

Ebb and Flow

by Tim W. Jackson

Thirty-knot wind fresh in his face, Cody Bach watched the fringes of Hurricane Sophie roll into Haulover Key. He should have been gone days ago, sailing southwest for the Yucatan and the Caribbean beyond. Old man Haulover's funeral had changed all that, though, brought Diane Haulover back to the island.

"She's a stormbringer, bro!" Wayne leaned into his right shoulder.

Cody nodded. Past his brother, down the shore by the rock-and-coral breakwater, waves broke against the old barge. Hurricane Enrico had grounded it three years before – the last time Diane had blown through, between med school and the Peace Corps.

Gray water splashed up between the dock planks and over Cody's feet. A fresh gust peeled back his raincoat hood, set his blond ponytail flapping in time with the palms behind him. He clamped his hands, numb from wind and wet, on the frayed two-by-four railing to steady himself. With the house shuttered and *Sunbeam* spider webbed back in the mangroves, he and Wayne had done all they could.

"You gonna tie her up and take her with you?" Wayne yelled.

"We're gonna have dinner!" Cody yelled back. "See what happens."

"She's off in Zululand, and you're sailing the Spanish Main. How you get 'happily ever after' out of that?"

"It's spiritual, bro!" Cody said. "You wouldn't understand."

He and Diane had grown up inseparable. "Your adventurous twin," his mom used to call

her. The night Enrico hit, he and Diane had holed up in the old house, knowing Cody's dad had built it to survive big storms. Island-born and raised, they were more concerned with being together than with a Cat Three storm roaring around them. They had spent the night in the living room, making love by the boarded-up picture window while the floor shook from waves crashing around the house's 10-foot stilts. Diane swore time and distance couldn't separate them, and Cody swore he believed her.

Now he shivered thinking of Diane here again. She swirled around him, a hint of honeysuckle amid the churned grass flats. He had lived with the idea of Diane for so long the real Diane seemed out of place. Cody shrugged the thought aside. He loved her. In a world where nothing was stable or lasting, that one fact kept him anchored.

"If I don't do this, I'll always regret it," she had said. "That would kill us, in time."

He had understood. Sort of. It was good for her, good for them. He sent her letters about the island sinking under a rising tide of tourists, retirees and wireless-linked day traders. She sent back long poems about yellow wind caressing her cheeks, lions' roars filling the void of night, and sunrise exploding like burnished copper behind the Matopo Hills.

His skin tingled. Diane was back, if only for a few days. Wind gusted, knocked him back half a step. Sophie would bounce north when she hit the Gulf Stream. Haulover would get a good blow, but not a killer one. Some wind, some rain, some shaking up.

To his left, up the island, a line of northbound cars clogged the Loggerhead Cut bridge. U.S. 1 looked like a parking lot suspended above dark rows of whitecapped breakers. Something white, or chrome, a car, flickered between the gaps in the stalled traffic. Someone headed down the empty southbound lanes, not afraid of the lower Keys in a storm.

"Hurricane's nature's way of clearing out debris," his dad used to say. Haulover Key would look nice blown clean of strip malls and condos. Not that it mattered. He was already gone. With the new marine sanctuaries, no one could live fishing or crabbing. If he didn't go now, he would be trapped here. Like his dad. Ramon's idea of sailing charters in the Tiperon Islands was perfect. And Diane would be proud of him, finally setting off on one of the adventures he always talked about.

"I still say you're crazy." Wayne, shouting above the rising wind. "It's not natural. Even saints . . . even *St. Francis* made trips down to the village every now and then. It's in the Bible. You look it up."

Cody laughed. "Eleven years at Jesuit down the drain!"

"She looked good yesterday, man. I'll give you that." Beside him, Wayne was a stick wrapped in a wind-whipped orange poncho.

Cody scowled. Diane had surprised him. No one thought she would be back in time for the funeral. He had arrived late, squeezed into a back-row pew. He wondered about the woman with the short, sun-bleached hair sitting with the Haulovers, but hadn't recognized Diane until the family filed past. Later, she hugged him stiff-armed, then apologized for still being on African time. He started to say something about his father's death the year before, but that didn't seem right. She fidgeted with the silver rings crowding her fingers and glanced past him, promised to come out the next day. He had been securing the house and boats non-stop ever since.

