

***Man* Overboard!**

Also by Kathleen Rooney

Lillian Boxfish Takes a Walk

Cher Ami and Major Whittlesey

From Dust to Stardust

Man Overboard!

a novel

Kathleen Rooney



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FOR LUKA,
WHO LOVES THE SEA
AND ALL ITS CREATURES

I who once wrote songs with joyful zeal
Am driven by grief to enter weeping mode.

—Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*

Whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my
soul [. . .] then, I account it high time to get to
sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol
and ball.

—Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

***Man* Overboard!**

1



11:45 p.m., November 27

The sea is, if anything, famously huge.

My entire life I've feared and hated it. People who claim to love the ocean underestimate its vastness. With a few exceptions, despite being the Nebraska state champion in the five-hundred-meter freestyle in 2009, I've declined to go deeper than where my feet can touch sand.

I appear to be in the midst of a major exception, a gooey soup that I am stunned to be immersed in, freaking out, eyes open, burning in the saline, turning my body toward what I hope is up. Breath held, legs and arms pumping, panic pushes me to inhale, but I refuse, and everything hurts.

My boat shoes—Sperry Top-Siders bought with an eye roll because I was going on a boat—waterlog around my feet, the leather keeping me from kicking freely. Crackles of pain excruciate my soles as I pry them off, toe to heel, toe to heel, and keep thrusting up. Bones broken entering the water? Probably?

I peel my pants off, as they feel animate, like living things clinging and pulling me down. My button-up shirt, too, until I'm naked save my boxers, out of some autopilot sense of propriety, and

2 · Kathleen Rooney

my tank top that—also out of some autopilot sense of not wanting to be scolded by Kelly or Justeen—I avoid thinking of as a wife-beater. I might have tried to keep my socks if they hadn't been shucked off with the shoes, and my oxygen-starved brain debates whether I should have done this striptease, the cost of the warmth the garments might have provided versus the benefit of the ability to swim unencumbered, but all my body argues is that I have to breathe.

Thick with seventy-something humid degrees, the air I gasp when my face breaks the surface clogs my nostrils with briny slime. My ears throb with the unpoppered pressure of my plunge, yet I hear myself scream: “Ma! Mom!”—stupid not only because I'm a grown-ass thirty-three-year-old man, but because my mom has been gone for twenty-two of those years.

“Stop! Help! Come back! Help me!” The words muffle and die at the water's surface, the black bowl of midnight stifling my cries. Star-punctured, the tropical night is enormous. Bigger still swells the sea—much colder—around me.

The ship cruises beyond my reach, a monstrous fourteen-story layer cake receding in a southerly direction, leaving me with a view known to few people in history: their vessel untethered in the open ocean.

The victims of the *Titanic*, for example, saw a version of what I am seeing, only they plunged into the frigid North Atlantic through no fault of their own, but rather a fatal combination of questionable-captain-meets-exceptional-iceberg. Me, I'm in the tepid Gulf of Mexico and my ship is fine. Never better. Away she goes. No disaster, no emergency except on the most personal level. Nobody aboard

Man Overboard! · 3

the Carnival *Valor*—*your high seas hero, here to rescue you from ordinary vacations and whisk you away to leisure, fun . . . and amazing destinations*—knows I'm here, and nobody knows how it happened, not even me.

I reach for my phone but no longer have even a pocket.

My phone's been slurped up forever into the currents of the Gulf Stream. I felt alone, radically alone, nobody-cares-what's-the-point-of-anything alone before I entered the water. The recollection of that feeling returns, but I feel confident in saying that I didn't know what the fuck I was talking about, because now my biggest problem is that I *am* alone, truly, in the middle of the bounding main, and it really is bounding. Waves slap me in the face, wet hand after wet hand.

My sister Kelly probably assumes that I went back to my room to sleep it off. Her husband is likely saying something derogatory about me in answer to her wondering aloud what's become of me. "Kick?" That's my nickname: Kick. "He's probably at the wheel of the porcelain bus." Because he talks like that.

The moon is a waning crescent, C-shaped and lying indifferently like an average grade on its left side, shedding just enough light to show me how badly I've fucked up. Did I fall? Did somebody push me? Did I jump? Do I not remember because I was drunk? I definitely was.

I'm five feet, eleven inches and 170 pounds. I never fib and say I'm six feet, because that would be sad; lying to other people sucks, but lying to yourself sucks worse. I clock in at 16 percent body fat, which has been bugging me recently. I don't want to be one of those ex-athletes whose muscle runs to flab. I'd been trying to cut

4 • Kathleen Rooney

it down to 12 percent, but to do that I'd have to completely quit drinking, something I advise my clients and patients to do all the time, but a discipline I've not yet applied to myself. Now 16 percent feels like an asset, because every greasy fat cell stands to help me not freeze.

I'm sober as a Mormon now, as my grandpa Tom would say, making Granny Sue say, *Don't say that; it's rude*, sliding bacon onto our plates in their farmhouse kitchen.

But maybe it's good that I was drunk as a skunk when I went into the drink? Like being hammered kept me from being hammered by the impact, stopped me from pulverizing more than whatever I can tell I've broken in my feet—and maybe my lower back?

In those scared-straight videos in driver's ed, to a disgusting degree the inebriated drivers walked away loose-limbed, unbothered, and barely scratched. Meanwhile the innocents they crashed into died or were maimed because they stiffened naturally in fear of the collision. I have to assume that the floppy, sloppy relaxation facilitated by the many frilly drinks beginning when we boarded and continuing lounge after lounge are to thank—is that the word?—for my continued existence.

Now with the sea, a rough uncle, lifting me under my armpits to toss me, then shoving me down again, I want my existence to continue. More than I've wanted it to for weeks. Perhaps years, if I'm honest—a life force more urgent than since I was a kid.

