

DUEL AT SEA

Living the Southern California life changes in the open ocean when a trawler shows up to bring the reality of South America on a retired couple

A short story
Written by LC Lee

© LC Lee 2018

Chapter 1

Tom Johnston and Jennifer Hallett met in San Diego and quickly became a couple. Before Tom retired from the Navy, he had a SEAL nickname of 'Shadow,' but Jennifer still called him "Tom." He had shortened her name to "Jen." With a little of her savings and his pension, they were going to pursue their dream of a cruise on a sailboat in the open ocean.

They had planned for a long time to take a trip and finally bought a ketch-rigged catamaran, which they named 'Andrea,' after their daughter who was lost as an infant. Never more than 100 miles, of the coast, they cruised down to Argentina, going in and out of narrow coves and places they had longed to visit. After their lengthy voyage, they were ready to head for home.

Tom and Jen worked to prepare the Andrea for her journey back, but the heat of the sun and the confinement they felt in the small space started to wear on their nerves. They argued over minor details, like where to put a dishtowel and why soap was missing from its usual spot. In desperate need of a little alone time, they decided to look for a port to get some supplies. To avoid the traffic around the Panama Canal, they passed it by and sailed into the Gulf of Nicoya in Costa Rica, south of Guanacaste. The area was magical. With its small coves and calm waters, it was a convenient place to find supplies and a good night's rest. After two nights anchored in the cove all Jen had on her mind was getting back home to San Diego and seeing her grandkids.

The boat, restocked with supplies by late that afternoon, set sail with Tom and Jen in better spirits and a course set toward home. They had bought a few groceries from a little village of Chacarita in South Puntarenas, but what they had really needed was diesel fuel and water, as well as a few liters of oil because the starboard engine was starting to burn a little oil.

Tom watched the sun hit the horizon off the port side as he sailed north toward home. He knew the fishing was great along the coastal waters and he'd have to drop a line before sunset, so he slowed to a trolling speed in hopes of a catching a Yellow Fin or King Fish, maybe even a Dorado. The next day, out into open water, Jen remembered to call her daughter Maureen as she had promised to do when they were underway again. Because Costa Rica's cell

phone service was not compatible with her U.S. phone service, she decided to use the satellite phone for just a brief call. Just as she reached Maureen on the phone, the boat hit something near the stern that violently shook the catamaran.

Jen shrieked. "What happened?" Maureen sounded worried as she asked what was going on. Jen cried out to Maureen, "I can't talk now. Something just hit the boat."

Because they'd had a late start and slowed to fish, they were now on the edge of nightfall just off the coast of Nicaragua. Tom's military training had taught him not to panic, so he calculated their next move. He knew he needed to press forward, but the boat didn't handle at all; the rudder kept swinging from one side to the other. Frustrated at the situation they were in, Tom looked at Jen and said, "The boats disabled we can't continue without fixing it."

He put on his snorkel-mask, to take a look before it got too late. As he was getting ready to dive, he noticed a boat coming from shore toward them. He hoped it was either the coast guard or perhaps a local fisherman coming to see if they could help. The Andrea was dead in the water, the sun was setting and he could use some help. As he examined the hull of the boat, Tom saw a steel rod trapped in a wooden pallet with fishing line and netting wrapped around the whole mess. It had damaged the port side rudder and the rusted steel rod had pierced through the center of the starboard side. Tom broke the surface to call out to Jen, "Give me the red handled pliers in the aft storage box."

Jen found the pliers, and as she handed it over to Tom, she told him she was worried about the trawler, which was coming closer. Tom calmed her and said, "I'll only be a few minutes."

Tom struggled to remove the steel rod that was wired to the wooden pallet. He saw the trawler along the port side, and, cleared his snorkel to get a clean breath of air, and went down one last time to free the starboard rudder. The fishing line and the steel rod had enmeshed the rudder using his diving knife he was able to cut the net away.

With his eyes locked on the surface of the water, he ascends upward. Just then, he saw a splash in the water above him. He adjusted his facemask to get a better view and couldn't believe his eyes. It was Jen. She had fallen in the water with the spare anchor and chain wrapped around her body. Tom, already out of breath needed air. He was on his way up as she sank below him. He reached out for her as she sank to the ocean depths. She was struggling to remove the chain from around her, but it was too tight. Tom followed her down, deeper and deeper. Screaming inside, he was finally able to grab onto the bitter end of the chain. When he pulled on it to retrieve her, it unrolled, spinning her body away from him. He fought to reach her, pulling harder on the chain. With no more oxygen left in his lungs, he let go in desperation. Tom removed his snorkel and screamed out underwater, "Jen!"