Rain popped against his back like flung gravel. Cody looked up at the house, its cedar planks black with rain. He had left the picture window uncovered so he and Diane could watch

the storm. Eight screws and a piece of plywood would cover it if Sophie got closer.

Cody started back, clutching the rain-slick wooden railing. Behind him, his brother laughed.

"Wayne, she and I, apart . . . we're more solid than most couples are together." He slapped a palm on the wet railing. "We're more real than this dock, or that storm coming in."

"Oh, no. Not the long-and-winding-road crap! Live wires burning between you. Souls in the mail between here and Zanzibar."

"Zimbabwe."

"At two dollars a pop. If they get there. You're a walking Paul McCartney song." Wayne stopped, faced him. The wind puffed out the left side of his hood, exposing blue eyes and a black three-day growth on a narrower version of Cody's own face. Wayne grabbed his shoulder and smiled. "You're hopeless. But I'm a sucker for a long-shot." His smile faded. "That storm takes a left turn, you got the VHF. Be talking to me." Wayne turned, walked toward his rusted Jeep parked by the house, poncho flapping.

"A *bad* McCartney song!" he yelled from the Jeep. Crushed shell and gravel flew as Wayne spun tires up the limerock drive that led to U.S. 1 and his place in Anejo.

Cody climbed the steps to the raised deck, still expecting to see his dad there. He shook his head. Diane's arrival, the funeral had cut loose a flood of memories. Carson Bach used to sit on the deck for hours, telling Cody, Wayne, Diane and Ramon about his life at sea – dodging freighter-dwarfing icebergs off Tierra del Fuego, or dancing barefoot on moonlit Tahitian beaches. After Cody's mom died, his dad had spent more time on the deck. Once Cody woke during a storm, saw his dad through the big window, arms braced against the railing, as if still

guiding a ship through heavy seas.

A burst of rain chased Cody inside. Framed charts of the Keys, the Ragged Islands, and Cuba's Archipelago de Sabana, from his dad's World War II days, hung yellowed and cracked on the far wall. To his left, the Seychelles, the Celebes, the Marquesas lined the hallway to the back of the house, relics of Carson Bach's 20 years in the merchant marine. Cody's dad had settled on Haulover Key when he married, turning fisherman to be with his new wife, but he never really left the open ocean.

In the center of the main room a rust-colored velour pit-group curled around the glass-topped table made from the wheel of an old square-rigged brig. Carson Bach had refused to get rid of the couch and table no matter how much his wife complained she couldn't have the neighbors over, or of bruising her shins on the wheel's spokes. The hurricane lamp chandelier bathed the room in a yellow glow. Sophie hadn't knocked out the electricity yet.

Cody left his boots, wet socks and rainsuit by the door. He padded across the scuffed oak floor toward the kitchen, running a hand across the couch's back as he passed. It would be his brother's monster in a few days. Wayne would probably keep the damn thing.

The kitchen tile was cool on his bare feet. He set the oven to preheat and headed for the shower. A half-hour later he was back in the kitchen filleting flounder. While the tour-ons and transplants swarmed Winn Dixie that afternoon, snatching up Vienna sausages, canned beans, and jugs of water, he'd grabbed a couple of bottles of chianti and run down to Wiley's for fresh seafood to give Diane a proper welcome.

He hit on the Weather Channel while he sautéed garlic and crabmeat for the flounder stuffing. Sophie was off Cayo Coco. Winds maxxed around 95. Anguilla was getting blasted.

The house shuddered. He hummed as he prepped. *Maybe I'm Amazed*. Wayne was right. Hot bacon scorched his fingers as he crumbled it into a bowl of spinach.

"I said, 'something sure smells good.'"

Diane had pulled off her blue rain parka and had dropped it next to his. Her hair still threw him. Filigreed earrings flashed beside her tanned cheeks. Oversized white blouse, unbuttoned, over a red t-shirt. Jeans soaked from mid-thigh down. Water beaded up on waxed hiking boots. Her gray eyes danced, but there were dark circles beneath them. She smiled, raised her eyebrows.

"You OK?"

