

ROUGH WATERS

Richard Ned Lebow

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Henry had booked the trip on-line for himself and his family. It looked legit, even though he had found the company and the references on the dark web. He checked it out on the regular Internet and found seemingly independent sites that suggested it had mostly satisfied customers. The company made all the usual disclaimers about delays due to inclement weather, crossings aborted by coast guard intervention, and refusal to accept any responsibility for what happened once they arrived in North Africa. It was a risky business after all, but Henry was willing to take the chance and had managed to convince his initially reluctant wife that it was the only prospect of their daughters having a good life.

The company promised to supply life vests and fresh water and claimed that more than 90 percent of its crossing had been successful. Only a few ships had turned back or been diverted by Italian or Tunisian authorities. Henry reasoned that whoever ran the operation had a strong interest in successfully ferrying people to their destination. If he failed to do this, people would post unfavorable reviews and the business would go belly up – literally perhaps. It was not a pleasant thought. Henry was old enough to remember watching BBC reports of boat people being rescued in the Med – if they were lucky – by European coast guard and humanitarian ships when their overpacked and unseaworthy tubs run into trouble. These disasters involved Africans trying to get to Europe. Europeans going the other way were richer, more sophisticated, and better organized.

The more serious problem, Henry thought, would be at the other end. Migrants from Europe were not for the most part put in tented camps ringed by barbed wire. Although there

were some who argued for such treatment on the grounds of revenge. They were treated politely, transported to hotels they had booked in advance, and given the freedom of the city. They were also shaken down for money. For many migrants, North Africa was only a temporary destination. They were in transit to sub-Saharan Africa. Either way, North African authorities demanded considerable money for either residence or laissez-passez permits. It had become a major source of income for littoral countries, surpassing remittances they received from Europeans of North African origin.

Henry had tried for some months without success to arrange for a quick path to citizenship for himself and his family in an English-speaking African country. He promised to set up a business, employ locals, and benefit the economy. African countries received a multitude of such offers and sold citizenship to the highest bidders. Henry was not in this category. He was comfortably middle class, an executive at a medium size firm with solid experience in marketing. His offer to establish a profitable business was not fully credible. In the absence of a visa he could not board a flight for Africa. The Mediterranean was the only escape route from himself and his family. The alternative, staying in Huddersfield, he considered out of the question.

Charlotte initially thought Henry was losing it. Moving to Africa was not her idea of a better life. She knew many people talked about a bleak future but they had a life here in Huddersfield, and a good one at that. She had grown up in a working class family and was now comfortably middle class. She was not about to leave on a lick and a promise, and she convinced herself, the naysayers were all exaggerating. The British had always pulled through and would do so again. Her commitment to stay began to wane when her sister and husband left for Australia. He had family in Melbourne and they arranged for visas. Then came the floods and

fires. Huddersfield avoided both, but the local and national news carried the stories and the fighting that broke out in their aftermath. The city was nevertheless on edge and a fire, totally unrelated to climate change, turned into an urban riot. Police fought looters, racial tensions rose, and random acts of violence rose dramatically. The turning point for Charlotte came when her daughter and a friend were roughed up by young thugs on their way home from school. They stole her daughter's watch and gave her a black eye.

The drive to Italy was unproblematic but long and exhausting. There were long lines of traffic, accommodations were difficult to book, and food and meals outrageously expensive. Turned away one night from a hotel that had overbooked they spent the night in the car. The young girls slept without difficulty, their parents did not and had to drive ten hours the next day. Crossing borders was also a problem. The French had all but excluded the English from entering their country and had used their preexisting facilities at Calais to inter those who came across without valid transit visas. There was a grand irony here because London had helped to pay for these facilities in an earlier era to keep illegal immigrants out of the United Kingdom.

Henry and his family had the proper transit papers for France but getting them for Italy proved more difficult. They had to pay a lot for them to the boat company, which provided this service. Altogether, Henry had paid 2,000 Euros for each of their four passages and another 1,000 Euros for transit visas. He could imagine the boat owners and the Italian bureaucrats arguing over how to split this bribe. Henry and his wife Charlotte had racing hearts at the Italian frontier – Schengen was by now history – but were waved through. They had two more days of driving to reach Reggio Calabria, where they would overnight before taking the car ferry to Messina in Sicily.

Henry kept the car radio on for news alerts in case something happened that caused them to deviate from their route. They were fine, but England was not. The United Kingdom had broken up a few years earlier, with first Scotland and then Northern Ireland going their own ways. Wales was considering leaving as well. The rump state of England was in great disarray. The recession was deepening and threatening to become a depression. Violence was on the rise, much of it directed, as always, against immigrants and minorities, but also against the government. The Tory government had promulgated a set of rules for dealing with the emergency, rules they changed regularly to everyone's annoyance and confusion. But certain prohibitions were constant but regularly broken by individual ministers. The prime minister refused to discipline his cabinet. It leaked out that three ministers, including the Chancellor, had made arrangements to emigrate with their families. The most egregious exposure was of the Defence Secretary who appeared to have transferred important military assets to Australia in return for citizenship for himself and his extended family of twelve.

