

DENNY HOLLAND

Etude 6, 2019
Oil on panel, 12 x 12 in



COURTESY THE STUDIO SHOP GALLERY

DEBORAH HANSEN

Herm and Emma's Thirteenth Summer

All the sails hung flaccid, the energy stifled by the sweltering air. With the mainsheet out for a downwind run, occasionally the boom swung over the cockpit. Emma and Herm's agitation increased when the boom and its tangle of ropes moved from starboard to port and back again. This irritating movement of the boom served to remind them of their motionlessness. Herm tightened his grip on the wheel. Emma focused on his freckled fingers, his pudgy white fingers covered with sun-bleached baby-fine hair. His lapis lazuli ring, the ring Emma had told him was garish to begin with and totally inappropriate for wearing on the boat, flashed deep blue across Emma's eyes. Her face tightened in a moue.

(Please don't think that Emma and Herm are stuck out in the middle of the sea, for they are on their absolutely exquisite boat, which at the present—the present being the time the action takes place in the above scene—and for that matter the better part of a long, hot, boring morning, is located about one hundred yards from the entrance to Spa Creek in Annapolis, Maryland, USA. Our couple feels a bit like they are flailing somewhere in the doldrums near latitude 0° because of the heat and windless condition and because they have lost sight of the other boats due to the dense haze and smog and the fact that they have drifted off course a bit and are actually in very shallow water with, unbeknownst to them, their keel hanging precariously close to being wedged into the sand. Being experienced sailors of the Chesapeake Bay, they should know that not spotting another boat, even considering the thick haze, is an indication that there is something amiss, for the waters are always crowded on a summer Saturday regardless of the weather; however, the ennui that envelops both of our characters whenever the winds die has clouded their vision. But don't worry because luck is with them and they are not going to plough into anything, nor will they run aground; instead, they will inch on a northerly course, being pushed gently by a slight underset, until, by providence, they emerge from the shallow shores—safely.)

"It's hard to imagine that life can be sustained by such visible air. It hurts my lungs," Emma said.

Herm raised his watery gray eyes. "Oh god, Emma, don't start. Yes, it's hot. *I* know it's hot. *You* know it's hot. *God* knows it's hot on the Chesapeake in the middle of the summer. Even you must recall a couple of other summers."

Don't think that Emma and Herm are some sort of physical odd couple or that they were created to contrast each other for some metaphorical purpose—it's just the way they are.

"But the air is thick. Unusually thick. Look at it! I can't breathe."

The boom swung again and Herm exhaled in a short puff. Emma tied a rope to the handle of a bucket and lowered it overboard. There was no drag on it, allowing her to hoist the full bucket into the cockpit. She put both her bare feet in the water, one on top of the other. The water was warm and murky. She twisted her arm up and behind her back, unhooking her swimsuit top. She dropped the top near Herm's feet. She trickled water over her head and behind her ears. Her thin tanned shoulders hunched toward the sky as she held her wet palms under her arms.

"Oh god, how things work out," Emma commented.

"Work out? Emma it was hazy when we started out this morning." Herm's eyes were becoming bloodshot from staring so intently into the thick haze, searching for any sign of trouble.

"I wasn't talking about this morning . . . or today." Emma continued to drip the water over her head. Her hands had the grace of a ballerina's.

"What were you talking about? Is this going to be another guessing game? Because I'm not in the mood."

"Never mind. I wasn't necessarily talking to you." Emma looked away.

"Sure, Emma, and who were you talking to? Who else would put up with your blanket statements? What exact meaning am I to extrapolate from this?" Herm's jaw was tight. He pursed his lips.

"It's no big deal. Calm down . . . I was just thinking . . . Do you remember just after we were married and we had that glorious lawn party? That was the year we had all the spring rain and everything was green and in bloom, remember? And we ordered the striped lawn tent and they brought that pastel blue tent and it ended up looking great. Oh and the food . . ."

"Emma, I was there. I paid for it. I can remember it."

"Well for some reason, I don't know why, I was just thinking of Samantha Redding. She came up to me and said that we were the closest people she knew to sybarites."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"You know, people who devote their lives to luxury . . . well . . . and now . . . I'm sweating to death with my feet stuck in this goddamn bucket."

"Emma, we're sailing. People have been known to rough it when they sail."