As of late I'm a physical therapist by day and a fitness instructor and personal trainer by night and parts of the weekend. I'm ripped. But I wouldn't say I conveyed that I had it together.

Man Overboard! · 5

Some people think that I don't think just because I work with bodies, other people's and my own. But I have a rich inner life. Ankush, my boss at the gym, says I can't blame people because I look—accurately—like a dude who says to other dudes, “Do you lift, bro?”

During my short sojourn on our five-day cruise, fellow passengers might have glanced at me and assumed—from my age, my singleness, my attitude—that my kitchen back in Omaha contains the remains of a demolished frozen pizza and the scissors used to cut it, but they would have been mistaken. Look closer and you'd see a man devoted to cooking and meal prep. I am what I eat and, in that regard, I admit to being controlling and vain.

So maybe I have a chance of surviving? With my physical vitality or whatever? But how did I get into the water? I cannot remember. I might have leapt, because the prospect of doing so crossed my mind much more than once leading up to this family Thanksgiving vacation.

But I might have decided not to?

I might have fallen, mid-debate, at the railing in my intoxication?

I'd heard about people who slipped while trying to evade the NO SMOKING signs and security cameras in order to vape, so shit happens. If I did jump, even though I'd been thinking about doing so, I would still be astonished at the vehemence of my own gesture.

Regardless, either I have just executed the best and worst pratfall in all of history, the cruise ship serving as the ultimate banana peel upon which to have slipped. Or I have just made the most comically inept suicide attempt by being, it would seem, too

6 • Kathleen Rooney

wasted to die by a method that ought to have been more reliable than any other, the cruise ship's lethality as a structure to leap from more dependably fatal than poison or pills or hanging by the neck or any possible gun. (Trust me, you should see my search history.)

My anxiety increases every second. Only the moon is looking at me. Or is something else from underneath, down in the sea? How many times am I going to think the word *sea*? I heard somewhere that sharks are nocturnal feeders. I am thinking so many things at once, I am glitching.

However I've gotten into the water, I feel like I've served as the plaything for one of the caged gorillas at the Henry Doorly Zoo, battered and bruised and somehow amusing. I laugh, and it comes out a hacking wet cough, seawater and phlegm. My sort-of girlfriend Justeen always tells me that I never take anything seriously, but I do—it's just that everything is also absurd.

The kind of novels Justeen likes to read, as far as I can tell, are all about writers writing, or about creative people who see themselves as art monsters, and who agonize boringly about how best to make art while they undergo mild middle-class woes and slights, especially the women who are married to mediocre men and come to realize that wifedom is dull and confining and not all they were apparently conditioned to believe it would be.

I'm like, I could have told you that, which is why you won't catch me getting married. I don't believe that I would make Justeen or whoever *unhappy*. Her first husband was a certified dickbag, and I'm not one. But could I satisfy a wife completely in the way that romantic expectations demand I be able to? Best friend, perfect lover, unerring helpmate? No way. But nobody's asking my

Man Overboard! · 7

opinion on the state of literature or the institution of marriage, though both are tiresome.

I like to read stories of life and death where something's at stake.

And here I am.

2



12:00 a.m., November 28

The Carnival *Valor* carries 2,974 passengers. Two thousand nine hundred seventy-three now. But how?

Do I not remember how I got into the sea because I don't want to? Maybe.

Does my dad's side of the family rest in their so-called staterooms unaware that I'm half-drowned behind them as their diesel-electric engine propels them toward Cozumel? Absolutely.

My limbs flash white and fishy in the dank black water. I've never been so aware of my windpipe.

Dad, Pam, my older sister Kelly, her husband Jason, my nephew Ulysses, my uncle Sean, my aunt Maria, my cousin Leo, and my sweet old granny Sue all snooze, or prepare to, aboard the "fun ship." Blackened sea bass and prime rib digest in their bellies, cares having dissolved like paint off a brush into the colors of the sunset, et cetera.

Despite my long-standing distaste for the sea, this is—was—not my first cruise, not hardly, not since Pam, my stepmom, came into our lives like a cheerful albeit leathery Floridian angel.

10 · Kathleen Rooney

Thanks to her, fluency in the language of cruising is mine. *Pax* for “passengers,” a word meaning peace, though aboard I typically experience none. *Shorex* for “shore excursions.” *Sea days* and *port days*—I prefer the former for their ineffable quality and for the fact that on them, I will not be shamed for declining to scuba dive with the rest of the family because I fucking hate the sea, the sea in which I am struggling now not to die.

In calm water, they say, try to float on your back and conserve energy. But I am discovering that tactic makes you cold, so to warm up, I tread. In rough water, they say, try the dead man’s float, breathing only when you have to so as not to gulp seawater. But I am panicking and cannot get my breathing under control. I choke, then vomit. So long, sea bass; adios, ribs. I’m pissed at myself because will the chunks attract sharks? And I would have used those calories.

Oscar is the code for “overboard.” Nobody on the ship slipping away, windows agleam, like a skyscraper gone horizontal, has put that alert out yet. At the soonest, my family might notify the authorities when I don’t show up for brunch.

It would be funny if Oscar were my name. But it’s funnier that my name is Patrick. Not that part, but the whole enchilada: Patrick Kilpatrick. Am I in the process of fulfilling my surname’s grim prophecy? Has Patrick killed Patrick?

Cruise ships move at different speeds based on their durations. Since this is a relatively short one—a scant five days from New Orleans down to the Yucatán, then back to the Big Easy—the vessel dawdles a bit in order not to reach Cozumel until the early morning of day three. Nevertheless, its 110,000 tons move away at a considerable rate.