

Afternoon Sail

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by J. D. Brumbaugh

Tom Cottrell smiled into the teeth of the fresh breeze blowing across the Pacific. The wind filled the sails of his 33 footer and plastered his yellow, nylon windbreaker to his chest. It crinkled the tops of the smooth swells so the sun glistened off the multi-faceted surface of the water and threw up zillions of pencil points of light. His Bausch and Lomb sunglasses took the brunt of the visual assault but left him mesmerized in a relaxed euphoria. The office belonged to a different world and he was glad he'd taken the afternoon off. Sometimes he just needed to get away -- alone.

He was miles out on the glistening, empty sea. Only the swish of the bow wave as Seabreez cut through the swells and the gurgle and splash of the wake interrupted the natural panorama of wind, sea and sky.

While his mind wandered, Tom carefully cleaned his expensive clay-bowled pipe, deftly caressing the hollow with the silver tool his wife had given him last Christmas. Wrapped in the warm luxury of solitude he scanned the ever widening expanse of sea. Finished with the pipe, he slipped the pipe tool into his pants pocket and absent-mindedly returned the pipe to its place in the rack inside the cabin. He steered steadily seaward, headed nowhere, just

pleased with himself and content with the world.

It was then he noticed it. A growing black speck, bow up, coming at incredible speed; on a direct line for him. At first Tom wondered why a powerboat would single him out on such a beautiful day. Coincidence, he thought. But why was such a small, overpowered boat, coming in from the open sea. Usually, they stuck much closer to shore.

Tom watched, half interested, as the black dot grew into a distinct hull. The deep V bit into the water and threw a white spray wall to either side. She was painted midnight black and carried no registration numbers. The boat bore down relentlessly, something sinister made Tom uneasy.

More concerned now, Tom changed course to diverge from the ominous newcomer. Already it had covered half the distance from the horizon, and Tom watched more intent now, his sails hardened down to hold the force of the wind. Without faltering the black V shape turned to meet Tom full on.

It could be a prank, but the silhouette was unfamiliar. And nobody Tom knew would paint their boat black. The looming apparition was only a couple of miles away now and closing fast. Tom could make out a lone figure standing in the cockpit, but at this distance it was just a black outline in a black boat. An indistinguishable pennant snapped at the stern light.

Tom wasted no more time. He heeled Seabreez over hard, the sails luffed, then the boom swung and the mains cracked full. Instinctively Tom hardened down the jib sheet and felt the surge of power as the wind took hold again. Back over his shoulder came the low rumble of straining engines forcing his pursuer ahead faster. Tom aimed for the Golden Gate, but he knew he'd be

caught miles from land. He thought of his radio, but discarded the idea. What could he say?

The pounding engines and the crash of the closing boat made Tom glance back over his shoulder. Just as he did a roaring, black specter hurtled past. The wake from the ponderous machine swept over Seabreez's gunwale and rushed across the cockpit, throwing Tom sideways; his hand slipped from the tiller as he slammed against the rail. The sailboat heeled over dangerously, swung into the wind and coasted gently, the wind spilling from her sails.

The mysterious tormentor dashed around Seabreez in a tight circle, and another crashing wake slammed her broadside before Tom could regain the tiller. Seabreez drifted on the rolling swells, out of control. A grappling hook arced smoothly into the main, thrown from the black ship. One razor sharp point ripped through the tough sail cloth and hung the three pronged weapon poised for a moment. Engines raced and the heaving line on the hook went taut. The ripping of tortured sail cloth sent a shiver through Tom Cottrell's spine. This was no prank!

Tom had a moment while the stranger disentangled his throwing line from the shreds of cloth clinging to it. Heavily, Tom struggled to get up from the deck where he'd been thrown, his right shoulder hurt and he could only raise it about halfway. Tom grabbed the free swinging tiller and yanked it to bring Seabreez around to fill the luffing sails. As he cursed her slow reaction, he glared over at the black boat standing to off the starboard beam. What he saw made his blood run cold.

The Jolly Roger stood straight out from the stern in the stiff breeze! And

the helmsman wore a coal black cloak with the hood drawn up over his head, even in this warm weather, so his face was invisible. Black breeches stuck down below the flapping corners of the cloak and clung to his stick-like legs. Kidnap, thought Tom.