(Don't get the wrong impression of this couple. In their minds, they try very hard to be pleasant, even loving to one another. And in public, each exercises the utmost care not to humiliate or embarrass the other. But it is extremely hot, maybe 103 degrees, and Herm, who is not verbalizing it, is concerned about the water depth; he knows he's off course because he has to weave the boat among many crab pots, which are found only near the shore; it is a real challenge because with no wind, the boat lacks maneuverability. And, of course, these tensions have a tendency to dredge up other problems: Emma is thinking that with all their money she shouldn't have to be sitting around sweating like a stuck pig, although she'd never use that expression to describe herself. And Herm is fed up with her complaining—actually he's been fed up for ten years—and he fears that, with the way the weather is shaping up, it's going to be a long, long weekend.

Now all of these problems could have been predicted, and some of them avoided, but they are both cursed with complicated cognitive processes that fail to let them control the trivial aspects of life in a simple, logical fashion. In

other words—they lack common sense. For instance, they always forget to tune in the marine forecast until they are out on the bay. And another really bothersome thing about this couple is that they both neglect things when they fall apart: burned-out headlights, torn screens, missing buttons, clogged toilets, chipped tile all remain in disrepair. It's not that they don't notice, it's that they usually sabotage their own management of these problems. Two summers ago, the pump that powered the water to the galley and head gave out. It wasn't a major problem; the water to the sink and to the toilet could be pumped manually. However, they were left with no shower. And because of lack of management skills, Herm simply adjusted his thinking—deciding the shower wasn't that necessary anyways; they were usually on the boat for only a weekend at a time and they could always rent a shower at a marina. And Emma, in her typical fashion, decided that *this* time things would be different; *she* was going to take the bull by the horns. And she felt proud of herself for calling the mechanic. But, then, she forgot to give him the key to the engine compartment and the appointment she made with him to rectify her initial mistake simply slipped her mind.)

"Come on, Emma, put your clothes back on and spare me the melodrama. Even if the shower worked, it'd be too hot for you to stand in the shower locker." Herm sat with his typical slumped posture. He crossed his legs. His large, bulky legs would not allow his bottom kneecap to catch the back of his other knee and soon his leg dropped from the crossed position, his deck shoe hitting the sole of the cockpit heavily.

"Please don't concern yourself that I'm probably getting some kind of amoebic dysentery just from sticking my feet in this godforsaken water." Emma twisted her personalized cartouche around its twenty-karat gold chain, a necklace she had felt was as garish as Herm's ring, but it was a gift from him and so she had an obligation to wear it. The necklace was very bright on her small thin naked body.

(Don't think that Emma and Herm are some sort of physical odd couple or that they were created to contrast each other for some metaphorical purpose—it's just the way they are. Emma is naturally small and because her physique lends itself to running, she has stayed in top form, her whole body being well toned and youthful except that

her small breasts have dropped a tad over the years, pulling the skin from her neck along the cords of her prominent neck muscles, and her thin legs have developed small blue spider veins just beneath the surface of her skin. And Herm, although without question much larger than she, isn't fat. He just has a burly build; it looks good on him and actually quite boyish. They're sort of the paradigm of the attractive middle-aged sporting couple.)

"Yes, I was just thinking that you'll probably get dysentery." Herm sort of ho-hummed.

"You're not even slightly concerned?"

"Well I would be, except that amoebas must be ingested to cause dysentery."

"Well . . . I still can't breathe."

"For chrissakes, Emma. It's our garden-variety inversion . . . typical summer weather."

Herm let go of the till and leaned back. "Emma, if you quit complaining, I'll do whatever you want. What'll it be?"

"First, I want you to admit that this weather is serious . . . and don't let go of the till. Christ, we can't see five feet in front of us."

"I was only trying to get your undivided attention." He focused intently again.

"Okay . . . you want to make me happy? Start the engine and let's motor up to Gibson Island . . . have some cocktails and dinner and take a shower." Her face loosened. Her eyes looked pleading.

"Ah, come on, Emma. That's not fair. We both decided to anchor tonight and watch the stars. You know how much I was hoping to get away. We haven't anchored all season." He leaned closer to her, making a little filip against her outer thigh.

"Ouch, that hurt. Why can't you be nice?"