The anguish in his eyes said it all as she slowly faded into the black and the sea swallowed her up. The night had taken over, and, looking up, he could barely make out the bottom of the trawler on the port side of his boat. He had to get to the surface to save his own life. Just breaking the surface on the starboard side, he used his snorkel to get air as quietly and quickly as he could. He slowly brought his head above the waterline and bobbed in the water alongside the trawler. He could hear the men conversing in Spanish as they divided the spoils of his boat. Tom looked into the water again and took a shallow dive, hoping against hope that he would see Jen there. There was no sign of her.

Returning to the surface, Tom waited in silence alongside the boat, hoping to identify the monsters who had killed his Jen. Finally, he heard the names "Octavio" and "Vicente." After a few more minutes had passed, the trawler motored away. Tom quickly got back on board his boat and pulled out an old pair of binoculars he kept near the bait tank, looking for any markings on the trawler that might help him to identify it later. He was able to make out the name on the boat 'Humeante.' His adrenaline was pumping. All he wanted now was to get those bastards who had killed his wife.

Tom turned his attention to a fire in the cabin of his boat and needed to take care of that emergency before anything else. His initial instinct was to put out the fire that Octavio and Vicente had set, but it suddenly dawned on him

that if the fire kept burning and they could see it from a distance, they would think they had not left any evidence behind. His training took over and squelched his instinctive reaction to distinguish it. He chose to keep it burning. He gathered all the bedding, cushions, and anything he could find that would burn bright or create smoke. He used his gaff hook to retrieve the wooden pallet he had just freed from the rudder, and he piled all the flammable items onto it. While it was alongside the boat, he added some cooking oil to make sure the fire would keep going and pushed it adrift. As the night grew darker, he set off with full power in direction of the Humeante, hoping the pallet he set ablaze would burn long enough to cover his next move.

Looking back, he could see the smoke and burning trash that he had left behind to keep Octavio fooled. He knew that Octavio was the one who had shouted orders when they were on his boat, and thought he must be the captain. Not seeing the Humeante ahead of him, he put his ketch on autopilot keeping their heading and went below to assess his options while he sailed for revenge. For Jen.

###

Vicente told Octavio, “I can no longer see the burning boat, but I still see the radar signature.” Tom had been so focused on catching up with them that he had forgotten about the sailboat radar enhancer. Without the enhancer, a boat made of fiberglass would be invisible to their radar reflection. Octavio had Vicente watch the blip on the radar screen, not sure, if it was the Nicaraguan Coast Guard or another trawler.

###

Meanwhile, Tom found a propane tank they had stored for their heater. Checking through all the gear, he remembered a large rope he had put on board. Some called it a float rope, and it was used to foul props of would-be bad guys. Taking account of all he had available, he wondered, “What can I use for weapons when I catch up to them?” He brought up all the diving tanks that he and Jen had used, and found one of them was still full. He looked for some workable parts and also for the spear gun he knew was on board. He

desperately needed to make something work and laid everything out that he could turn into weapons.

His moment of resolve brought a sudden recollection of his loss of Jen. He broke down sobbing over the loss and uttered, "Those bastards don't know what's coming for them. I will avenge you Jen. I will see justice for you." Wiping the tears away, he sat down to piece together weapons. While he was mounting the spear to a dive tank, Andrea's radar warning went off. Looking up, he saw a blip coming toward him on the screen. Up on deck, he could see the trawler's lights on the horizon. He then realized his radar enhancer was leading them right back to him. Without hesitation, he pulled the spear from the spear gun and scurried to the top of the mast. Swinging away at the ball that contained the radar enhancer, he could see clearly that Humeante's course was set to intercept him. He was unable to reach the mounts for the enhancer, and every time he swung at it, the rope he was holding on to pushed him away. Time was running out and Tom was desperate, so he locked his legs around the mast and beat on the mount with the spear until it finally came loose and landed on the deck. Lowering himself back down, he tossed the radar enhancer into the ocean. Then he steered hard starboard to get off their course.

###

On the Humeante, Vicente called out, "The boat is gone, Captain. There is no blip, nothing."

Octavio said, "What? It can't just disappear. Go see what's wrong."

"The radar is working, it must have been a fluke," Vicente replied.

"Get up on the bridge and see if you can spot any lights," Octavio commanded.

There was nothing but pitch black. Vicente turned on a powerful spotlight and swept the horizon. He told Octavio, "There is nothing out there, Captain."

Chapter 2

Tom was sure he could stay with them during the night, and when the morning winds came, he could catch them off guard. He knew the Humeante could barely do 10 knots, and with a tight beam reach, Tom thought he could exceed their speed, and never have to stop for fuel. He watched the radar blip from the Humeante until early morning, with just four or five minutes of sleep at a time. At first light, he could see the trawler on the horizon and worried they could see him too. With the wind speed low, he lowered the sails there wouldn't be any advantage in keeping them up to catch Humeante in broad daylight. What he needed now was a strategy. How was he going to get close enough to use his improvised weapons without sails? A strong wind at night was his only hope. For only the second time in his life, he prayed for help. "Dear God, let me catch these sons-of-bitches and find justice for Jen." Tom turned to God only in troubled times. The first was in Kandahar when his brother-in-arms Joel was hit by a sniper. He was able to medevac him out, but Joel's damage was permanent, and he never returned to combat. This time, Tom wasn't asking to save a life; he was asking to take a life in revenge.