By now the oddly dressed driver was swinging the grappling hook, eyeing the jib. Seabreez was picking up speed. Only a piece of the main still held, but the jib was pulling her steadily. At least Tom had steering. He watched the cast of the hook, and timed his turn so it splashed harmlessly into the ocean. Calmly the lone pirate recoiled the line and set about tossing the hook again. Again Tom dodged it nicely and the hook fell into the blue-green water. A third jibe and the hook sank beneath the waves again.

Now, for some reason, the menacing vessel pulled away, throttled back and matched Seabreez's steady progress through the water. Tom lashed the tiller and ducked into the cabin. He snapped on the radio and thumbed the mike.

"S. O. S. -- S. O. S. This is Seabreez, this is Seabreez; Seventeen miles WSW of Golden Gate; under attack by pirates."

He snapped off the mike and listened. Heavy static screeched back at him. Interminable noise drowned everything. "S. O. S," he screamed again, hysteria clutching his vocal chords. "Seabreez, seventeen miles WSW of San Francisco. Somebody answer." The static crackled back ever louder. He tossed the microphone on the counter.

Back up on deck, he scanned the ocean for any sign of help. Nothing! The sea glittered and gleamed, empty as a desert. He turned his attention to the

shadowing vessel, and amazingly, the hooded figure pointed toward Tom, arm outstretched, forefinger extended. The forefinger gleamed white in the brilliant sunshine. Then the finger shook up and down in the universal gesture, "no-no."

Tom looked around again, wild-eyed. The open ocean rolled magnetic. What? He looked again. He was running back out to sea! Somehow dodging the grappling hook he'd turned all the way around. Instantly, Tom pulled on the tiller and got set to man the sheets. To starboard, the deep throated roar rose a notch.

Before Seabreez had turned 10 degrees, the hook sank into the jib and ripped away hunks of cloth. Tatters streamed behind in the water, leaving the boat in irons as she lost way. Now Tom was helpless to maneuver as the sharp points ripped away the rest of the main.

Now what? Kidnap? Or just destructive vandalism? Maybe the worst was over, the black boat would probably head back wherever it came from and leave him at the mercy of wind and wave. Actually, the worst was coming.

Now the sailboat was entirely helpless, and the dark bullet shot for her at reckless speed. At the last minute, she cut away and the faceless pilot looped a small spherical object high into the air. The wake slammed into Seabreez abeam, tossing her from side to side, just as the projectile exploded against the mast, splintering the heavy aluminum like a toothpick. Fragments hurtled down at Tom and he ducked to avoid a deadly hunk of jagged metal. Several smaller chunks clipped him on the forehead and a trickle of blood oozed out near his receding hairline. The sudden pitch threw Tom against

the gunwale and his already bruised shoulder took another jolt.

"Damn," he spit under his breath, and tried to regain his feet. Seabreez lurched under the battering force of another swirling wake. The sound of straining engines overpowered Tom and the smell of hot exhaust mingled with the smell of his own blood. Pulling himself up by the rail, Tom peered at the stern of the black boat. "Reaper!"

"What do you want?" screamed Tom at the receding frothy wake.

At the helm, the hooded dark figure turned slowly to look back over his shoulder at the crumpled man in the battered sailboat. A grim, white smile cracked a fleshless face and empty eye sockets glared with an unholy fire. Tom could not control the animal scream that escaped his lips; the hood contained only a skull. The Reaper pulled away, only to circle back, his deadly job not yet complete.

Tom looked around him, desperate now. The mast was shattered; the boom had fallen onto the deck. There were no sails left on her, even the remains of the jib lay in a pile on the foredeck. Tom looked into the cabin again, chunks of the mast had punctured the overhead bulkhead and rained destruction on the radio. It was useless.

The roaring throb of the Reaper's engines grew as it raced back toward him. Tom could only manage to hold on as the boat shot broadside past him, another explosive missile bounced off the foredeck and blew up before it could hop over the side. Huge chunks of fiberglass careened out over the waves and a gapping hole stared at Tom from the fore cabin. The skeletal pilot hissed with delight as he flashed past.