"Just a love tap, my dear." He patted her knee.

"Well we're not going to see any stars tonight. We can't even see the sun today."

"We don't know how the night will turn out. Why don't we compromise? We can motor up the Chester River, stop at the Yachtsman Inn, get some soft-shell crabs and drinks, and then eat on the boat under the stars. What do you say?"

"What will we do if there are no stars out?" She glared at him.

"Watch a movie on your phone?"

"No way!"

“Okay . . . sorry . . . only kidding.” He patted her knee again. “We could tell each other stories.”

(Please bear with the story, this is not going to turn into *The Tidewater Tales*. But for all of you who began reading Barth’s novel and put it aside thinking it was prosaic or that it was just a rewrite of *Sabbatical* or for those of you who wondered how it was that a twenty-five-year-old could write a brilliant nihilistic work, *The Floating Opera*, and then at the age of fifty write little sailing stories—well you’ve probably never sailed on the Chesapeake, or maybe you don’t appreciate the function of storytelling, or perhaps you’ve never been able to recognize that John Barth is a lover. And what’s wrong with a lover? If these literary references mean nothing to you, it’s not important. Just stay with the story, it’s really very short.)

The fact that Herm is mentioning storytelling is a conciliatory gesture on his part. This is their thirteenth summer together and during these thirteen years of monogamy, they have sailed their boat, *Aria*, hundreds of times through these waters. Which relates to storytelling in that when the wind blows briskly and the boat travels at hull speed, Emma appears content, but with the thick haze of summer, she has bouts of severe imagination. Herm complains, saying she slips into lethargy and despair. But Emma protests, saying that during her bouts of daydreaming, she feels most alive and maybe if they would share in the daydreaming, they could share this feeling.)

“ . . . like boy scouts sitting around a campfire.”

“Oh god, Herm, you make everything sound so attractive and romantic.”

“I try.” He smiled at her, resting his chin on his hand. Once again the boom swung.

Emma sighed. “So how do you plan on telling these stories with your dearth of imagination, anyway? Am I to buoy up your meager tendencies?”

“Ha, ha, smarty. I’ll tell true stories and you won’t even know the difference.” He tipped his wide-brim hat from his brow, exposing his strawberry hair.

“Well, let’s do it. Let’s head for the Chester.”

Herm cranked the engine and looked at the chart, while Emma roller furled the jib and dropped the main. They motored past the mouth of the Severn.

“Maybe you’d like to put your clothes on before we get into the shipping lane,” Herm said.

“I don’t see why, another boat would have to be right on top of us to see anything in this thick air.” As Emma spoke a boat emerged from the haze and crossed in front of their bow. They cut to port.

“How’d you arrange that? You’ll do anything to get me to put my clothes on,” Emma said as she picked up her swimsuit. “How are we going to make it under the bridge? We’ll never see it.”

“The foghorns will be on. We’ll just stay alert.”

“Why is it you always become calm when jeopardizing my life?”

Passing under the Bay Bridge, their diesel engine echoed against the enormous pilings. Almost as if they had come from a forest to the heart of Manhattan, the steel girders raised above them through a hole in the haze and tires screeched on iron. Herm turned the boat to starboard, heading for the Chester River. The noise and the bridge disappeared behind them, swallowed by the smog. Emma fell quiet.

“I was wrong, Emma. I think your complaining is easier to take than your zombie routine. Say something, anything.”

“I’m dying of heat stroke. I really can’t breathe. And we could be at the Gibson Island Yacht Club enjoying a cold drink in air-conditioning. How’s that for complaining?”

“It’s irritating.”

“Okay, how’s this for irritating? We could have our dinner ready, waiting for us to pick up, if only our VHF was working, but along with everything else . . .”

“You know . . . I really believed we’d have a good evening, but maybe we should settle for being civil.”

“Civil! Bitching isn’t civil? What about sarcasm?” Emma asked.

“We could just say nice things.”

“Or say nothing?”

“Force ourselves to be nice.”

“Okay, for a while,” she said unconvincingly.

They pulled up to the dock at Yachtsman Inn just after 6:00 p.m. People were milling about in front of the restaurant with drinks in hand. The women wore backless sundresses and the men colorful polo shirts. Everyone looked bright from sun and drinks. Emma had a new strapless sundress hanging in the locker and she longed to put it on and join the crowd, but she had made her promise.

