

“Perfect Tide”  
Beth Ann Mathews

At seven a.m. my husband brought coffee and a bowl of oatmeal to the aft cabin where I was sleeping. Our sailboat was tied to the public dock in Taku Harbor, a favorite wilderness getaway within the Tongass National Forest, twenty miles south of our home in Juneau, Alaska.

“We’re coming up on low tide,” Jim said, handing me the bowl. “You can stay here, if you like. There’s no wind. I can get us off the dock and anchored mid-cove.”

“What’s your plan?”

“I’d like to snorkel and see if I can get us some Dungies.”

I bit the inside of my cheek. “Are you sure?” Two months earlier, he’d suffered an unusual type of brainstem stroke. He’d spent five weeks in a Seattle hospital, the first in intensive care, the rest in rehab learning how to walk and swallow. After only three weeks at home, still recovering, he’d convinced me to do this mid-June trip with our nine-year-old son, who’d been with us through it all.

“It’s no big deal. My wet suit’s like flotation,” he said. “I won’t wear much weight. It’ll be fine. The water’s clear and it’s a minus tide—perfect for free diving.”

My silent stare spoke my concern.

“I’ll be *fine*.” He shook his head, radiating his don’t-limit-me look.

“I’ll help with getting off the dock and anchoring,” I said. Another boat at the dock would block us in as the tide dropped. It would be a tricky departure because the shallow water limited our scope to turn around.

“Okay. I’ll get her warmed up.” He left the cabin. The engine started with a familiar “Thu-rumm!” I finished eating, dressed, and went up top. While I was releasing dock lines, Jim tossed down my life vest. I zipped it on. The cool, still air felt good on my arms and face. Ripples sloshed onto the beach where a faint mist rose in front of the forest.

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Jim nodded and shifted into gear. I pushed the bow hard away from the dock and climbed on. We inched forward. Nearby, a loon peered underwater, arched, and dove.

Helm hard to port, Jim powered and shifted, forward-neutral-reverse, forward-neutral-reverse, spinning our sailboat around in the tight space.

“BLEEEP! BLEEEP! BLEEEP!” The depth sounder blared. Programmed with two feet to spare, the alarm still kicked up my heart rate. Watching my husband pivot our 42-foot boat 180 degrees, I saw no impairment. A jumble of pride and relief welled up in my chest.

We slid past the other boat and rounded the end float. The depth sounder flashed from six to seven, then nine feet. “That was impressive,” I said, glad to be beyond the risk of going aground. “How’d it feel?”

He thought a moment. “I-I have to concentrate more. But it feels good.” He gazed ahead. “It’s easier than walking,” he added, almost inaudibly.

As we approached the location, Jim went forward to deploy the anchor. I took the helm. Glancing back and forth from my husband to the depth sounder, I called out, “twenty-six, twenty-five.”

The chain clanged out of the locker. He flashed a hand signal. I shifted into reverse, holding a low RPM until the anchor grabbed.

In the cockpit, he undressed, dusted his skin with cornstarch, and began pulling on neoprene Farmer Johns. I took off my life vest, hung it with the others nearby, and helped him stretch the hooded top down over his torso.

“I’d like to have the kayak ready in case you need help,” I said. “And to photograph that loon if it sticks around. Can you give me a hand launching it?”

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We lifted the double kayak over the rail, tied, and fendered it at mid-ship, then walked back to the cockpit.

“Hey!” Glen poked his head up from the companionway.

“Good morning, Mr. Sleepy,” I leaned down to kiss his head. “Jim made oatmeal the way you like—with raisins.”

“Thanks, Jim.” Since he was three, our son had called us by our first names.

“I need to get in the water,” Jim said. “This suit’s cooking me.”

At the stern, he held my shoulder and pulled on long flippers. He bent over to buckle his weight belt, then attached a goodie bag.

It seemed too soon for him to free-dive for crab. But he’s doing well, I thought, and the neurologist said swimming should be fine. Plus he loves being in the ocean.

He pulled on neoprene gloves. I unhooked the stern gate above the folded ladder. He stretched the mask onto his face, smoothed his mustache out of the way, then positioned the snorkel in his mouth.