Tom looked on in shock as the Reaper returned for another pass. This time the grenade exploded just above the waterline at the stern, blowing away the rudder and leaving a hole that gushed water every time the boat rode down over a swell. Seabreez was in danger of foundering. Tom felt blood seeping down his cheeks, mixed with the sweat that fear forced from his pores. Tears rimmed his lower eyelids and his knuckles turned white where he gripped the railing.

He heard the pitch of those horrible engines change and he knew Reaper had turned for another run. He heard the slosh as water gushed through the hole at the stern.' It wouldn't be long before the boat sank if he didn't get the pumps running. The pumps! He clung to that thought as the one sane thing left in his world. Start the pumps, he whispered to himself, forcing his legs to bring him erect. He ignored the rising roar of onrushing engines, and urged his legs down the stairwell into the cabin.

The heavy crash of the wake, the sudden rush of ocean surging into Seabreez followed by a sharp boom marked the Reaper's next pass. Still, steadfastly, Tom clung to that one idea -- start the pumps. Braced against the countertop Tom leaned over carefully and flipped the switch for the bilge pumps. The reassuring hum put a small piece of reality back into place in his bewildered mind. Determination lined his forehead as he climbed back up to look for the death ship.

Off to starboard, the black vessel was spinning in a tight turn, aimed at another mad dash past Seabreez. Desperately Tom looked around. The sea remained an empty, friendless mistress. Shattered wreckage littered the deck;

chunks of fiberglass and pieces of mast and rigging. The long topmost part of the mast lay amid a tangle of cable on top of the cabin. It looked like a lance left by some forgotten Arthurian hero. Tom glanced at the onrushing boat. Seabreez rocked calmly side-to-side.

Steadying himself for the next onslaught, Tom leaned into the cabin with his knees braced against the hatchway. Deftly he grabbed the metal toolbox from the counter and placed it on the cockpit deck. The hum of engines was now a heavy drone. He snapped open both clasps and fished out the pair of wire cutters. Without looking up, afraid he'd lose his nerve, Tom leaped atop the cabin combing and snipped the first stay from the broken mast. The roar of engines filled his ears. He clipped the next two and noticed the fourth had been cut by the explosions. Now he reached down and caught up the heavy length with both hands.

The black boat bore down on Seabreez, and Tom knew this would be the final assault. Reaper was set to ram. The ugly vision filled Tom's view, there was no more time to think, only time to react and he heaved the mast end at the cursed shape.

Reaper and mast and water all met simultaneously. At her speed, it was as if the broken shaft of aluminum was set in concrete. The mast point pierced the hull like tissue paper and stabbed straight into the gas tank, splitting it open. A second later and the engine heat flashed the gasoline into an explosion that shattered the onrushing boat 30 feet from Seabreez. Burning shrapnel from Reaper's hull crashed into the wallowing sailboat. The concussion knocked Tom off the cabin roof, but he managed to grab the rail before he slid over the

side. Reaper had been stopped, just as the leaping tiger is impaled by the planted spear.

Gasping for breath, Tom scrambled back to the cockpit and settled himself for a moment, surveying the situation, wondering what his next move should be. Behind him, a black cloaked figure swam frog-style under the green surface of the Pacific. It angled straight toward Seabreez, with a singular purpose. Tom couldn't have seen it if he had looked; the black shape stayed far enough below the glittering surface to disguise his passage.

Tom rose slowly to his knees, one hand daubing the blood that oozed from his battered forehead. A cloud of black smoke swirled away in the strong breeze. The sea winked back at him with thousands of glittering eyes, and horizon to horizon was an unmarred line of swells. Somehow, he'd have to get help. The radio was smashed and useless. He had a flare gun on board somewhere, but who thought he'd ever need it. He'd check the toolbox. He peeked into the open box and started picking out tools and laying them on deck. The waves were too gentle to slide things around.

