

By Mel Allen

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He hadn't expected the water to hurt so much. Like a vise tightening around his body, growing tighter and tighter so that he could barely breathe. Just above his head he saw the bow of the *Harkness* poised skyward. For a moment Rudi thought he would be crushed by his own boat. And then, except for the bubbles foaming to the surface, the boat was gone, too.

The wave that swept him from the deck had risen in the night from a January sea so shrouded in sea smoke that he could not see the faces of his shipmates two feet away. Now, he heard their cries from the darkness; their voices rose and vanished with the waves.

"Rudi!"

"Arthur!"

"Duane!"

The waves tossed them together, then tore them apart. When Duane hit the water, the flashlight he gripped in his hand had frozen solid to his mitten. Every time he moved his hands, the light wavered through the mist.

Arthur kicked toward the light. It was his flashlight, brand-new, a Christmas gift from his daughter, Robyn. When Arthur found Duane, he hooked his arm through a strap on his life vest. They heard Rudi, the only one without a life vest, choking and gagging, struggling to stay afloat. Arthur shoved Duane toward Rudi's voice. Duane spotted what seemed to be a long plank floating a few feet away. When he clutched it, he saw it was a wooden extension ladder that had broken free from the deck of the *Harkness*. Duane and Arthur wrapped their arms around rungs at either end. Rudi held on in the middle. In the cold and darkness they had found a slender eight-foot island. "Stay together, boys," Rudi said. "We've got to stay together."

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Until the moment shortly before 6:00 p.m. on January 16, 1992, when Rudi Musetti found over a foot of water splashing about the stern, the trip had been as routine as a car ride along I-95. They'd left Eliot at daybreak, a blistering cold but lovely day with blue skies and a shimmering sea dotted with fishing boats and tankers.

Rudi, 57, had worked for MacQuinn Construction for 37 years. The company used the *Harkness*, a 75-foot tug that once towed great booms of pulpwood across Maine's northern lakes, to haul barges in its pier-building projects. Rudi's job this day was to steer her home to Northeast Harbor, a 22-hour journey.

His mate, Arthur Stevens, 44, as thin and wiry as Rudi was broad, had dug worms, lobstered, fished the deep-sea trawlers. A good man on a boat. For fun, Rudi invited Duane Cleaves, a pal

from near Bangor, to come along. "We've got nothing in common," Duane told people. "He's ocean, and I'm a 'tater guy from Aroostook."

The men talked and joked, and from time to time Rudi let Duane take the helm. Around midday the seas grew rougher, and Rudi and Arthur wondered if Duane would stand up to the rocking. He never flinched, busying himself cleaning the galley.

When Rudi discovered the leak, the *Harkness* was far out to sea, buffeted by eight-foot swells and the strong northwest wind. The windchill plummeted to 54 below. With night came the smothering sea smoke. Rudi lurched into the engine room to start the bilge pump. He figured the water must be coming from a snapped rudder post. He had another worry: The 600 feet of towline had washed overboard. If it became entangled with the propellers, Rudi would lose his engine and his ability to steer.

The water continued to rise — the pumps apparently had frozen. At 6:05 he radioed the Coast Guard in Southwest Harbor. Southwest Harbor relayed his call to the Coast Guard in Rockland. Rudi said he'd try to reach Frenchboro, 20 miles north.

In Rockland Petty Officer Ronald Chadwick faced a quick decision. His 44-foot cutter was designed to weather the rough seas in which the *Harkness* floundered, but it would take a couple of hours to get to the scene. His 41-footer was twice as fast, but less handy in rough water — it might put his own men at risk. Five minutes after Rudi's call, Chadwick's five-man crew left Rockland in the 41-footer.

On board the *Harkness* now, things were happening fast, none of them good.

6:17: "I've lost an engine. Two feet of water over the stern."

Rudi had to stand on a box to read his instruments. With the rolling sea and glare ice that coated the deck, he kept slipping off. Duane braced him so that Rudi could tell the Coast Guard where he was.

On Vinalhaven Island, Dave Allen, captain of the Seacoast Mission's *Sunbeam*, listened intently to his scanner. He'd been friends with Rudi since boyhood. He plotted Rudi's position: five miles north of Matinicus Island. "Don't try for Frenchboro," he radioed Rudi. "Head to Matinicus. If anyone can find you, it's the fishermen of Matinicus." The two-mile-long island lay 22 miles out to sea, on the rim of Penobscot Bay, the outermost inhabited island on the Eastern Seaboard. Rudi always assumed it was deserted in winter. With his ice-coated radar now almost worthless, Rudi nudged the boat toward Matinicus.