She stayed behind, sitting in the cockpit still wearing her swimsuit, as Herm, throwing on a shirt and packing his wallet in his back pocket, left to get the food. Over an hour later, he returned with a grease-soaked paper bag, a six-pack of Dos Equis, one of Beck’s, and two frozen strawberry daiquiris. Emma said nothing as they cast off and headed farther up the Chester River, with the sun falling fast to the horizon behind them.

“Come on, Emma, don’t ruin the night. We have food and drinks and the sky’s clearing . . . what more do you want?”

Emma shrugged and swatted a mosquito from her forearm.

(At this point Emma is silent because she’s thinking of a story she wants to tell Herm. The story is about the previous owner of *Aria*. They bought the boat used from Sparkman and Stephens in New York and they never knew the history of its ownership. Emma has always wondered about the name. During one of their sails, she dreamed up this handsome baritone who had sung the Dutchman in Wagner’s *Flying Dutchman*. The story went like this: The baritone had a very short solo career, retiring from center stage after his first engagement as the Dutchman. He had been a sailor for years, so he became intimately involved in the story. As the season progressed, his performances deteriorated. By his final night, he could barely be heard over the prompter. Emma saw this struggling man with tears in his eyes as he tried to recall his lines. He died shortly after his retirement, calling for Senta, the heroine of the opera, on his deathbed.)

Except for the glorious vision Emma had of the baritone, it never was a very interesting story. However, Emma feels that the story would mean something to Herm. If only she could tell it right, it would be her conciliatory move. She wishes she had the wonderful oral gift of the Sagamores, the couple in *The Tidewater Tales*. But all her daydreams work so much better in her mind than in the telling. And the more she thinks of it, the more she knows that the message will be lost. She wants to talk about husbands and wives sacrificing for each other, but everything strays to a different tangent.)

“Why must I always kowtow to your moods?” he asks.

“I see it in reverse.”

“How can you?”

During one of their sails, she dreamed up this handsome baritone who had sung the Dutchman in Wagner’s Flying Dutchman. The story went like this: The baritone had a very short solo career, retiring from center stage after his first engagement as the Dutchman.

“That’s the way it works with couples.”

“Then how can anything ever work?”

“It doesn’t. Sacrifice is resignation.”

Aria sailed into a deserted anchorage up Southeast Creek. Herm set the anchor. Emma sat with her knees up to her chest. Herm brought the portable table up and set the lantern out, but as the sun disappeared in a sort of burst of deep red, the mosquitoes became unbearable. Emma finally gave Herm a hand and they moved their feast down below. They put the screens in the companionway and turned the fan on, but it was still hot.

Emma took one of her frozen drinks from the icebox and held it to her forehead. “How are we going to watch the stars from here?”

"Well, we don't have a panoramic view, but we can see some stars through the screen . . . look . . . even the haze is clearing."

"Whoopee, for this I could have stayed home."

"I didn't order the mosquitoes, Emma. And at least we don't have all the city lights." Herm opened the grease-soaked bag and brought out two large sandwiches. The little legs of the soft-shelled crabs were sticking out from both sides of the bread.

"Look at the legs . . . I don't think I can eat them." Emma tightened her face.

"Well you have to now . . . You've already broken the heart of the crab's husband." Herm was talking with his mouth full. He was expressive with his gestures, putting a hand over his heart and making a lovesick face.

"So how did I break a crab's heart?"

"Well . . . you've noticed that when the crabs double, the male will hold his mate for a couple of days, right? Do you know why?"

"Clue me in." Emma pushed her sandwich around on the plate.

"The male protects the female when she's shedding her shell. He holds on for dear life . . . hers. You see, when the crabbers get these soft-shell crabs, they always pull them from the clutching male . . . and since your crab is dead, you've already broken a heart. So just eat your sandwich."

"That's horrible."

"It's true, sweetheart . . . absolutely true."

"Well I'm not eating mine."

"Give it to me . . . I'll eat it."

Emma finished her drink with a slurp and took a beer from the icebox. "Okay, I'm ready for a story."

