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# **For Better For Worse**

Written by Damian & Siobhan Horner

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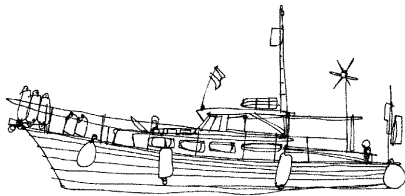
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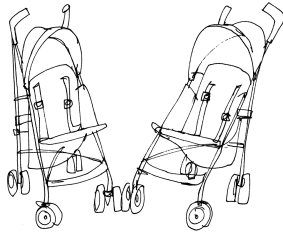
*For* **Better,**  
*For* **Worse**

**DAMIAN AND SIOBHAN  
HORNER**



PHOENIX

## CHAPTER 1



I feel almost cool again – a reckless woman, free and excited about the unknown. Well, as cool as you can get when you are pushing two kids under three in buggies, lugging a bright yellow potty and an inflatable boat too. At my side is a man muttering, shifting on both feet, checking his watch and trying to look relaxed.

Staring out through the rain-splattered windows of the Dover to Calais ferry, a dark-haired, glamorous foreign student looks me up and down, probably thinking something along the lines of, ‘God, I hope I don’t end up like that woman when I’m older’. I catch sight of my reflection. My hair is bed-ruffled from carrying India, my baby. There’s a vomit stain on my shoulder and bags under my eyes.

I assure myself that I am a youthful 39 . . . at the start of an Alice in Wonderland adventure, chasing a white rabbit down a rabbit hole in a magical world. In my story however the white rabbit is my husband, Damian. That twitchy man by my side.

Damian. On the verge of turning 40 and already talking wistfully about Jaguar E-types and other classic sports cars (has he forgotten we have two children?). He’s on Day One of our ‘new life’ and growing a beard in haste, wanting to shed his image of burnt-out advertising hard-man before we set foot in France. He’s almost six feet tall and good-looking, although I always thought he’d improve with a little more stubble and a lot less

gloss. Now he's walked away from his work life in London, his big salary, his bright and witty colleagues, his sleek suits and polished boots, his secure and comfortable existence. There'll be no room for such comforts where we are going. In Calais we'll board our old wooden boat to head south on canals and rivers that weave through France. We are trading our secure London life for a one-way ticket into the unknown. No work, no house, no plans.

As I nibble my sandwich, perched uncomfortably on what looks like a sack of potatoes but is in fact our rolled-up inflatable dinghy, I worry that I won't be an interesting enough companion on the days that stretch ahead of us. I mean you marry for life, not for lunch. What will I be like after several months on a boat? What will we discover about each other? Will we be able to get through the inevitable 'for worse' bits of the trip?

**As I eat my canteen-bought sandwich, I gaze out at the choppy sea and wonder what the hell we're doing. Furtively I look at Shiv with India in her arms and a potty by her side. I know I've been a complete pain in the arse over the last few months (maybe even years) and lately I have been unhappy with big chunks of my life. Not the important stuff like Shiv and the kids but the things that dictate the day-to-day structure of my life: my job, commuting, living in a city ... you know, the problems that most men bang on about. When I think about it now though, I can't believe that running off on a boat was the best solution I could come up with. Suddenly I'm overwhelmed by a huge sense of responsibility and realise that somehow I have to make sure Shiv really enjoys this experience. She looks shattered. Maybe I *should* have done what every other bloke does when they have a mid-life crisis and bought a pair of leather trousers and a motorbike.**

**Here, on a grubby ferry in the middle of the English Channel, reality is starting to bite. This is supposed to be a big adventure but already it feels as if nothing is turning out the way I had imagined it (and not in an exciting way either).**

I look back at the sea and remember last week when I was crossing the very same water in our own boat, *Friendship*. The Channel crossing was supposed to be the start of the whole thing; a symbol that marked the jettisoning of our old lives.

The reality was much less dramatic. In the end, after days of debate, Shiv was left, stuck at her mum's house in Peterborough (looking after the kids) while I made the crossing with Dave, the coxswain of the Dover lifeboat team. I didn't know Dave from Adam but in his spare time he works as a pilot, helping incompetent people like me to cross difficult stretches of water.