I pulled out a few hairs caught beneath the mask’s rim and kissed him on the cheek. “Don’t overdo it. Okay?”

He nodded, lips expanded around the mouthpiece.

With one hand holding the halyard, he lifted each flippered foot over the cap rail and balanced on his heels at the stern’s edge, four feet above the surface. I knew he’d use the giant stride entry method, rather than the ladder. When suited up, it’s easier to jump in than maneuver down the narrow ladder. Free hand cradling the mask against his face, he hesitated.

“Take your time,” I said. I liked how he looked in his diving gear.

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He stepped out, legs in a deep stride, ready to execute the entry scissor kick as soon as he hit water. I can still see him there, as if I’d snapped a photo that caught him midair, muscled legs in that ready-to-go stride. A research diver, he’d done the entry many times.

He dropped and splashed into the cold water. His head disappeared. Normally, right after the closing kick the diver pops back up.

I sucked air. *Where is he? Something’s wrong.*

Leaning out, I stared at the green-blue surface. *Where is he? Get the kayak!* But then, his body flashed through the water. *No time for the kayak.* He was kicking, but on his side and moving parallel to the surface. Above his flippers the sea churned to a froth. *Why’s his head underwater?* He was swimming away from the boat. He hadn’t taken a breath.

“Jim! Jim!” I shouted as if my voice might transmit from air into water, as if it might defy physics and puncture that surface. *What’s going on?*

Fifteen feet from the stern, he lurched sideways breaking free, like a dolphin’s half-breach. I saw his mouth open, gasping. *Did he get air?* It was as if some external force had grabbed him—as if a demon had speared him from below and was drowning him by dragging him round and round inches below the surface. For a second, his face—submerged—flashed into view. I glimpsed the terror. *Did his snorkel clear? I didn’t hear him breathe.*

Glen appeared. “What’s going on?” he asked, alarmed.

The scene and my expression answered. Our eyes met and I saw my son knew what I knew: Jim’s body was being shoved in circles. Then by chance, it seemed, the spiral aimed toward the stern.

*Get his head out of the water! Shit. I’m not wearing my life jacket. He’ll pull me under.*  
*No time.* I scrambled over the rail and down the ladder. *He’s coming this way.* I grabbed the top

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rung with my stronger arm, leaned out, knees bent tight, feet on the bottom step. I crouched, angled over the water. Ready. *Grab him.*

Every edge of his 180-pound body was smoothed with black neoprene—no handholds.

*Don't miss!*

His arms flew about, fighting for life. His strong legs kicked and kicked—driving him away from air.

*Get his head out. Don't let him pull you in.*

My grip on the rung above was all that would keep us from possible drowning. Cold water lapped my feet. *Here he comes. Lean farther. Brace for the strike.*

Glen's small hands encircled my wrist above. His grip tightened.

Jim lurched toward the stern. I aimed for the black blur. *Now!* My strike hit his shoulder. I clutched a fistful of neoprene and pulled the narrow fold. My grab slowed the circling, but his kicking continued. I tensed my arm, bicep straining. His eyes jerked, terrified.

*He doesn't see me!*

The next kick ripped the slick neoprene from my hand. *No!* His body was yanked back underwater, into the same hard circling. Away. *Did he breathe when I had him?*

“Damn it!” I screamed. *What if he doesn't come back?*

“Jim! *Jim!*” Our son's shouts joined mine. “*JIM! JIM!*”

He was circling back.

“Get him!” Glen yelled.

I braced as he thrashed toward the stern.

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*Aim for the curve at his neck.* I struck out, cuffing him with all my force. I pulled. His head came up. This time, my hand clutched more neoprene. He looked confused—eyes unfocused. He gasped.

“*Jim!* It’s me! I have you!” I shouted. “I have you!”

His legs fought me. My arm quivered. *Do not let go!*

“Glen! Throw me the floating line!”

The line appeared.

*Tie it around his chest. Secure him.* I instantly realized my idea wouldn’t work. Suspended one-armed over the ocean, I couldn’t loop the line without releasing him. *Do not let go.* I looked up at Glen. “Get my life jacket. Get yours.”

Face inches from Jim’s, I spoke firmly, “Jim! I’ve got you.”

