



MAY FLYER

Exhausted physically and mentally my mind went quiet. The once raging sea was now calm and serene. Fear left my body and my will to survive faded; dying became an option and I let go.

[Story **Steve Schuler** • Illustration **Brian Bryson**]

It was 6 a.m. when the phone rang. My foggy brain started clicking off the possible people who would call at this hour. By the third ring, I placed my bet on my good buddy and sailing companion, Jim Griffin. This wouldn't be his first predawn wake-up call. He took pride in getting up early while the world slumbered away precious morning hours. The early bird worm theory he would say. It would have greater meaning if you grew up working on a farm, and he did—a hundred acres of orange trees—juicers, he called them. Now he's a detective for the Florida State Attorney's office.

"Hello; good morning," I said with a voice sounding as awake as I could muster.

"Hey, did I wake you?" Jim asked in his born and bred Southern drawl.

"No," I said, stifling a yawn.

"Oh, did I get you out of bed?"

"No," I lied again. "Been up since the crack of...dawn."

Jim didn't challenge my fibbing.

"What ya think about a teaser race before the Kahlua Cup?"

"Ahhh, the Coors Cup in Tampa Bay. I'm awake enough to know that race is five days out."

"Exactly."

"Not gonna happen, Jim; don't have time to bring my boat down."

"But I got a couple ideas."

"Yah, like what? You sailing my boat down for me?"

"Nope, got one there already, *May Flyer*."

That piqued my interest. I've always wanted at the helm of his Santana 20. It was sleek and fast, and for a lightweight one-design, relatively stable.

"As exciting as that sounds, don't forget, I told everyone we'd take a break until the Kahlua Cup. It's been a long season and I don't want to push my luck and toast the crew."

He said, "I've got someone to crew for us."

"Do tell."

"A co-worker, he loves racing...a big fan of America's Cup."

"Sounds like a sofa sailor. Can he tie a proper cleat?"

He's a sharp guy, won't be in the way, and if we get one more person it'll be perfect."

"Okay, you know I can't turn down a chance to race. I'll make a few calls, you do the same. If you find anyone who knows the difference between a bowline knot and a bowlin' alley, I'm in. Oh, one more thing, gotta run this by my honey."

"Great, Steve, I'll call you tomorrow and we'll pull this

together."

"Can you call a little later than 6 a.m.?"

"Yeah, sure, also, before you crawl back to bed I got something for you to sleep on—you'll be at the helm."

"You know how to warm a guy's heart."

"Sweet dreams," and the phone went dead.

By this time Linda was in the shower.

"That was Jim," I said. "Wants to race his boat in the Coors Cup this Saturday." I was pushing my luck asking since I promised Linda that this weekend would be family time. Racing three or four times a month is a big commitment for everyone. Family included. Not to mention time spent working on my boat, *Different Drummer*, a Morgan 27. Keeping it race ready requires tons of work, bottom cleaning, sail fixing, and the never-ending battle of checking every moving part so something doesn't go snap. Any salt will tell you that Murphy's Law can smack you down in the worst possible way—and it won't be during flat seas and a light wind. As sure as the sun sets in the west, a fastened line will come undone, or a line you want to run free, will snag.

I handed her a towel when she stepped out of the shower. Without responding to my question, she dried off and

wrapped it around her tiny 4-foot 10-inch frame. Her stringy wet hair hung to her shoulders. My honey, at 36 years old, was still carded when we went nightclubbing.

"It would mean a lot to Jim," I said. "And you could come down after the race. We'll be drinking Rum Runners at Captain Eddies by 7 o'clock. Maybe spend the night on *Ms. Rosewater* instead of driving back home."

Ms. Rosewater is Jim's cruising boat, a Tartan 34, named after a character in Kurt Vonnegut's book, *God Bless you, Mr. Rosewater*.

"Okay, alright." She said, tossing the towel at me.

I chuckled at the symbolic tossing in the towel.

Linda encouraged me to race. She knew it was my passion and fueled my competitive spirit. What she didn't like was the aftermath—a half dozen guys sitting on our dock drinking beer and eating pizza.

"Dinner would be nice, and besides, I haven't seen Laura in a few weeks. Maybe the four of us can stay aboard *Ms. Rosewater* Saturday night?" She asked.

