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Anna B's Owner

by Judith Mercado

"I hear your brother's living on a boat in the Florida Keys."

I stared at this childhood friend, in town for a short visit, who had no idea what he had just done. Finally, I heard myself say, "Really? Where in the Florida Keys?"

"I don't know where exactly." He squinted. "It's not Key West or I think I'd remember. Not Key Largo either . . ."

Please don't remember, Bob.

I worked at keeping my face placid. If Bob thought my interest was trivial, he might not try so hard to remember, and there was still hope for my ordered life.

"Marathon," he said finally. "That's it. That's where he is."

I smiled stiffly. Marathon. A tangible destination that made my brother come alive again.

It had been six years since I heard one of those bits and pieces about my peripatetic brother Dan that occasionally came my way. Like how he went out to New Mexico and ran a trailer park outside Chimayó for a while. Another time, someone said he was tending a gas station in Amarillo. No one ever talked about his photography, whose artistry had once been so promising. No one mentioned anything about promise at all.

I didn't ask about it now. I had caught my second wind and regained some of the serenity I spent twenty-one years cultivating. And I hoped my face didn't reveal that other question festering like an unhealed sore—has he forgiven me?

I doubted it.

I thanked Bob and headed down the street, feeling lighter somehow, which was baffling until I realized I was not avoiding the faces of tall, slender men in their sixties. As soon as I realized that, I lost my lightness, having succumbed to the wearying memory of the humble, but ultimately selfish voice that used to wake me up at two in the morning, pleading for rescue.

Once home, I opened my front door without first glancing up and down the street. I had always wondered whether even here, where I hid after our mother died, Dan could track me down. I didn't have to worry about that now. I knew where he was. He was in the Florida Keys, fifteen hundred miles away. I was safe.

Inside, I laid my grocery bags on the kitchen counter and started emptying them, but I couldn't stop hearing Bob's words.

. . . *your brother's living on a boat* . . .

A boat! Death or prison had seemed more likely. That or spending the night beside a garbage can in some dark alley. I mean, the last time I'd seen my brother Dan twenty-one years ago, he was being escorted out of our mother's house by the police.

I balled up the grocery bags and was about to fling them clear across the room when I looked down at my fists and thought, What is wrong with you, Anna

Beltrán?

I stuffed the bags into the garbage and walked over to the sliding glass doors overlooking my back yard. Though why I bothered to look out, I don't know. My paved-over back yard had a stone bench on it. That was it. Not a single tree grew. The only blossoms came from weeds squeezing up through the pavement. You would never know that I grew up with a mother who regularly got awards for her gardens.

I wondered if First National still held in trust my brother's share of the proceeds from the sale of our parents' house. Then again, that could explain how Dan, perennially short of cash, had had money to squander on a boat. It just didn't explain why.

I turned to look at the single photograph I still kept of him, tucked into a corner of my kitchen bookshelf, right up against a struggling African Violet and cookbooks I never used. In the 22-year-old faded snapshot, he stood stiffly, red hair falling over his forehead, sinewy arms bent at his waist as he endured, nay suffered, posing. My brother took photographs. He didn't readily consent to having his taken. He preferred to act the ghost, incorporeal, a presence only in memory.

A ghost on a boat.

That could haunt if I allowed it to.

I tried to imagine what Dan might look like now. Had his red hair turned gray? Had his hard stomach settled into a small belly? Was his angular face no longer chiseled but gaunt? I wasn't even sure anymore that, if we passed each other on the street, I would recognize him, and that was almost as much of a loss as losing him in the first place. My friend Bob's guileless words had been stunningly effective in revealing just how permeable was the membrane concealing my chronic grief.

I picked up the phone. "Bob Meister," I told the hotel operator. He answered after two rings.

"Bob," I said after my hello, "who told you my brother was on a boat in the Keys?"

"Oh, hi, Anna B. Well, it was Tommie Vargas down there on vacation. Ran into him at a 7-11-type store in Marathon."

Nobody ever called me anything but Anna B, even though the person who first called me that hadn't done so for twenty-one years.

"What else did he tell you?"

"Nothing much. Your brother barely said hello before edging out the front door."

He was still trying to efface himself.

"But Tommie did say he was living on a boat?"

"Yeah, but that's it."

"Well, how do you figure that, Bob? How does a corn-belt Hoosier who hates boats end up living on one? You remember, don't you, how when Mom and Dad took us out on Pine Lake in their little runabout Dan would wedge himself into the bow and not move until we came back to a dock?"

He laughed. "Anna B, you're asking me that about your *brother*?"