"Okay. There was this couple. I don't know names, but they were sailing from the Chesapeake to Bermuda. And of course they had to use celestial navigation to guide them. It was really cloudy during their first couple of days out and the moon was new and hard to shoot, so they were relying on Betelgeuse to guide them. But then on the third night, the star disappeared, its center of gravity could no longer hold it together. And they sailed around . . . lost forever."

"That's it?"

"Yup. That's it."

"Even for you that's bad."

"I know, but what I really wanted to tell you is far more interesting." Herm took the last bite of Emma's sandwich. He gathered the paper wrappings and three empty beer cans and dropped them in the garbage.

"So why didn't you just tell me the interesting stuff?"

Herm reached into the icebox.

"Oh, get my other daiquiri while you're in there." Emma stretched out on the cushion and took off the cap she'd been wearing all day. Her hair was in a French braid and she started to untwist it.

Herm handed her the drink and pulled his shirt off. He looked out of the screen, checking a light on the shore to make sure the anchor was holding. He opened his beer.

Lighting the amber patio candle, he set it on the table. He reached up and turned off the light. He sat across from Emma—the table between them with the candle flickering. He leaned over the candle, which created harsh shadows on his face. "The reason I didn't tell you the interesting stuff is because it's true and you, my dear, didn't want to hear the truth."

"You've made your point." Her untwisted hair was a wavy mass of brown and gray falling to her pointed bare shoulders. She looked intensely thin in the candle light. "Go ahead, tell me."

"You see." He reached across and held her hands. "If we had no mosquitoes, my dear, we could sit on the deck and I'd point out the constellation Leo . . . because there's this star in Leo that's losing it. Its center of gravity has let go and its gases are just bubbling out. Mysterious, huh?"

"That's it?" Emma was staring at Herm's ring and feeling an unusual headiness.

"Actually I led you on . . . It's not that unusual." He dropped her hands. He laid his hands flat on the table. Emma continued to stare at his ring. "But now astronomers have found that the star seems to be reconstituting itself. It's very similar to our sun, so maybe it says something about . . . oh I don't know, forget it. It's hot in here. I'm going to fight the mosquitoes and sit up top."

Emma sat in the cabin alone. Maybe it was the alcohol, for she felt an uneasy sense of despair over the star burning out.

Herm called to her, "The breeze has picked up and the mosquitoes seem to be gone. Do you want to come up?"

She forced herself—as if waking from a dream. They sat on the bow. Only a single light shone on shore. The red and green buoy lights flashed from the mouth of the creek. The night was moonless; the stars covered the heavens. Emma sat next to Herm, putting her shoulder against his back.

"Did you see that shooting star?" Herm pointed up.

"Yeah, what a night. The air has turned to lightness. I can breathe."

Their breathing synchronized. And for one split moment, the two of them had the exact same experience, the identical scene shared in two separate minds, meshed more purely than the right and left of the same brain: The image of a boat heeled at thirty degrees, leaning toward an inky, cobalt sea. A backdrop of sheer cliffs dotted with white villas and windmills with sails turning. The two of them alone, smiling at one another. The sea glowing with phosphorus, the deck and sails bathed in the same glow.

(Okay, you think we must need to get out of this story by any means and that this scenario is really stretching it. And what the hell is this supposed to be, some kind of dream? Well it's in here because that's the way it happened. You want to know how many times people experience the exact same thing? Never, *nunca*. But this is the point—thirteen years together and they must have a shared moment. And this is how it happened, looking out at the heavens on a clear night following a murky day on August 11 when the earth passes through the Perseid meteor shower, allowing them both to see more shooting stars in one night than they have seen in a lifetime. The boat swings the range of the anchor scope and moves with the undulation of the river. And our couple has spent thirteen years getting to know everything they can't tolerate about one another, sort of perfecting hatred, yet they remain mates. Why? Why? It's one moment, the one-in-a million moment, that our couple will never talk about, never mention . . . a core of gravity that can inexplicably reconstitute.)

Deborah Hansen fancied herself a writer over twenty years ago. She wrote for small publications, was part of a writing group, and completed a novel for her master's thesis. This writing abruptly ended when she got a full-time job, a boyfriend, and a passion for running long-distance. So it was quite a surprise when her short story "Herm and Emma's Thirteenth Summer" was accepted for publication in *Catamaran Literary Reader*.