"That would be great," I said.

She smiled and kissed my cheek. "Steve, we need some time on *Different Drummer*." She snuggled into me. "I can't wait to sail down to the Keys next April."

I hugged her. Last year we gunkholed our way to the Florida Keys, drinking vodka splashed with orange juice. We spent two weeks hanging on the hook in Boot Key Harbor before meandering our way back home, and just like waiting for sunset on Mallory Dock or watching dolphins surfing off our bow; it never grew old.

Later that day I made a few phone calls and heard similar excuses—already have plans, or too short of a notice. I called Jim back.

“We got nobody,” I said. “Looks like it ain’t gonna happen.”

“It’s a small boat,” Jim argued. “I can handle the sails. All you gotta do is point it around the course and go fast.”

“I’d like nothing more, but are you up to manhandling a spin-naker on a pitching foredeck? There’s a front moving through and it’s gonna be breezy.”

“Hell, you’re on your game when it’s blowing,” he claimed.

“Maybe, but I fancy 8000 pounds under me rather than a half ton daysailer with a newbie tossing cookies off the stern.”

“1350 pounds,” Jim corrected me, “of mean racing machine,” he added.

“Oh, that makes it better.”

“Tony’s solid and a quick learner. He’ll, umm, make good ballast?” He framed it like a question.

“No sailing experience huh?” I responded.

“Nope.” He paused. “It’s a favor, you know...impress a co-worker.”

I stayed silent; thinking about racing the Santana brought on an adrenalin rush.

“Steve, I’ll make this easy. Just show up at the dock, and drive the pointing end around the course. I’ll even sail it back after the race. Then you can relax on the dock, drink beer and throw peanut shells at me while I hose it down and fold sails.”

I caved, “Okay, okay, check the forecast and get things ready. Oh, by the way, will Laura be around this weekend? Linda wanted to hook-up with her.”

“She’s gonna be busy with her mom, but I’ll have her get in touch.”

Friday night Jim called and said it was still just the three of us and the weather report called for a bit of wind—18 to 22 knots. We would have our hands full, considering lightweight boats don’t mix well with heavy wind and sloppy seas. The kicker was the predicted gusts of over 25 knots.

Jim was on the dock when I arrived—the boat already in the water and the sails on the deck.

I smiled thinking early bird worm theory.

“Steve, this is Tony,” Jim said.

He was a moderately big man in his late 30s and built like a guy that spends a lot of time sitting behind a desk. In this case it was behind a bench, Tony was a DUI judge.

“Hi, glad to have you aboard.” We shook hands.

“Any sailing experience, Tony?”

“No, but I’m on the water a lot, fishing.”

I dropped my duffle bag on deck and climbed aboard. Jim started the kicker motor to get us out of the channel. I unfastened the dock lines, coiled and stowed them.

The wind was already kicking-up and there was a chop on the bay. While the motor puttled away, we chatted about race tactics and responsibilities. I instructed Tony. “Always stay on the highest rail and duck anytime I yell jibe or coming about.”

“Aye aye captain,” said Tony, in a pirate’s voice.

This guy was likable and smart. I had to trust Jim wouldn’t bring a problem to a race he was so eager to win.

“Another point—don’t take anything personal. My race mode personality shifts a little and my vocabulary drops to a handful of words, like jibe, tack, trim, coming about.”

Jim coughed into his closed fist and nodded while he stared at nothing in particular.

“There’s less confusion,” I continued. “No please and thank you, either, and if everyone’s paying attention, I won’t have to use the word duck, and other four letter words.”

“This’ll send you in the drink,” Jim said and rapped his knuckles on the boom.

“I always yell jibe, but sometimes, in the thick of a race, it comes without warning.”

I pulled my foul weather gear out of my duffle bag and started putting them on. I slipped the bibbed pants over my jeans and fastened the straps over my shoulders—crossing them for a tighter fit. For now, my sweatshirt kept off the chill, so I folded my rain jacket and sat on it. Jim handed the helm over to me and worked his way to the mast.

“Think we’ll get rain,” Tony asked. Immediately a wave crashed the bow sending sea spray across the boat.

“No, but it looks like we’ll get wet.” Jim grinned.

Tony zipped up his jacket and smiled. He looked like an overgrown kid going to Disneyland. I was excited too and a bit anxious.