"I didn't hear you!" His stomach jumped. He bounced around the kitchen counter, feet not touching the tiles, wiping bacony hands under his arms as he came. "I should be asking you that." And then she was in his arms. Her hands dug into his back as he buried his face in her hair. Pain lanced across his nose and cheek. He pulled back and glared at the rough brass scrollwork dangling crooked from her left ear.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She reached for his face.

He wiped his cheek. His fingertips were red, sticky.

Diane dabbed at his face with her shirttail. "That Xhosa woman said they'd protect me, but . . ."

"Call it a dueling scar." He reached for her hands, then kissed her forehead, her eyelids, her lips. Her hands felt as rough as his, calloused where they had always been so soft.

Diane pulled back and looked into his eyes. "You haven't changed much." Cool fingers slid across his face. She glanced around the room. "Neither has this place."

He brushed the backs of his fingers over the tops of her ears. Had her eyes always been level with his own? "You grow over there?"

"Yeah." She laughed. "I think I have."

He started to kiss her again, but she swung away and led him into the kitchen. "I won't interrupt the chef. This smells incredible!"

Cody forced a smile, slid the flounder into the oven and grabbed the bowl of shucked oysters from the refrigerator. Her hands settled warm on his shoulders.

"Thanks," she said. "I can use a friendly face. Or one that doesn't need comforting or supporting or . . . *need*. It's good to just *be*, you know?"

He stood, took her hand. "You holding up?"

"Readjusting. Home seems so different." She slid her arm around his shoulders, kissed his scratched cheek.

Cody held the bowl to the side and hugged her with his free arm. They curled into each other like they'd never been apart. Honeysuckle surrounded him as he touched his lips to the top of her head. She shifted, eyed the bowl of oysters.

"Got your hands full, don't you?"

He set down the bowl, but Diane pushed him toward the stove. "Uh-uh. Food first." She laughed "I feel like I haven't eaten for a week."

Cody turned away, face hot. Three years. Two funerals. It would take time. He should have realized that. He dropped the oysters into a saucepan with some melted butter and heavy cream. Diane stood back, talking as he cooked, touching his arm occasionally for emphasis. He let her talk.

“I’m still blown away,” she said. “You never realize how little control you have of your life.”

Rain pelted the shutters. The house shook again, rattling glasses in the cupboard above him. Cody stepped to the door, forced it open enough to stick his head out. Gray water, flecked with foam, swirled under the house. Farther out, part of the dock bobbed in the rising waves, torn loose from its pilings. Cody stared. The dock had survived Enrico. Expressionless, he slipped back inside. This would be the worst of it.

“Hope you were planning to stay,” he said.

“No problem. I walked down from the road.” Diane handed him a dry towel.

Cody lit candles, broke out glasses and plates while Diane talked. The house would be fine. It had survived worse. When the food was ready he cut the overhead lights, lit the candles and queued *Moondance* on the iPod. One of Diane’s favorites. They sat opposite one another, Diane talking, Cody listening.

Diane told of months in trucks and tents, traveling from village to village. He'd read much of it in her letters, but tonight the stories sprang to life. Her hands wove bright webs of gazelle, rain hammering on the tin-roofed clinic and people lining up for days to see the only doctor in 300 kilometers. Cody saw, as never before, what Diane's work meant to her, why she needed to be there.

She yawned. "Sorry. Still jet-lagging." She glanced at her watch, counted off fingers with her thumb. "Seven here means it's . . . nine o'clock tomorrow morning there. *Habari, rafiki yangu!* "

Her face glowed in the candlelight, beautiful despite its new strangeness. But he no

longer saw himself reflected in her eyes. He wondered who she had shared campfires with in the Transvaal, then silently shoved Wayne from his mind.

"Uuh . . . soup it is!" He picked up their salad bowls and stumbled for the kitchen, away from an unfamiliar Diane and words he didn't understand. She had grown, but he hadn't realized how until then. He knew Cody-and-Diane, had explored and defined that for years. But now, with Diane so near, yet so changed . . . The wind outside moaned louder. The house vibrated with the wind.

"All I said was 'good morning,'" she called from the next room. "You're supposed to say 'mzuri.'"

"Missouri, sure!" he yelled. He returned with bowls of stew. The smell of cream, garlic and oysters filled the room.

"It's so beautiful, Cody! I wish you could see it!"

Cody ignored the words, letting her voice wash over him as he watched her face for traces of the Diane he had known. Her voice deepened.