Yeah, I know, the same brother who, after Daddy died twenty-one years ago, slammed our mother into a wall, prompting her to call me, weeping, at four in the morning, pleading with me to help her.

That's how my brother ended up being escorted away by police the last time I saw him. I had turned him in. Involuntary intervention, it was called by the professionals. I called it death by atrophy. The slow atrophy of heart muscles. Mine. And it didn't even start when the police slapped handcuffs on Dan, the surprise lingering on his face as they bent him over into the squad car. Nor did it start when, after watching them drive away, I looked back at our front door, still wide open. The slow death began years before when a boy whose eyes sparkled at the play of light on fluttering aspen leaves also found how to calm his exposed nerve ends with Mom's cheap cooking wine.

"You know anybody who's ever lived on a boat, Bob?"

"Nope, but if anyone's sufficiently off the wall to do it, it's your brother."

"How long ago did Tommie see him?"

"A couple months ago."

He might still be there. The Keys were just a plane ride away.

There was one more question I wanted to ask, but no one ever talked about this out loud. No one ever said about Danny Beltrán, He's a gentle man imprisoned in an ungentle world, and that's why he drinks.

"Anna B?"

Please don't ask me out to dinner again, Bob. That's not why I called.

"Listen, Anna B, he didn't seem to be . . ."

"Drunk, Bob. The word is drunk."

I put the phone down and gazed at my trembling hands. Somewhere, maybe varnishing a boat teak rail, was my only brother whose hands probably looked just as mottled and transparent as mine. Did he ever wonder what *my* hands looked like now? We were only a year apart, something which used to make people wonder if Danny and I were twins. That was before the devil drink shape-shifted him into Satan. Then people wondered how it was possible that an upstanding investment analyst like me could be related to such an asshole.

I was retired now from hunting down the latest under-priced stock. In Danny's absence, I had surveyed all of Europe from a train window. From the safety of outdoor cafés, I kept tabs on how others lived. Every Thursday night I played bridge with the same three women who aged even as our voices called out our bids. And I had buried a broken mother who after the intervention never saw her son again.

Sometimes I wondered if she blamed me for that. Her gardens soon lost their luster. She stopped gifting me with weekly bouquets of fresh flowers and no longer spoke of her longed-for grandchildren. And I never explained how in safeguarding myself against my wounded family, I had exhausted my capacity for nurture.

Or for romance, for that matter. Usually, after the third or fourth time I rescued my

brother, the boyfriends had exited quietly. Now, when I looked into the mirror, I couldn't help but wonder why years ago I didn't figure out that one day I might end up old and alone, with only a phantom brother who probably hated my guts for family.

I caught myself sighing and went over to my computer.

"Marathon, FL," I typed in on Google.

The next morning, I flew to Miami, not giving myself time to reconsider.

I had never been to Miami. Nor had I imagined my brother there either. But when I walked out of the terminal into the bright Florida light, I began to understand why such a fragile soul as Danny might choose to dwell under a subtropical sun. Everything around me breathed life in abundance. Swaying palms, blossom-drenched oleanders, prolific pink hibiscus—all vied for vividness. One could spring to life in such a place. And as I drove south for two hours, Florida continued to insist on vitality. Brilliant orange *flamboyán* trees exploded like starbursts by the side of the road. Violet bougainvillea scrambled over clay-tile roofs. It didn't matter. I was still surprised that my brother actually lived in such a vivid place; much less, having reached old age.

It was in Key Largo, when I passed a brand-new Cadillac towing a dilapidated Boston Whaler, that I began to suspect I might be on the right track. On both sides of U.S. 1, faded turquoise and pink one-story concrete buildings resembled a washed-out cartoon strip. Festooned with jarringly inconsistent signs, this honky-tonk disorder, I could believe, would welcome such a one as my brother.

Alternating with the tacky commercial strips lay miles and miles of unspoiled ocean and bays on either side of the road. Water of the lightest tan spilled onto jade green pools, with sky blue and violet mixed in. Had the artist in Dan found his muse here at last? Dan's intervals between drinks had often produced masterful landscapes, some of them now gracing the walls of my living room. Had my brother and his camera followed white egrets as they pranced across these flats? Or was he parked on a bench somewhere, morosely monitoring the amount still left in his brown-bag-covered pint of whatever liquor was last easily available?

When I entered the Marathon city limits, I realized I needed to find someone who knew something about people who lived around here on boats. When I saw the road-side sign for Marathon Marina, I turned into its entrance, which cut through another of those helter-skelter trailer parks proliferating like wild grass, though not as pretty. After passing a gauntlet of trailers, I drove below boat after boat raised up on blocks until eventually I came out to a clearing with docks and a marina store.