6:24: "We'll try for Matinicus. I don't know what's going to happen."

The water climbed past their boots and reached their knees. Duane and Arthur found three threadbare immersion suits. Made for barge workers who might tumble overboard and need protection from the initial shock before being hauled out, they were not intended to keep a person alive for an extended time in cold water. Duane and Arthur put theirs on, then tugged

Rudi's onto him while he continued to speak on the radio. The Coast Guard told Rudi that an Air Force jet with pumps and a rescue swimmer was taking off from Cape Cod, only 90 miles away. But shortly after take-off, the pilot of the jet turned back. The inner window in the cockpit had started to crack.

As Rudi feared, the towline tangled in the propellers. Unable to make headway, the *Harkness* was battered mercilessly by the waves.

6:52: "I'm without power. I'm drifting toward Matinicus."

Along the Maine coast from Rockland to Mount Desert, people huddled by their scanners, as if by their collective will they could pray the boat to safety. A friend radioed from Deer Isle.

"What can I do?" he asked.

Rudi had spent his life on Mount Desert Island. He knew the fate of men washed overboard in winter. He wanted to spare his loved ones as long as he could.

"Call my girlfriend," Rudi said. "Call my father and mother. Tell them I'm all right."

An engine-room window shattered. Water reached Rudi's chest in the pilothouse.

7:00: "We're going down."

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All that day, the lobstermen of Matinicus stayed off the water. The island and its 30 or so inhabitants lay wrapped in a blinding shroud of sea smoke. The fishermen called sea smoke "vapor." They set traps in vapor all the time. But they were not fools. The island town history takes two pages to list the names of ships lost around its ledges. So the fishermen stayed home, waiting for the cold to break.

That evening Vance Bunker and his wife invited Rick Kohls and his wife to their house for lasagna. Their talk quieted. Over the scanner they heard Rudi's struggle. Vance, a lobsterman's son, was in his early fifties. Except for four years off-island to attend high school, he had lived his life on Matinicus. Rick, in his early thirties, had been coming from New Hampshire to the island in the summer since boyhood. He moved permanently to Matinicus at age 16, learned lobstering as Vance's stern man, and had fished his own boat for four years.

Vance's brother Albert phoned. Earlier that year Vance and Albert had rescued a yacht during a storm with winds so hard they flattened trees on the island. But on this night Albert was housebound with an injured leg.

"I can't go," Albert said.

"I know," said Vance. "I'll go."

Vance called Paul Murray, the island's mechanical wizard. "Paul's been with me on the water," Vance said. "I'm used to him."

By 6:40 the three men boarded the *Jan-Ellen*, Vance's 36-foot lobsterboat, one of only four boats on the island with heaters. Visibility was zero. Standing in his wheelhouse, Vance could not see his bow. A lifetime at sea and he'd never seen saltwater ice coat the windshield so thickly, freeze so hard on the deck. He started the engine. Paul turned on the Loran navigation unit. Rick released the mooring.

Vance gentled her into the chops. He knew he could not hurry. If he opened the throttle, the spray would cascade onto the boat and freeze; the build-up of ice would render the boat useless.

Over the radio Rudi had said he was north of the island. He said he could make out a green flashing buoy. But two buoys floated out there, a mile and half apart. Paul and Rick stood behind Vance, calling out Loran fixes. As Vance cleared the harbor at three minutes past seven, Rudi's transmissions ceased. The silence engulfed the cabin. The fishermen knew the boat had gone down, knew they were probably searching for bodies. "From the time we lost the conversation," said Vance, "I don't remember anything. I felt sick. My stomach just knotted up."

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The cold began in the feet, spread through the legs, wrapped around the waist, and climbed like a flame into the chest.

"Are you getting numb?" Rudi asked Duane.

"Half numb," Duane replied.

"Yeah," said Rudi. "Me too. Half numb."

Arthur knew he was dying. He knew he'd float away and someday they'd find him, bobbing like a cork, frozen, pickled by brine. The strange thing was, he didn't care anymore. He couldn't think straight. To hold on to the ladder seemed to make no difference. So he let go.

Then Rudi went under. He emerged choking. The sound was like a slap to Arthur's face. He kicked back to the ladder, wrapped himself around Rudi, and held his friend's head as high as he could above the water.

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When the *Jan-Ellen* reached the Matinicus buoy, the Loran position didn't match the position Rudi had last given. It had taken 15 minutes to reach the buoy. The Coast Guard gave Vance a new set of coordinates. The *Harkness* had probably gone down near the ledges of No Man's Land and Zephyr Rock, 1.5 miles northeast of Matinicus.