Jim began raising the mainsail. “I’m tucking in a reef.”

I nodded. It was our best option since our only headsail was a 150.

After the main was up Jim removed the motor from the stern, stowed it below. By the time we got to the starting area we were in full rain gear and the boat was battened down.

The ten-minute warning gun went off on our approach. The race committee had already set the windward marker, about a mile out. The winds were strong and unsteady—the seas erratic. Boats were jostling for position as we sailed into the chaos.

“Jim, let’s head for the line. When we cross it, we’ll jibe back.”

“Yep,” Jim responded. “Got the clock—nine minutes and counting.”

The Santana responded rapidly to sail trim, but it also stalled on a dime. It lacked the weight to carry through heavy seas.

Most boats were staying farther off the line in an attempt to approach at full speed. With less than four minutes on the clock, we crossed the start line. I trimmed hard to weather and settled in for a few seconds. Occasional gusts heeled the boat to the rail.

“Damn, I keep losing rudder. Put a twist in the main, see if that flattens us.” I eased the main while Jim adjusted the traveler.

After a timed 60 seconds, we jibed back for the line. The boat moved swiftly downwind. Too swiftly, we were going to be early.

“Two minutes,” Jim called out.

Our course headed us directly into the fleet and most were pointing our way. Some were luffing their mainsails to bleed

off speed.

My plan was to dip over the line, pull into a reach and have full headway when they squeezed the trigger. If my timing was wrong, we would be forced to restart. It was a risky scheme—all or nothing—and our options expired about three minutes ago. Either way, I expected a few one-fingered reviews when we crashed the party.

“Tony, get heavy...lean as far as you can.” He shot thumbs up.

Jim handed me the hiking stick. “Gonna need this,” and slapped it in my hand. I dipped below the stern of a C & C 24 and saluted the captain. He was getting pinched on all sides.

“Sixty seconds” Jim called out. “Gonna be early.”

I let off the main and ticked off five seconds.

“Goin’ down the line,” I yelled and swung across the face of the approaching fleet. They were early too. The C & C looked like it would be pushed over the line. Two boats were barging at our end. One tacked and nearly fell into irons, the other flagged his jib and dropped behind, leaving a small opening. I waited two beats, dipped into the gap, and was immediately forced to jibe. The main slammed across the cockpit. Tony looked at me with that “What in hell,” expression.

“Damn it,” I said under my breath. I pointed to the other side of the boat and he scurried across, ducking as if he were avoiding helicopter blades. Jim was calling out the seconds. I was watching our line. Attacking from this position forfeited our right of way and my maneuver created a new problem—we were heading directly at the committee boat. We watch as two men scurried to the bow preparing to fend us off. I was more concerned with snagging our 4-foot keel over their anchor rode.

“Trim up,” I ordered. “Goin’ for the line. Tony, look for red flags.”

Jim started yelling, “Go, go, go,” as the gun went off.

We cleared the committee boat and Jim let out a “Whoop, whoop.”

Dumb luck, I thought. My nifty sailing skills didn’t carry us above the anchor line, it was the strong current.

I glanced back at the fleet of starboard sails jockeying for position. We were in clean air and moving fast, but I still struggled with control when the boat heeled too far. I eased the main a tweak and decided to focus on maintaining speed rather than pointing high. Whitecaps swept across the bay, waves crashed over the bow, and Tony looked like a puppy with his face in the wind as we raced toward the windward mark.

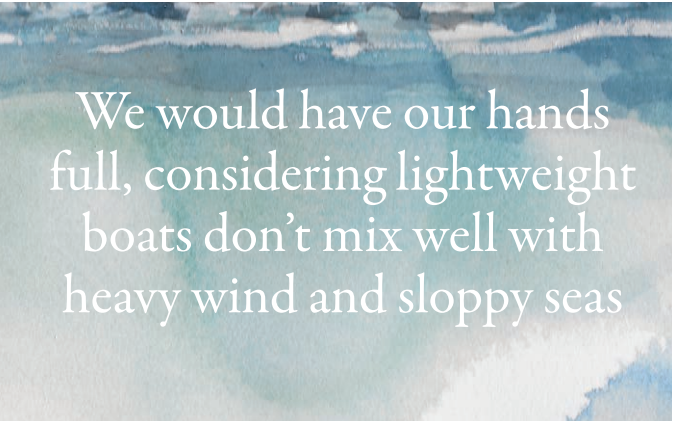
“Jim, we need to get flatter, I’m fighting through the gusts.”