He shook his head, inhaled and coughed. “I’m-I’m okay.” His kicking slowed, then stopped. Deep inhale, exhale. “I’m okay.”

I did not believe him. I pulled him closer, bicep trembling. “Hook your arm on the ladder,” I commanded.

He brought his arm up through a low rung, like he was in a trance. His chest rose and fell. His eyes jittered. “I’m okay.”

“Can you hold on while we put a line around you?” I asked.

He stared ahead. “Yeah.”

I loosened my fist, but waited several seconds, not trusting his words. I climbed the ladder, arms shaking.

Glen held my vest open. “Put this on.”

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I zipped it on and hurried back down. After threading the yellow line under his arms and around his chest I passed the tail up. Glen tied a bowline, then snugged the end to the cleat.

I joined Glen on deck. Jim dangled by his arm through the rung.

“We need to let the ladder down,” Glen said. The ladder hinged where Jim’s arm was crooked.

“Jim” I asked. “Can you take your arm out, while Glen drops the ladder?”

He nodded.

I pulled the yellow tether taut while Glen released the bottom half of the steps.

“Hand us your flippers,” I said.

He tugged off a black flipper and lifted it to his son, then raised the other. As he climbed, I took up slack. He lurched onto the deck. We grabbed and held him.

“My God. What happened?” I said.

He shook his head. “I-I can’t tell you now. It was awful.”

When we let go, Jim staggered to the cockpit and lay down on his back, forearm over his eyes. I sat by his head, hand on his shoulder.

Glen was next to me. “What was that all about?”

Jim shook his head, but didn’t answer. After a few minutes he said, “I’ve got to get out of this suit.”

Glen and I helped extract him from the hooded top and Farmer Johns. While he soaped up and hosed off in the cockpit, his expression remained distant.

“Can you tell us what happened?” I asked.

“Not-not now. I need to rest.” Towel around his middle, he made his way to the aft cabin.

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Three hours later, I touched Jim’s arm. “Would you like some lunch?” He pulled me on top of him. We held on to each other.

“Holy shit,” he said.

I stroked his hair. “If you want to tell me, Glen’s napping.” I slid into the curve of his arm.

“I remember doing my weight belt check, then grabbing the halyard to balance. Lifting my flippers over the rail was hard, but I kept thinking, one leap and I’m free. Screw this walking crap. In the water, my legs won’t have to be coordinated. When I hit water, I knew something was wrong. I did the scissor kick, expecting the euphoria of weightlessness. Instead, some alarm went off. I thought maybe I’d hit my head or gotten hung up in a fishing line—“

“Were you?”

“No. That wasn’t it. As soon as I went under—” He winced as if in pain. “I didn’t know where the top was. I told myself, ‘Go to the surface!’ I wasn’t very deep, but I could *not* find it.”

“Oh Jesus.”

“First thing you learn in scuba, if you get disoriented: follow your bubbles. But I-I’d knocked off my mask. I couldn’t see. I started kicking for the surface. My right hand grabbed at the metal flap of my weight belt. It dropped off. That’s my training. Then, I broke the surface. But-but, oh my God!” His face contorted as though he were reliving a nightmare. “Our sixty-foot mast was horizontal. The ocean was friggin’ vertical.”

“What?”

“I panicked. I couldn’t tell what was real. For a second I thought, ‘Oh I get it. This is a nightmare.’ But I knew I was in trouble. My brain wasn’t working. Everything I learned about following bubbles—not possible. ‘Swim hard!’ I told myself. That’s what I did. I kicked.”



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I closed my eyes and bit my lip.

“I don’t remember being scared, just thinking, ‘Swim hard! The plane’s going down. Holy shit. The plane’s crashing.’”

I reached for his hand. “Do you remember needing to breathe?”

“I don’t. I swam as hard as I could. If I’d had the wherewithal, I could’ve simply relaxed. Without the weight belt I was buoyant. I knew the surface wasn’t vertical. But logic was gone.”

He did not have any recollection of aiming himself toward us.

“I remember you grabbing me. Oh my God. Thank God.”

“I grabbed you *twice*,” I said, trembling. “You couldn’t see me. You scared me so bad.” I buried my face in his T-shirt and cried.