company of its bigger sisters. *Why are boats referred as she?* She, Clare, was sure that she had heard a story somewhere, maybe even from Gramps, but she forgot all about it and somehow for her it was always "it, the boat." Clare was paying the rego and mooring fees regularly but has not

done much else. Once she brought Julian to see it. The fashionable Julian, who raced on his friend's super yacht, looked from the shore at her little possession and burst into peals of laughter. 'You should really get rid of it, darling.'

Clare met Julian at a work conference. His presentation could not have been missed, his deep voice and charming looks captivated the audience. She could not resist to ask him a question at the end and he shot back an eloquent answer.

When people mingled before dinner with cocktails in hand, she saw him, tall, in a superb suit, gliding through the crowd towards her. 'Hello, I am Julian.' 'Yeah, I know who you are. Clare,' she managed to reply trying not to look in awe of him. A few drinks later they chatted like they have known each other for a long time.

On the day she lost her job Clare was devastated. It came as a blow and without a proper explanation. What a humiliation to be escorted by the security guard, carrying a box containing the knickknacks which adorned her beautiful office, trying hard to conceal tears of anger and disbelief. "Regret to let you go. Restructuring, downsizing..." those words were ringing in her ears on the way out of the building. She arrived home at midday and threw herself on the bed sobbing. She spent a week in mourning, then another week, then a month and another. Eventually she started looking for a new job. Six months later she was still looking, her confidence dwindling. Her savings were severely depleted and mortgage repayments in jeopardy. She reluctantly put the apartment on the market but was glad when it sold as she was running out

of money. Mercedes had to go as well. The circle of friends gradually grew smaller, not that she encouraged any of them to stick around. Julian was last to leave.

Clare started packing. She sold almost all the furniture. She dragged boxfuls of designer clothing, business attire and high heeled shoes to Vinnies. With two bulging travel bags, a laptop and mobile phone Clare found herself on the beach in front of Wavedancer. Her rowing was not much better this time, on top of which she had to balance her bags in the tiny dinghy.

When she stepped aboard her small yacht Clare suppressed disgust with birds' poo and lingering fishy smell. She let the air and sun into the cabin and this time she surveyed it thoroughly. Gramps' old stuff: two burner metho stove she had no clue how to use, Gramps' favourite blue metal mug, chipped, a few plastic plates, bowls and cups, some cutlery, stove top kettle, a pot and a rusty frying pan. No microwave, no coffee maker, no fridge. The seat coverings were mouldy, the old sails were folded on the bed, on the table was a thick white folder on which "Wavedancer" was written in big red letters. Clare opened it and sighed with relief. A manual. *Trust grandpa to think of everything. Does it say how to use the metho stove? No.* She leafed through. *Batteries, solar panels, engine ... the mind boggles. She'll have to Google lots of things if she was going to make this work.* A blue milk crate full of fishing lines and lures was stashed in the corner.

Clare cleared some space and brought her bags inside. She felt tired and craved for a cuppa. She found a box of matches but they were damp and would not strike. Then she realised there was no metho in the stove anyway. She rummaged through the cupboards and eventually found a bottle

with some metho in it. But then she did not know how to refill the stove. Her friends Google and You Tube helped. And discovering a lighter and a small jar with loose leaf tea. No coffee. No sugar. The tea would have to do. She sat for a time thinking of all the things that will have to be done to make the Wavedancer a comfortable home for a while. Just a short while, she hoped, until she gets back on her feet.

The laptop and mobile were on their last legs and needed recharging. Clare searched hopelessly where to plug them in. No luck. Exhausted and dispirited, she moved the sails from the bed, curled up and went to sleep. She spent a fretful night and was awakened in the early morning by a swishing noise and a cry: 'Go, Charlie, go. Straighten that stroke now.' Startled, Clare jumped out of bed, bumped her head on the low ceiling and looked outside. Poor Charlie was rowing with all his might and his coach urged him by yelling instructions from the runabout on the side. She was amused then observed Charlie's technique. After all, she will have to learn to row properly.

Over the next few mornings Clare watched intently the rowers training and in the evenings, when there was no one around except dog walkers in the park, she practised in her dinghy. Hopefully no one would pay attention to her clumsy attempts.

She rowed to shore every day and soon stopped concentrating on her movements, the dinghy reaching the beach in perfect motion. She even enjoyed it. Up the hill, a short walk from the park, was a supermarket and McCafe. She was regular at the cafe, while nursing a cappuccino Clare charged her laptop and mobile and used the free Wi-Fi. Afterwards she went for her daily

visit to the supermarket. Passing by the noticeboard two colourful ads caught her eye: “Dog walkers wanted. Interested persons please phone Gladys on ...” was the first. “Crew for twilight racing on Tuesdays needed. Phone Phil ...” She entered both contact numbers into her mobile.

Clare has not yet dared to move Wavedancer from the mooring. It would take much more Googling to summon courage for that. Instead she was imagining what it would be like sitting in some idyllic coastal or offshore anchorage, with palms swaying above white sandy beach and swimming around the boat in crystal-clear water.

The clouds burn bright red after the sun is gone and Clare feels unexpected stillness and peace enveloping the cockpit. It would be hard to recognise in this barefoot young woman, clad in dark blue shorts and oversized white T-shirt, with her flowing long auburn hair tied in a pony tail, that highflying glamorous business woman of some months ago. That woman of old, sitting surrounded with big TV screen, laptop, and her mobile flashing and beeping constantly, would never find time to watch the sunset or notice how thickly the sky is covered with stars or see the full moon rising or just sit and watch the rowers passing by.

Clare is now grateful for this small wooden shell as without it she would be homeless. ‘Thanks Gramps,’ she whispers and turns into the cabin.