I got out of my car and scanned uneasily the docked sailboats, trawlers, and houseboats. Was one of those Dan's? My eye was drawn to a beamy sailboat with dirty coiled lines hanging from the mainsail boom. From the dock, I stared through the open aft door into the cabin's shadowed interior. A plump, middle-aged woman scantily clad in a halter top and mini shorts stood over a stove with a cigarette dangling from her lips. As I watched her, a white-haired man rode by on a rugged bike, his chest bare, a generous stomach hanging over loose faded canvas shorts. That's when I knew I was not on a fool's chase, that old derelicts might do something crazy like live on a boat.

I didn't really expect to find my 66-year-old brother here though. These docks couldn't be cheap. After about five minutes of half-hearted scrutiny, I headed for the marina store. Behind the counter, two young girls, their skin already puckered by the sun, moved with purpose around desks crowded with papers and spare

parts. In the background, someone called on the VHF radio.

I waited patiently until one lifted her head and faced me. "May I help you?" she said.

I froze. Had twenty-one years been long enough for him to forgive me? I almost walked out then and there. Only when I remembered that if I had been crazy enough to fly four hours and drive another two more to get to this marina office at the far end of creation, I had to allow myself to be crazy enough to actually look for my brother Dan.

"I'm looking for someone living on a boat," I said, feeling lightheaded.

"What boat's he on?"

How was I supposed to know? If in my working days, I had acted on an investment based on the witchiness of a longing, I would have been fired. But that's what I had been doing since leaving at predawn from Indiana.

"I don't think he's on any of the boats here that I can tell."

"We can call him on the radio if he's in the area. What's the boat's name?"

My tongue felt trapped in gooey molasses. The counter girl frowned, as if suddenly unsure of me despite my white hair and obvious age of sixty-something. I unfurled my tongue and mumbled, "I don't know. I just know he's living on a boat in Marathon."

"What's his name?"

The minute I said his name out loud, I'd lose my anonymity. Even if I walked out the door and headed back to Miami, if Dan somehow heard about my visit, by physical description alone, he might guess I had been here.

"Where might an older guy with not too much money anchor?" I said.

"Probably in Boot Key Harbor. You know where that is?"

I shook my head. She came out from behind the counter and picked up a nautical chart from a nearby stack. "Here," she said pointing to a spot on the chart. "This is Sombrero Key, and this is Boot Key Harbor right next to it."

About a mile and a half back toward Miami, I turned into Sombrero Key and found the parched golf course she told me to look for. I followed it until it dead-ended into The Dockside Lounge and Marina. I slipped into a parking space at the end closest to the anchorage basin which was replete with so many boats it was almost like a small floating town. With the hiss of the air conditioner as company, I stared at their masts and wondered which one might be Dan's.

Ten minutes went by while I waited for a tall, gangly man to amble by on the dock in front of my car. Make it easy for me, I kept thinking. Come on, Dan. Walk past me so I can at least look at you.

But only strangers passed by, some with a swagger that must come from the freedom of knowing they could always pick up anchor if something didn't suit them. The thin ones were like tough old meat. Others had a glow of beer in their

cheeks.

Were these strangers, in their rumpled, sun-faded clothes, their hair bleached by the sun, my brother's new family? Or did he navigate among them the way I navigated among those inhabiting my life on land—with ample fenders placed on all sides?

Why did you choose to live on a boat, my brother? Was it because it feels consistent with being cast adrift? I didn't have to live on a boat to know what that felt like. I knew it every single time I left blank the next-of-kin space on an application.

The rental car's AC chilled me. After all my hours traveling, I was sorely tired of sitting. But I didn't move. I kept staring at that anchorage basin stretching away from me, imagining what it would feel like to follow my brother into the cockpit of his boat. There, I would have that exhilarating moment of recognition when I would realize that even if all mirrors in the world were destroyed, there was still one that would tell me the truth about myself. I would examine his face, finding myself in his eyes, nose, and lips. We would talk for hours and hours, drawn in by the homing impulse of familiar facial twitches and pitch of voice. We would clear out the old, stained algae cluttering our hearts.

Maybe he would also forgive me.

But he didn't pass in front of my windshield.

I turned the car off and opened up the windows. The steamy tropical air rolled in. So did the laughter of a girl on a nearby docked sailboat. She sat straddling a stanchion, her skinny legs dangling over the side, her blonde hair pulled back high in a ponytail, as she chattered on with no one I could see. Inevitably, though, I started predicting the sorrow that lay ahead of her as I found myself doing so often when I saw children enjoying themselves.