As he neared the Zephyr buoy, Vance saw lights through the gloom. He turned his searchlights on, but they blinded him reflecting off the vapor. Vance opened his window, trying to see through a six-inch slit, trying to miss the ledges.

The lights Vance saw belonged to the Coast Guard's 41-footer. Now both boats converged on the spot where they believed the *Harkness* had sunk. The men peered over the side, unable most of the time to even see each other, their lights as useless as candles in the wind.

Slowly, slowly, Vance scanned the water, the cutter in his wake; everyone looking, Vance fearful of running over a body.

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Arthur was the first to see the running lights of the *Jan-Ellen*. He was too weak to shout for help.

The beam of the flashlight, frozen upright on Duane's clenched mitten, pierced the sea smoke at just the moment Rick Kohls glanced away from the water and into the sky. "What are the chances," Rick said later, "I'd look up, not down, just at that moment?" The light, he said, looked "like a Charlie Brown Christmas."

They had found the men, but now they needed to get them into the boat. And Rudi, Duane, and Arthur were so frozen and weak they could be of little help.

Arthur drifted away into the welcoming lights of the Coast Guard boat and was rescued. Lobstermen know a life of leaning and lifting, of shifting weight, of keeping balance. But Vance Bunker had never needed to haul a weight so heavy, so slippery as when he tried to haul Rudi to safety.

Paul and Rick used their gaffs, long poles with a hook on the end, to snare Rudi and Duane. The gaffs held Duane and Rudi fast beside the boat. Drained of strength, they could barely grab their rescuers' hands. The boat rocked and tossed. Rick and Paul strained to keep Duane alongside. They leaned over as far as they could, grabbed whatever they could, trying to hold onto what felt like a ton of kelp.

"Help me," shouted Vance. "I'm losing my man."

Every time Vance heaved Rudi from the waves, Rudi caught on the railing and fell back. Vance felt his own strength ebbing. His face reddened with exertion, Vance called on his back and chest and shoulders to respond. "Pull, pull!" he yelled to Rudi. Rudi hung once more upon the railing, then toppled headfirst onto the deck.

"There's heat in the cabin," Vance gasped, and he hurried to lend one more hand to haul Duane on board. Duane, too, finally came over the railing and crashed onto the deck. Rudi and Duane crawled into the heated cabin. While Vance steered for home, Rick and Paul stripped off Duane and Rudi's clothes and dressed them in their own. The flashlight would not come off Duane's mitten.

Arthur, Rudi, and Duane shook so hard they feared they might break. They shook on the careful trip back to Matinicus; shook in the heated trucks that met them at the harbor; shook as they sat beside the roaring fire in Vance Bunker's house; shook coffee out of their cups; shook until the brandy finally warmed them and they lay covered under blankets and slept like dead men until morning.

"Boys," said Rick Kohls, "if we had any luck stored up, we've used it up tonight." In the morning Rudi, Arthur, and Duane flew to the mainland, a ten-minute hop over a sea still hidden by vapor. Reporters and television cameras met them. "We lose so many," Arthur's wife, Judy, said later. "So seldom someone's saved. I was bound and determined I wasn't going to cry, and he was bound and determined he wouldn't."

A television reporter asked Arthur to turn on the now-famous flashlight. The light balked. He smacked it against the palm of his hand, and to the delight of the audience, it snapped on.

For months afterward, Rudi woke in the middle of the night, worrying on the same problem. "I wanted to figure out what happened." He kept his heat cranked to 90° F. No matter how many clothes Arthur wore that winter, he shivered.

In late March the Maine legislature honored the Coast Guard crew and the lobstermen. It was the first time veteran Coastguardsmen could remember receiving such an honor for duty done. It was almost as though the state needed to honor not just the deed, but something larger. As Rick Kohls said, "I'm not real religious, but something happened that night."

The lawmakers stood, applauding. The lobstermen, proud and embarrassed, blushed. They were called heroes that day and again when U.S. Senators George Mitchell and William Cohen each read their exploits into the Congressional Record.

But one does not use that word lightly around Vance Bunker. "Don't call us heroes," he said quietly. "Don't glorify what we did." What he and Paul and Rick did that night, he'll tell you straight out, was what fishermen have done for centuries, without acclaim, without notice, without expectation of reward. A thank-you would have been enough, he says, and he got that. Rudi's parents wrote simply, "Thank you for saving our son."

And it wasn't like they had a choice. They had made their choice years ago, when they became Matinicus fishermen. A call for help is not a time to decide *if* you go, only how to get there.

Arthur Stevens understands the ethic of these men as well as anyone. "If somebody's in trouble out there," he agreed, "you go. You always go."

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