He moved forward and repositioned the turnbuckle. I gave him a thumb up.

“Prepare to come about!” I shouted. I grabbed the main sheet and waited for a lull in the trough of waves.

“Coming about!” I yelled as I pulled hard on the helm. She dipped gracefully through a crest of waves and settled into a friendlier rhythm. Repositioning the clew opened up the jib, letting air escape out the top. We still heeled deeper than I preferred, but I did have better control.

Jim pointed leeward. The fleet had tacked and we looked to be ahead, except for two boats. One was larger, approximately 30 feet, but not in our class. I recognized the other, it was *Dark Horse*, a Morgan 24. It moved well in heavy



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weather, and the skipper was a good sailor. This was our competition.

“Damn, it’d be nice to give him a thrashing,” Jim said.

“Yeah, let’s put on the pressure. Prepare to come about.”

Jim adjusted the starboard tackle and gave a thumbs up.

“Coming about!”

The seas had grown a bit, broadening from chops to swells. The boat moved better through a tack, but we were still doused with sea spray when we punched into a good wave.

Just as the boat settled in Tony yelled out, “I see a flag!”

Jim fished his binoculars from his pocket and looked in the direction Tony was jabbing his finger.

“Got it,” he said. “One o’clock.”

I gazed the horizon for a few seconds and found it.

“We’re drifting below the marker,” I said. It was a quick assessment and even though we appeared to be out front, an unfavorable wind-shift could quickly wipe that away.

“*Dark Horse* just tacked,” Jim hooted. “Looks like the larger boat will cross his bow on port. We’re kicking butt!”

I glanced back at the fleet. They were scattered now, and we were definitely in the lead. The only boat gaining on us was the 30 footer.

“The big guy tacked,” Jim shouted.

I nodded. Our strong suit would be the next leg, a broad reach, but we would need full sail, that or fly the spinnaker. I looked to the sky. Dark clouds were rolling in and gusts were slamming us.

I yelled, “Let’s take the reef out next leg.”

Jim raised his eyebrows. “You’re kidding?”

I smiled, “Not going mutinous are you?”

Jim laughed, “I don’t mind taking it out, it’s puttin’ it back that’ll be a bitch.”

“Yeah, it’ll be a bitch, but we’re gonna need more sail if we leave the spinnaker on deck.”

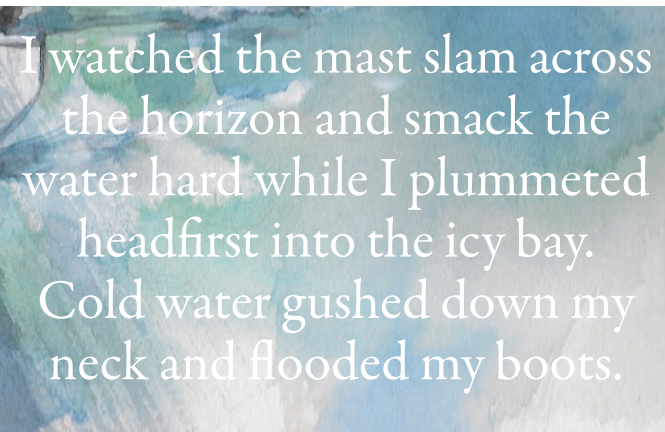
Tony glanced back at me. His color was pasty, and his smile seemed strained.

“Don’t worry,” I yelled. “We’ll be around the first mark in a few minutes.”

“Will it be any better when we round it?” he asked.

“Nope. But it will be different, and probably not in a good way.”

The fleet spread-out behind us. The only boats noticeably closer were the Morgan 24 and the bigger boat. We tacked two more times and were a couple of minutes from rounding the mark.