". . . that's what makes it so hard to just pick up and leave. After all that time and work, it's, 'Boom! You're outta there!' you know?"

"You're out . . . you lost me."

Her mouth narrowed. "The clinic? They cut the program? That gives us two months to train people in-country, and hope they continue after we leave."

"So where's that leave you?"

"With a year left. We can float or join VISTA stateside."

"So . . ."

"As I was saying," she glared, "it's crazy to pack off to Gabon. I don't speak the language, know the country, anything. And by the time I do, it'll be time to ship out."

Cream sauce caught in the back of his throat. "So you'll be gone another two years. To make it worthwhile."

She poked at her stew. "I thought so, but driving down from the airport yesterday, with the water going wild on either side of me and the wind whipping the palm fronds, I realized how much I miss home. Cruising over Loggerhead Cut, the island seemed more exotic to me than giraffes and gazelles and baobabs. I felt like a tourist."

"So where's that leave you?"

"People here need doctors, too. I make some calls, see what Monroe County VISTA has to offer." She reached across the table, brushed a wisp of hair out of his eyes. "You could be seeing a lot of me soon."

The room tilted. Cody closed his eyes, sure the house was crumbling. He had dreamed of this moment for years. But this was the wrong time. The wrong place. Diane and the Caribbean were currents pulling in opposite directions. He had imagined Diane with him in the Tiperons, but how did he explain that daydream to her here, now.

He could stay. For a while, anyway. The chart of the Cyclades behind her glowed yellow in the candlelight. With Diane here . . . together they could make anything work.

That would leave Ramon hanging, though. *Sunbeam* was key to their plan: Ramon's money, Cody's sailboat to hook the customers. Maybe Ramon could hold off for a bit, until Cody and Diane worked things out.

"Earth to Cody?" Diane was waving a hand in front of his face.

"Sorry. Thinking."

"About . . . ?"

"Change."

"Change is good," she waved her spoon at him. Cream sauce dripped on the table.

"Change is fun. Change means growth."

"But transitions can fuck you up."

Van Morrison died. The kitchen light flickered, went out, leaving the room lit by candles. The wind outside howled a pitch higher. Diane raised her wine glass. "Good timing." Her wavering shadow jumped up the wall behind her, blotting out the Aegean Sea.

"Sophie's doing," he said. He picked up a candle and stepped to the kitchen for the battery-powered radio and set it on the table between them. WKWF from Key West was still coming in clear. Power was out from Key Largo down. Roads were impassable.

Diane reached across the table, slid her hands over his. Lightning flickered through the picture window. "So tell me about these horrible transitions," she said.

He watched her thumb slide back and forth across his own. They had always been able to talk about anything, but now he was unsure of what to say or how to say it. Names from nautical charts blazed in his mind like gilded letters from an antique treasure map, magical names of power and promise. Tortuga. Cartagena. Ocho Rios. Magdalena. He looked up. Her dark brows were raised, expectant.

"Peace Corps send doctors to the Tiperon Islands?"

"What?"

"You know dad and I finally got that old sloop reworked, just before he died."

"*Sunbeam*? You mentioned it. In every letter."

"Well, a week ago I was set to join Ramon on Blacktip Island, in the Tiperons, running charters. Tourists go wild for something with sails, teak decks and polished brass, he says."

"Cody! That's wonderful! That will be so perfect for you!"

"If you're there."

"It's *your* dream."

"When you were across the universe, sure. But you're here. You can come to Blacktip. Or we can find someplace else we both like."

She smiled, but shook her head. "This is my home, Cody."

"Mine, too."

It took a moment for the words to register. "Don't you dare, mister!" she said. "You have to go, like I had to. Anything else is no good to either of us." Still holding his hands, she rose, walked around the table and kissed him. "I'd love to be here, Cody. With you. But if you don't go, this will eat you inside out."

"You don't know that." He heard his voice tremble. Leaving the island was scary. Leaving Diane was unthinkable.

She studied him, lightning flashing across her face. "You're serious, aren't you? You'd stay here solely because of me." She shook her head again, ran a hand through his hair. "And probably convince yourself you're happy, too."

The house shuddered again. That seemed less important than Diane next to him, so warm and so real, a wish come true.