Doubting God would ever consider his request, he turned to what he knew. His training, which had taught him to improvise, to make something out of nothing, and it would define his next choice in battling the crew of the Humeante. He lashed the spear to the dive tank and readied it to fly off the deck into the trawler. After securing an igniter to the propane tank, he was looking for some way to sling it onto the Humeante. That was when he ran across some of Jen's tennis balls, the same ones he tried to talk her out of taking on board because there would be no place to play on the trip. Using a worm blower from his fishing tackle box, he filled one ball with the kerosene fuel they had for a camping stove they had used on shore. When the inside ball was full, he dipped the fuzzy outside into more fuel. Then he held Jen's racket in his right hand, put a match to the outside of the ball, popped it into the air, and hit it with all his might. That was when he discovered the flaw in his plan. A flood of fiery fuel gushed out of the ball, enveloping his hand and most of the racket. He

dumped everything into a cooler filled with melted ice to extinguish the flames and cool his burn.

He turned to plan B and made an old-style sling out of a metal stay and a piece of leather he cut from his belt. He dipped the leather into the ice water until it was saturated, and inserted a tennis ball, and decided it was good to go. He was able to propel the ball almost fifty feet. He thought that it was a good distance, but he still needed somehow to get that close to the trawler.

The groundswells had tossed both the Andrea and the Humeante up and down like ocean buoys most of the afternoon. When they finally subsided, a breeze picked up to about 10 knots. This was what Tom was waiting for; a little chop on the water and a stiff breeze to catch the trawler. The Andrea, with full sails, headed for the Humeante. All his weapons were ready, and adrenaline started pumping through his body. He was no longer looking at the radar screen because he could see the trawler dead ahead. As he moved within sight of the Humeante, he saw another craft alongside it. The craft carried members from Nicaragua's Coast Guard who were inspecting Octavio's boat. Tom had to come-about quickly with a new heading. He knew they were clear of Nicaraguan waters, so he wondered why the Coast Guard was that far north. Tom thought that something was not right with the Coast Guard meeting the Humeante this far out of their territory, so he decided to avoid contacting them.

It was late now, and the trawler stayed anchored. There was still an evening breeze, but Tom used the diesel engines to get close to the Humeante. Once he was close enough, then he put up the sails and silently came up on their port side. The first weapon from the Andrea was the spear tied to a dive tank. Tom hit the valve with an ax, and it fired off the deck. The spear hit the Humeante right at the water line.

Tom used the motor to turn for another pass, and this time he chose the tennis balls filled with fuel. Lighting one, he carefully maneuvered it into the sling. When he stood up to fire it into the trawler, shots rang out, but Tom was committed and ignored the shooter to fire his best shot. As soon as the tennis ball hit the wheelhouse, flames engulfed the wall. The shooter stopped firing to try to extinguish the fire. That gave Tom time for one more try, so he whipped

the sling as hard as he could and put a flaming ball right inside the Humeante's wheelhouse. He tightened his mouth and wiped his forehead when he saw bright orange flames light up the inside. With his throttle wide open, he swung around for a final pass. Passing on the starboard side, he opened the valve on the small propane tank and flung it over to the deck of the Humeante.

In the adrenaline-filled mayhem, Tom didn't realize he had been shot. He fell to the deck, trying to reach the throttle as the engine was screaming its demise. He looked over the railing to see the propane tank crazily spinning in circles on the Humeante, spewing flames in every direction, until it found an open hatch and fell below deck, throwing flames out of the open hatch. With one hand badly burned, a bullet lodged somewhere near his left kidney, and a bad knee from an old wound. Tom stayed just off their port side until he saw the Humeante sink. He shouted, "They will never do harm to anyone else. This is for you Jen. I will always love you."

Tom patched himself up and decided he should try to find a doctor in El Salvador. The wounds weren't the worst thing. The worst thing was figuring out what he would tell his family. How could he tell them he couldn't protect Jen? He thought he would always be able to protect her but he had failed. If only he would have come up top when she asked, she might still be alive. The more he reflected on the past few hours, the deeper he fell into darkness until he didn't care what happened to himself. Just when he was sure that all was lost, he got a call from Maureen. She cried when she heard the news about her mother, but she recognized that her father was in a place he sometimes went when he suffered alone with his PTSD. She stayed on the phone with him, and they both cried as she encouraged him to come home.

Later that morning, Maureen called the U.S. Coast Guard and pleaded with them to find the Andrea. She told the Coast Guard her father's simplified version of what had happened, saying nothing that would tip off the authorities of his act of revenge.