Looks' like they're coming up on us," Jim shouted. I hollered back, "Set your stopwatch at the turn. If we got 'em by more than a minute we'll leave the spinnaker in its bag." "What if they launch their chute?" If it's the bigger boat I'm gonna admire it. If it's the Morgan... I didn't finish my sentence. Jim knew we wouldn't take this lying down. We approached the marker on port. Rounding it was going to be close, so I pinched to weather as much as could. Jim trimmed the jib. "Steve, it's all we got." I held my breath as we squeaked past the marker with only a few feet to spare. "Man, that's pure luck," Jim yelled. "Yeah, luck alright," I shouted, "and the more I practice the luckier I get." Tony joined in, "Captain, you had it all the way." The boat settled in nicely on our new course, surging with following seas. With that leg behind us, our tension eased. The wind agreed. Rather than screeching at us, it pushed us along the rising and falling surf. Tony no longer had the color of a faded window-mannequin. "You timing 'em?" I asked. "30 seconds," Jim yelled out. "Big guys' about to round." "I glanced back, several boats were approaching the marker. The 30 footer was closest. Close enough to read the lettering on the side, *Daddy's Money*. I watched him sail by the marker and change course. A couple of beats went by. Jim said, "He's going below us. No spinnaker on deck." "Where's *Dark Horse*?" I asked. "Shit, he's turning the marker. Spinnaker on the bow." "It's a bluff—that or wishful thinking. Wait him out." Jim yelled, "50 seconds back." Then slid off the rail and worked his way to center hatch. He pushed it open, reached in and grabbed the spinnaker. "It wasn't a bluff," and he tossed it on deck. "Okay, let's do it." Jim quickly got the spinnaker pole latched to the mast. He then made his way to the foredeck, attached the launching bag to the bow pulpit, and fastened the sheets. I felt my gut grind into a knot. Race it like you stole it, kept running through my head. I yelled, "Tony, stay forward of the mast. Jim, I'll handle the main till we get her launched. "Guts and glory, boys."

Jim grinned, "Gonna be intense." Then he pulled the hal-yard hand over hand until the spinnaker reached the tip of the mast. With a quick jerk on the sheet, it snapped open hard. The boat surged, heeled brutally to starboard and I lost rudder control. I dumped off the main and she settled back. "Wow that was fun. Now let's trim for course." After tweaking the sails, we noticed a buzzing sound that vibrated at our feet. Jim said. "I think it's the keel. I heard it once before when towed behind a motorboat." "Long as it doesn't fall off I'm good," I said in an attempt to ease the stress off our white-knuckle ride. Tony sported a new color, pea green. Once the excitement was over we fell into good stride—except for the sporadic wind bursts that threw us to the edge. When they hit, the boat heeled hard, the keel hissed, and we lost control. All we could do was dump the main and wait. I found myself holding my breath and wishing we had left in the reef. "Gonna bring the spinnaker down in a couple minutes," I yelled, "I can't steer directly to the marker and it's not safe to jibe." Without taking his eyes off the sails, Jim nodded and yelled. "We're making better than 10 knots." We were sailing away from our competition, but the boat was unstable. Another gust hit and the boat lurched hard to starboard, and then something different happened. She spun wildly into the wind and rolled over with a vengeance. I watched the mast slam across the horizon and smack the water hard while I plummeted headfirst into the icy bay. Cold water gushed down my neck and flooded my boots. Two thoughts stormed through my head—I don't float and I'm not wearing anything that floats. My bulky clothing resisted my efforts as I thrashed frantically to keep my head above water. I tried kicking free of my boots, to no avail. I reached to pull them off, and in the process, I spun upside down. I began to panic. With the boots off it still took all my energy to swim to the surface. When I felt the cool air on my face, I gulped in deep breaths while rolling seas washed over me. I had drifted away from *May Flyer*. She was upside down and the keel jutted skyward at a steep angle. A shadowed figure stood next to it, pointing toward me. I raised my arm above my head, trying to signal, but the effort to stay afloat was too great. I stopped struggling for a moment to unzip my jacket. It slipped away easily, but the slicker-pants, with straps crisscrossed over my shoulders, seemed complicated. I sank into darkness while I wrestled free of my burden. My heart pounded in my ears and my lungs burned. The light above me grew dim. I kicked toward it for what seemed like an eternity. When I surfaced I gulped in a mixture of water and air. My throat made a raspy sound while I gasped and choked on seawater. Drifting in the waves I looked for *May Flyer*. She wasn't within sight, only a mast tip interrupted the rolling skyline. I battled to keep my head above water. Exhausted physically and mentally my mind went quiet. The once raging sea was now calm and serene. Fear left my body and my will to survive faded; dying became an option and I let go. There was no sensation of sinking, only daylight giving way to darkness. Cold no longer shivered through my