Nothing in the top section and Tom lifted out the tray and set it aside. He sat back and pulled the toolbox up between his legs. The rattle of the tools as he shuffled them around completely covered the rattle of dry bones scratching their way up the side of Seabreez to catch hold of the rail. Tom's head bent to peer into the box. A hand of bleached white wrapped over the top rail and began to pull the skeletal thing up and into the boat. Tom slid several wrenches to one side and picked up the flare gun. Then he scooped up one of the long unused rounds and dropped it into the chamber; the gun clicked shut.

Black holes-for-eyes peered down at Tom from over the edge of the rail. The menacing leer of gumless teeth appeared whiter when contrasted with the black hood. Slowly the face dropped back below the level of the gunwale and waited, only the white fingers still gripped the edge.

Tom stood up and scanned the sea aft of Seabreez. It seemed an impossible chance, but maybe someone at the Coast Guard station would see the flare. Without feeling very optimistic, Tom pointed the gun skyward and squeezed the trigger. There was a gentle thud and the smoke trail rushed toward the clouds to burst in a brilliant ball against the afternoon sky.

Tom turned and his eyes met the piercing black sockets of the Reaper's pilot. Tom froze, the empty flare gun hung limply in his right hand. They stared at each other for long minutes; the flare burned out and its ashes fell into the cool sea. Tom looked at the tool box squatting between them. He knew he couldn't reach it, let alone get another flare. There was no choice, so he waited, hoping a boat was even now leaving to answer his flare.

Slowly the dead thing crouched, imperceptibly gathering itself for a leap. The dead fingers tensed into hooked claws and the eyes burned with an inner death fire.

"What do you want?" Tom said to break the hypnotic effect on his mind. He shifted his feet, anticipating the lunge, trying to remember what he'd done as a high school halfback.

A cold, distant hiss escaped through lipless jaws, filtered through a vast cosmos. It chilled Tom.

Tom took a half step backward and repositioned his feet. "Why me?"

Mentally he prepared to spring as he spoke, and he hoped his body could remember.

The harsh hiss again, like escaping steam, and the sinister figure leaped like a striking snake.

Tom dodged, but his reflexes were too slow and the creature caught him a glancing blow in the ribs. Tom flew sideways into the cockpit and rolled heavily against the toolbox. The skeleton slid off and rolled to a stop near the shattered tiller. Immediately it sprang back to its feet and rushed Tom again. Talon-like fingers slashed the air, trying to hook into Tom's battered flesh. Instinctively Tom grabbed the half empty tool tray with his left hand and threw it in the face of his attacker. Tools flew in every direction and the shotgun effect scored hits with assorted projectiles. The lunge spent itself short and the creature skidded to a halt on the deck several feet from Tom.

Before it could get up and charge again, Tom snatched a flare from the bottom of the tool box and leaped on top of the cabin. It scrambled to its feet as Tom snapped open the breech and dropped in the shell. It launched itself headlong at Tom, grinning its evil, kill-crazed smile, hands intent on ripping Tom to shreds. Coolly, Tom aimed the pistol at the charging monster and squeezed the trigger. Boom. The hot projectile slammed into the rushing madness. For a second, the thing slowed; then came ahead unfazed.

The hurtling weight of it slammed into Tom, smashing him backward. A flurry of slashing claws tore into his chest and back as the two of them went sprawling on the foredeck. The flare gun flew from Tom's hand and slipped over the side with a soft splash. Fire shot through Tom's battered and bloody

body, there was nothing now to save him. Still he struggled on, wrestling with every ounce of his fading strength. Somehow, his mind, wracked with pain and fear, guided his right hand to his pants pocket, where his fingers found the silver pipe tool; his only weapon. Driven by desperation, he clenched it in a death gripe and drove the pointed scrapping end into the mid-section of his enemy.

A whoosh of air rushed out with the putrid smell of centuries old death. The hooded cape and pants fell from Tom like lifeless laundry. Suddenly, Tom was alone on the wreckage that had been Seabreez.

Exhausted, he lay still on the gently swaying cabin for a long time. Eventually, he was roused by the oncoming sound of powerful engines, and the nightmare returned. He rolled over to face the onslaught, only to see the proud prow of the Coast Guard cutter slicing smoothly toward him. He wondered what he was going to tell them, but it really didn't seem important.