Although it was a bit of a let-down to leave Shiv and the kids for the Channel crossing, it made absolute sense for two reasons:

1) The Channel is one of most treacherous seas in the world and we didn't want to drown our children on Day One of the trip.

2) I haven't got a clue what I'm doing when it comes to navigation, tidal shifts and cross-track error so the chances of drowning my family would have increased exponentially if I had been left in charge.

When it came to it, I felt a bit empty on the big day. It was like a huge false start. It simply didn't count if Shiv and the kids weren't there too. Even worse, after so much work to get *Friendship* seaworthy, I wasn't the skipper on her first big voyage. I knew I needed Dave, but having him at the helm made me feel emasculated and embarrassed, particularly as he was a man who *really* knew the sea and had risked his life on countless occasions to save others. I mean he was the skipper of a lifeboat, for God's sake – a *proper* bloke. I could just tell that he thought I was some tosser from London taking a jolly old sabbatical. Frankly it didn't help that I had worked in advertising and was called Damian.

Nevertheless, I warmed to him immediately when he said how much he liked *Friendship*. 'She's a tough old sea boat,' he told me, 'she could probably withstand anything.' That was all it took to win me over.

The weather was miserable but the eight-hour crossing was utterly uneventful, boring even. I could hardly believe that this was the leg of the trip that had kept me awake at night (and in meetings) for the last few months. The Channel in a word? Grey.

Grey sea. Grey sky. Grey clouds. Grey ships . . . Grey. Grey. Grey.

After a full day in the drizzle we pulled into the yacht marina behind the ferry port in Calais and moored up on a pontoon. The hatches were secured, the doors locked and then we ran back to the ferry terminal to get the next ship home. I think I was in France for all of half an hour.

Just one week later, here I am again in the middle of the English Channel. This time on a ferry, with Shiv looking emotional, Noah, our two-year-old, looking excited and India, our one-year-old, looking for more food. Then there are the three rucksacks, two pushchairs, a changing bag full of nappies, a rolled-up inflatable dinghy and a potty. Oh yes, and how could I forget? We're also accompanied by an enormous canvas cover for *Friendship's* cockpit that turns out to be impossible to manoeuvre. If you've ever carried a double mattress up a flight of stairs, you'll have some idea of what it is like to lug it on and off a ferry as a foot passenger. You can imagine the arguments as we take over two hours to squeeze off the ship with all our clobber and then stagger the half-mile to the marina where the yachts are moored and where *Friendship* lies waiting for us.

Our first evening aboard, as *Friendship* bobs in the safety of Calais Marina with the kids curled up in their bunks, Damian paces up and down the tiny wooden cabin, head bent to avoid cracking it on the ceiling struts.

Four steps forward and Damian passes, to his left, the galley (kitchen), dining area and sitting room. Four steps back past a seat, shower room and toilet. That's it. There is no more. He pauses at the two wooden steps up to the cockpit, where I sit, watching him and waiting. He tuts, turns, takes four steps away

from me and stops short again at the cream-painted wooden doors that open into the kids' bedroom, the forepeak. It's a triangular space in the front of the boat (usually used to store sails and anchors) once converted into a luxurious more-than-double-bed for us, pre-kids. Now it's divided into two with a complex structure of netting and hooks to enable both Noah and India to sleep separately without falling a metre onto the floor.

With paper-thin walls made of painted plywood, their breathing fills our pauses in conversation. We shall live no more than ten feet away from them, and each other, from here on in. There is absolutely nowhere to sulk.

'I just don't feel anything big. I'm so disappointed. It's such a massive life-change. And I feel nothing,' Damian moans, his arm hanging from a ceiling strut, looking like he is on the Tube. He looks forlorn. I am angry.

'How on earth can you be like this?' I hiss viciously so as not to wake the kids. Although I am coiled with tension, I know if I shout we'll end our first night in a fight and I really do not want that.

Today has been so thrilling for me – so far removed from my monotonous existence in Queen's Park. I'm joyous that tomorrow will not be a biscuit-making day: walk to the park, kids in sandpit, cappuccino kick-start, punctuated conversation with mummy friends, walk home, lunch, sleep, ditto for afternoon till bath and bed, dinner with husband, whinge about stress, read, collapse in bed. What makes my heart beat is that I have NO idea what will fill tomorrow.