body. Quiet and peace overcame me and time suspended. Then I saw an image of my sweet Linda, so beautiful and loving. She would be home waiting, waiting for a call that would never come. No more hellos, no more goodbyes, and no more goodnight kisses. Only unforeseen emptiness and questions—questions that begged answers. I wanted to feel her in my arms. I wanted to hear her voice. My ears were ringing and the burning sensation in my chest became unbearable. With renewed energy and determination, I kicked and fought my way toward the fading light. Waves rolled over me when I surfaced and I gasped for air. A boat was moving in fast. Two men were standing on the bow. One pointed in my direction and the other, with a seat cushion in hand, was stripped down to his underwear. The seat cushion sailed across the water like a Frisbee and landed in my outstretched arms. I clung on it. The boat moved closer and a line slapped into the water in front of me. When I grabbed it, it pulled back and I was moving through the water toward the side of the boat. It was *Daddy's Money*, the Catalina 30. A hand reached over the side, and a voiced asked. "You okay?" All I could produce was a nod. Another hand reached out and together they pulled me aboard. I wanted to thank them, but a kaleidoscope of thoughts whirled through my head. "We watched your boat go over, man. It went in hard." A second voice said. "That was the best crash n' burn, ever." Another chimed in. "Pardon the pun, but I'd call it the best slam dunk ever." The guy that tossed me the life cushion put his hand on my shoulder. "I'm Charlie." He had his pants back on and wore a blue sweatshirt. "I'm Steve." My voice was weak and I still clutched the seat cushion in my arms. I stared past him at the Santana. She was back afloat and rocking with the seas. Jim was attaching the motor to the stern. Tony was sitting on top of the cabin with his head between his legs. He swayed slowly with the motion of the boat. The sun sifted through the scattered clouds and warmed my face. I shivered. Eager hands steadied the boats as we eased alongside *May Flyer*. Jim had finished with the motor and greeted us. He grasped my arm and helped me aboard. All he said was, "Damn." I slowly shook my head in response. I was thinking about my words when Jim had hoisted the spinnaker. Guts and glory. Now I realized it was arrogant overconfidence. Hands waved goodbye and *Daddy's Money* sailed away. I could barely wave. Jim started the engine and Tony joined us in the cockpit as we motored back to the boat ramp in silence. After several minutes, Jim finally broke the ice. "The mast stuck in the bottom when we flipped. That's why she didn't self-right." I thought about it for a moment and said, "That's great, we ran aground in 25 feet of water." "Gotta be a world record," Jim said. Tony asked, "What caused us to flip like that?" "It's called a broach. We tripped over the keel when she turned sideways." "It happened so fast," Tony said. "Think about it like skiing behind a boat and you make an abrupt turn. You may be facing a new way, but you're still going

in the same direction. Now shove the flat side of a four-foot keel straight down." Tony nodded, and with solid ground moments away, he glowed in a new color. Sun flushed pink. We went silent again. I gazed at the approaching shoreline. Tony futzed with his jacket zipper. In a few minutes, we were edging up to the dock. I jumped off and tied the bow and stern. "Gotta make a call." I walked over to the payphone, dug a quarter out of my jeans and dialed home. Linda answered immediately. "Hi." "Hi," I said in a weak voice. Silence. "Something's wrong, you okay?" "I'm okay." "What happened? Something's not right." I stayed silent. "Steve, I love you so much." "I love you too." "I'm here—you can tell me everything." I hung up the phone, walked to my car and got in. I looked back at Jim and Tony preparing to pull *May Flyer* out of the water. I drove away without saying goodbye. Jim would call tomorrow, probably at 6 a.m. •SCA•

Steve and Linda's love of sailing began during a weekend sailing school with their three boys. It became their passion after exploring the Florida Keys on Ablest, their Hinterhoeller designed Shark 24. On September 27, 2013, Linda lost a 10-month battle with kidney cancer. Steve keeps her memory alive with stories of their life's journey and traveling adventures spanning 45 years.