Damn it, Anna, get out of this car and go to the bathroom at least. Chances are, if Dan's here he probably won't recognize you either. Last time he saw you, *your* hair was red, too.

I stepped out of the car and turned full circle to scan my surroundings.

I did not see my brother.

I tread over the dock's old wood planks, away from the anchorage basin, passing sailboats and trawlers, sports fishing boats and houseboats, eventually coming upon a dockside, open-air, thatch-roof bar. The temperature was blazing hot, over 90°, probably why at mid-afternoon so many crowded loudly around the dimly lit counter.

Anna B! When did you buzz on in here?

Well, yeah. I had half expected to hear him yell that from inside the bar.

I stared boldly at the men and women raising hell around the counter. You'd think they were fighting they were so loud, but my brother was not among them.

A part of me shivered with disappointment. Though ordinarily a bar was the last place I would want to find him.

Another part of me breathed easy.

I moved on. Just past the bar, I came upon a bulletin board nailed to an outside wall. Hands clenched in my pockets, I scanned the listings. Most were mostly for boats or marine paraphernalia. The notices curled up at the edges, some faded by long exposure to the sun. I examined every single one, trying to guess which one might be Dan's and what his state of mind was at the time. Elegant graphics would announce he was sober. A scribbled scrap of paper meant ... well, the usual. But no one signed off with a Dan or a Danny on a board where never a surname appeared, only first names. I felt my shoulders slumping as I continued to stare at the bulletin board until I turned away.

The tropical air wafted across the anchorage toward me. This might be what his boat smells like, I thought. Of breezes in the sun.

If his boat was even here.

Those balmy breezes weren't protecting me from the blistering sun, though, and I hadn't brought a hat or sunglasses with me.

The marina office might sell both of those, Anna.

I stared at its flaking wood door, not more than four steps away from me. They might know in there, too, if a Daniel, Danny or Dan Beltrán was somewhere around here. I started toward the door and was about to pull it open when I thought, What if he's working in there?

I backed away and headed toward my car, fingering the rental-car plastic key tag in my pocket as I swept past the bar, the docked boats and an open-air laundry shed.

You're not really going to do this, are you? You're not going to leave without really trying to find him. Are you?

Are you?

I kept heading toward my car.

Are you crazy? You came fifteen hundred miles just to walk this dock and then go back home?

I squared my shoulders. So I was crazy and a coward. And maybe that's why the hint of nausea had lingered the whole time I was here. Because when it came to my brother, my instincts for fear were well honed.

Truth is, I still had no real idea why I had rushed here today. And if I had so little control over my own impulses, what could I expect of my brother? What was drunkenness anyway but an inability to rein in an impulse?

An illness. That's what they had kept saying at all those twelve-step meetings I attended over the years.

You didn't cause it. You can't cure it. You can't control it.

They said that too.

All I could think when they said that was, Easy for you to say. You're not on the other side of the door or the phone or in the same room when the devil drink bludgeons itself into your life.

I must have forgotten all that because here I was on this dock fifteen hundred

miles from safety, encouraging my brother's muse or demon to speak up or act out again.

I must be really lonely.

That, too.

Halfway to my car, I stopped to linger over the thirty or so dinghies tied to the pilings of finger piers. Some had elaborate names painted on their sides. *Roustabout* /t/ *Wanderer* was one such name. Others simply taped on haphazardly their Florida registration numbers. Some dinghies had highly polished hulls and varnished wood trim; others, barely inflated pontoons.

I was still scanning the dinghies when a young man on an inflatable dinghy approached from the anchorage. I went over to watch him tie up to the pier, curious as to how he would actually climb up to dock level. At low tide, he was easily about six feet below me. He nosed his way in between two other inflatable dinghies and then tossed a line around a piling cleat and cut off his motor. Then he stepped into one dinghy after another until he reached a plank ladder I'd not noticed at the very end of the pier. I was wondering how he would manage that same feat carrying laundry bags or groceries when my knees suddenly almost buckled. I felt myself transported to a dimension in which no sounds, no thoughts, no feelings carried in them a sense of time passing. There was only that tiny, old, red inflatable dinghy that the young man had just stepped into right below the plank ladder. In neat block letters painted carefully on its fully inflated pontoons were the words: t/t *Anna B.*

Tender to *Anna B.*

He had named his boat after me. My heart beat like a runaway train. My brother was here! He had coasted into this dock in that achingly well-maintained red dinghy whose overlapping seams were stripped clean of their outer vinyl coating. Fifty years ago, before he turned into a whirling dervish, my brother had kept the neatest bedroom of anyone I ever knew. Now a single life jacket lay folded tidily beneath the varnished board serving as a seat. The gasoline container fit snugly against the stern, not carelessly askew. The Evinrude's housing was free of grease and dirt. The line holding the dinghy to the piling was clean white, the excess coiled into a flat spiral inside the dinghy.