She had chased her dream and come back a stranger. If he left now, how much more

distant would they grow? This was a chance to pull their lives together, make them one life.

“I can do anything,” he said. “We can do anything.” Being together was what mattered. He stared into her eyes, willing her to understand, afraid to say more.

“Yeah, you can.” Diane yawned. “Sorry. I’m wiped out.” She rubbed her eyes, then put a hand on his cheek. “I don’t know, crazy man. I’m chucking a dream to move back here, but I know what I’m chucking . . . We have a few days to talk about this, right? When I’m awake?”

She stood, led him to the couch, and sat facing the window. She looped his arm around her shoulders and curled against him. A volley of lightning lit the deck and railings pale blue. Staccato flashes froze raindrops in violet air. Wind and surf drowned out the thin sound of the kitchen radio.

“The window’s OK?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said. “It’s held through worse.” He didn’t dare move, break this growing bond between them. “We rode out another storm here,” he said. He turned to kiss her. Her lips brushed his, lingered, then pulled away. She raised her free hand, caressed his mouth.

“Reminds *me* we’ve got a lot of catching up to do.” She turned his head back toward the window. “Watch the fireworks, silly.”

He shifted to face her. She chewed her lower lip. “Cody, we’ve been apart three years. Letters are great, but they’re not real people. Things’ll work out, but . . . it’s not that simple. Not yet.” She settled back into him. “Give it time.”

“I love you.”

She squeezed his hand. “You’re missing the show.”

The low clouds flickered purple, pink and white beyond the silhouetted railings. Rain

clattered around to the north side of the house. The storm had turned, was moving past. Diane's breathing slowed, shortened. Thunder shook the walls. Cody's arm tingled, numbing beneath her head, but he dare move and wake her. He sat as still as he could, matched his breathing with hers. He would stay. It *would* work. He wouldn't be happy without her, no matter where he went.

The floor rumbled, a low grinding more felt than heard. Something bumped the pilings. Rocks from the jetty, maybe, or pieces of the broken dock. Cody needed to stand, step outside, see if the house was OK. He didn't move. Even if the house splintered around them, he couldn't change it. His pulse boomed louder, faster than the storm. The house would hold, the house would hold. His father had built it to ride out worse.

Carson Bach would have been outside in all this, loving the storm coming at him. Cody remembered his dad's eager face as he and Cody had worked on *Sunbeam*. Helping refit the sloop had been Carson Bach's salvation. The island's newcomers had seen a weathered fisherman hobbling down the new concrete sidewalk in front of Wiley's, a colorful local sprung full-formed from a Jimmy Buffett song, as quaint as the Sabal palms in front of their condos. Cody had glared that pale caricature out of them every chance he got. Carson Bach would have loved the Tiperons.

Lighting flickered. Diane shifted in her sleep, slid down, head face-up across Cody's leg. He cupped a hand around her face, stroked her forehead. He could have been seeing her for the first time. Or in a dream. He felt like a third person in the room, watching Cody-and-Diane from high above.

The room was lighter when he woke. Beaded water covered the plate glass. He raised his head, winced as neck bones readjusted. Diane lay curled beside him, her head on his leg. The house was still. No sound of rain. Cody eased a pillow under Diane's head, stretched, slipped on his raincoat and stepped to the door. It opened with a slight shove.

The wind ruffled his hair, but no more. At the railing he leaned out and looked under the house. Splintered chunks of dock and fallen palms lay strewn below. Car-sized boulders from the jetty sat around the house like lawn ornaments. The far corner of the deck sagged. A support post had been ripped away. His face tingled in the charged air, as if Sophie had left unspent lighting in the falling wind. Turtle grass hung in green and brown streamers three feet up the few palms still standing. It had been a bigger blow than he had thought.

Inside, blurred through the wet glass, Diane curled tighter on the couch. Cody shivered, as if the storm had blown part of him away, left him naked and alone. He turned away.

Downwind, where the jetty had been, the old barge had washed clear of shore. The rusty hulk, mostly-submerged, bobbed in the dark water 100 yards offshore, drifting out on the receding tide. Currents would drag it into the main channel, then northeast and out to sea. Cody smiled. He would radio the Coast Guard to watch for it.

He stepped back inside to fix breakfast and pack the last of his things.