I stand up, poised at the cabin entrance, not sure what to do now – there's no space for me to pace too. At home I would have left the room to avoid an argument.

We've been together for nine years, married for four of them, but the voices of peers echo in my head as I survey our new living quarters and my disgruntled husband: 'Living on a boat will be miserable' and 'You'll be divorced within months.' Even good friends jittered. 'Incredible for a man to leave his career at its peak', 'Are you mad? Where will you storm off to when you

have a row?', 'What? You mean you'll have no television?!', 'You're going with two kids? Are you crazy?' In fact, come to think of it, only our families egged us on.

I make an excuse to take the rubbish out after we've argued about being different to one another, and stomp off down the pontoon. The sky is purple-black, mirroring my feelings towards Damian right now. I can just make out yacht masts pointing skywards. Halyards chat in the light evening breeze. My mood deepens. Maybe we've been too rash. Maybe we should have stayed put. Maybe we were caught up with the idea of having a romantic adventure. Well, it's not an idea any more.

Looking back at *Friendship* from the quay, even in this dying light our new home stands out from the rest, with her solid wooden hull, her bow stretching upwards and varnish gleaming. My family are lying, snoring and pacing inside that ten-metre-long boat. A dim yellow light from the cabin windows draws me back on board to join them.

By the time I've returned to climb over the taut wire safety lines and stoop under the new green canvas awning of the cockpit, Damian appears more relaxed and hands me a glass of red. Acutely aware that holding onto arguments will make boat life hellish, I soften, accept the wine and survey our new living quarters. I knock back the rest of my glass as it sinks in just how small our new home is.

*Friendship* is actually a converted fishing boat, made for carrying tonnes of cod, herring and mackerel from the north seas – not a warm-blooded family of four from London used to central-heating, fluffy carpets and rooms to disappear into. Tonight, we have to piece together a jigsaw of six-foot-long wooden boards, place cushions on them and then try to disguise this arrangement as a bed with sheets and duvet. Our bodies will have to entwine on this narrow platform for the next few hundred nights or more. I wonder how many nights will pass before it gets to me. I never ever make the bed at home, let alone dismantle one every morning.

I scrub 'adults' dinner' from the menu as I'm too tired to cook for Damian and myself now, and anyway I have no idea where



anything is. For their dinner, Noah and India each had to make do with a bag of ferry crisps and a banana. Before departure I had stocked the bilges with food: rice, tinned tomatoes, pasta, sardines. I wasted hours wrapping goody bars for the kids in plastic bags, squeezing cartons of UHT milk into unused parts of the boat and stacking tins of beans in the dark recesses of cupboards. Somehow I felt that if we were surrounded by a full larder then nothing really bad could happen. Perhaps it's something to do with being half-Indian. This obsession with food and where the next meal is coming from is ingrained. I know we're in France, not Tibet, but I've read that there are parts of the canals where one is miles from habitation and supplies. What I forgot to do in England was make a list of where everything is stored (which Damian suggested) so now there's no dinner.

My chaos and forgetfulness is balanced by Damian's love of order. He lives by lists, planning and looking ahead. He knows what is on the calendar in November next year. As long as I've known him, his world has been framed neatly by what he is planning for and what he needs to achieve to get there. Now, for the first time, he is removing the safety net and venturing forth with no plan. We have left England on our boat with no destination and no fixed double bed.

'Please look after us all,' I whisper to God as well as to Damian as I lie rigid in our new bed in our new home with my 'new' husband. For a moment, I wonder whether we'll be crawling back to England in a few weeks' time, making excuses to all our friends. My mind and stomach are doing somersaults but I pretend to sleep.

**Shiv seems so calm and relaxed but I'm freaked out by everything. I spend most of the night lying awake in our awful bed, wondering what we should do next. We have no plan and no timetable for this trip so in theory we could stay in Calais Marina for days, weeks even. But that seems ridiculous, we're only 20 miles from England and most people travel further to work each day. So shouldn't we just get on with it and**

motor south in search of sunshine and sunflowers? Then again, why rush? Let's make the most of every place we visit ...

I can't cope. I'm not used to having no agenda. For the last five years, Camille, my beautiful and über-efficient PA, has told me what I should be doing and when I should be doing it. Now I'm on my own, I'm feeling disorientated. I need lists, targets and goals. I am a man after all; I can't think for myself.