My brother was here. He had stepped out of that proud little dinghy and climbed up those planks to head somewhere on land behind me.

To do what? Hold down a job? Visit a girlfriend?

Drink?

I turned around slowly, half expecting to find him walking toward me. I would wait until he was close enough for me to brush a hand across his forehead and lift the thick hair which had fallen over his eyes. But the only other person here was this young sailor, a stranger who smiled politely as passed by me.

My eyes lingered on his receding back. Only when he was safely gone did I lean over the side of the pier to look down at the stiffly clean red rubber boat. Its full pontoons called me down, inviting me to brush my fingertips across them. They beckoned with hard-won honor, but my shaking knees would not cooperate. I'd never make it down the plank ladder, much less be able to come back up. So I merely stared at the little red dinghy, buffeted by the abject terror and soaring joy ricocheting like two sides of a cannonade inside me.

Danny was here! I was stunned at how strong was my yearning to touch him. I'd

shut it down for so long, it should have atrophied. But no. It now threatened to cut off my breath.

I looked up at the sky. It's Danny, Mom. I found Danny! He's still alive!

Then I looked down at the dinghy again. My eyes kept returning to the letters on the pontoons. I didn't get it. Why name his boat after me? My brother should hate me. Had he been drunk when he did it? Or had he done it out of love?

Love! Come on. Only someone who has not repeatedly rescued a drunk at 2 a.m. would trust the good intentions behind naming a boat. Drunks only love the bottle.

I scanned the multiple swaying masts in the anchorage. Their transoms all faced away. I could not see which one was *Anna B*. But what if *Anna B* was as groomed as this little dinghy below me? Had Danny really reformed? Or was this dinghy an aberration, its polish and nattiness accomplished in a frenzied but infrequent sober moment?

I teetered a bit as I turned away from the anchorage basin, feeling as if a gust had just whipped through. I held on to a piling to steady myself and looked down at the white line perched on a piling cleat. I grabbed it and pulled. The line was not taut. The tide might be coming in. I could wait here for as long as it took for the dinghy to rise. Then I could drop into it and sit and wait until Dan came back.

Why, Anna B! he would shout. There's a new kind of bee in Florida!

I'd squeal and Dan would jump in and we would somehow manage to hug without capsizing his pristine little boat.

I pulled on the line again and brought the dinghy closer to the piling. If I were a kid I could just slide down that line right into the boat.

That's the thing. I wasn't a kid. I was an old woman with tears in her eyes and a hollowed-out heart. An old woman who could ask, What does forgiveness really mean, my brother? Would I hear your voice at the other end of the phone and learn to be unguarded? Would we celebrate birthdays and Christmases and pretend ours was a wholesome family? Would I finally shed my guilt over the intervention that dealt the executioner's blow that killed our family?

I focused on the neatly coiled white line, an eddy of order, but could find nothing in it about forgiveness. It only talked of the here and now. Right now, the line lay coiled neatly on the dinghy deck, but that said nothing about future promise. Or about how my brother could possibly have healed when I, who was not owned by his devil drink, still could not figure out why I came to this anchorage. Was it so I could go on for another twenty-one years in withering, but uneventful exile? Because that's how I felt, as if I had left behind my native land years before and spent the rest of my life searching for my compatriots in the face of every stranger on the street. Except there was only one stranger who could ever greet me with the familiar dialect of home. And that same stranger could be my jailer if I ever tried to land on his shores.

I brought out my phone and took a picture of the red dinghy. Then I drove back to Miami International Airport. From it, I mailed my brother a postcard, care of the Dockside Marina in Marathon, Florida. The card pictured a solitary sailboat at anchor silhouetted against the red-orange sky of a setting sun. I left the message space blank. Danny would recognize my handwriting.

Sometimes it simply examines the essential mystery of the human condition. Her short stories have been published in *Nassau Review*, *North Atlantic Review*, *Rose and Thorn*, *Gemini*, and other literary reviews. Her essays have been published in *Latina Voices* and *Being Latino*. She has completed creative writing courses at New York University and Florida Atlantic University. She is a graduate of Purdue University and the University of Chicago Business School. She blogs at *Pilgrim Soul*: www.judithmercadoauthor.blogspot.com.

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