People did not take kindly to this double standard. Several local Tory offices were torched or broken into and trashed. A former prime minister, who proclaimed his intention to relocate to the Caribbean, was roughed up by protestors before being rescued by the police. Shots were fired at a cavalcade carrying the current prime minister, wounding a bystander. In a well-read *Guardian* piece, a columnist known for her biting wit, compared the behavior of upper class passengers on the *Titanic* to their present-day counterparts. It was a myth, propagated by publicists for the well-heeled, that women and children were evacuated first for this sinking ship. In practice, the men mostly tried to save themselves and few lifeboats were left for those who had not traveled first class. There was no chivalry at sea, as there was none when the seas threatened to overwhelm the island of Britain. The columnist cited LaRochefoucauld who

described hypocrisy as the homage vice pays to virtue. Self-interest had become so blatant among the privileged classes, she observed, that hypocrisy was no longer necessary.

“I’m glad we’re leaving,” Charlotte said after listening to the BBC news. “It’s not the country I grew up in.”

“I’m afraid it is,” Henry said. “We just turned a blind eye, dismissing this kind of behavior as unacceptable and abnormal. We’re the abnormal ones in our commitment to more traditional values.”

The BBC news concluded with its daily weather report which these days included an update on the Atlantic Ocean. For the tenth day in a row, and 150 days of the last two hundred, the temperature of the water was more than four degrees below average. The Gulf Stream no longer reached Europe. It had not for some two years now. Instead, the Bear and Spitzbergen currents flowed from the Arctic south to blanket the British Isles. They were rapidly cooling not only Britain and Norway but most of northern Europe, which for millennia had depended on the warming waters of the Gulf Stream. It formerly flowed at an average speed of three knots per hour, was sixty miles broad, a hundred fathoms deep, and its water started north with an average temperature of 50 degrees. It followed the American continent north until it met the Labrador Current and then turned east toward Western Europe.

The news was followed by a discussion, a debate really, pitting a respected climate scientist against a Tory politician who was head of the Climate Research Group.

“Do you want to hear it, or should I turn it off?” Henry asked his wife.

“Let’s listen for a few minutes. Otherwise, I’ll concentrate on how slowly the traffic is moving.”

The climate scientist began by noting how their models were only roughly accurate and at best established a range in which change would occur. The Tory MP lit into him: “If your models are guesswork you have no right frightening people and even provoking them to violence.”

“Our models are not guesswork. Climate change is real. People have a right to know. In any case, scientists don’t provoke violence. Politicians do.”

“Is that so? First you predicted that the world was heating up. Now you say it is cooling down and that the glaciers will return. This is all nonsense. Our studies suggest that cooling will benefit the British economy.”

The scientists tried to stay on point and describe some of the complexity of climate change “The world is heating up due to carbon and methane emissions caused by human machines and farms. But it is uneven. Some parts of the world are getting colder, and all of northern Europe will be covered by glaciers within a century or so because the Gulf Stream no longer warms us. Hotter Atlantic waters have slowed down the Gulf Stream, then to stopped it from flowing across to Europe. Now, it doubles back to the Caribbean, making us colder and bringing serious flooding to the US east coast.”

“Glaciers move an inch or two a year. The Climate Research Group calculates that it would take at least a million years for them to cause any problem.”

“If I’m not mistaken, this the same group that under a different name calculated that Brexit would be a boon to the British economy?”

“Please turn it off,” Charlotte said. “I’d rather watch the traffic. I’m now thinking that all this carbon emission might be a good thing if it slows down the glaciers.”

“You don’t really believe that?”

“No, but it is a comforting thought.”

The girls were surprisingly good travelers. Henry and Charlotte stopped every few hours to let them run about. They let them order pizza for lunch and have ice cream later in the afternoon. Charlotte told them they were on a big adventure. They were on their way to a new home that would be warmer and where they could swim all year long.

“Will we have a swimming pool?” her daughter Olivia asked.

“Wouldn’t that be nice,” Charlotte said.

“Would you like to swim with me before or after breakfast?” she asked Olivia.

“I’d have to get really early. Could we do it after school? And could I bring a friend?”

“Of course, dear,

“Are we there yet, mummy?” Olivia asked.

“I’m afraid not dear”.

“I have to make pee-pee,” four year old Emma announced.

“OK, darling, daddy will pull over.”

They reached the Tuscany-Umbrian border and overnighted in an undistinguished hotel in an undistinguished town that had the advantage of being just off the motorway. Charlotte convinced both girls to have spaghetti Bolognese instead of another pizza. Their parents were more adventurous and shared some ravioli made with allegedly wild mushrooms and then \ a cutler. They washed it down with a good local red, a Montepulciano.

“Meat will soon be something of the past,” Charlotte said. Henry agreed, and wondered if they should feel lucky or guilty about eating it now.

“Lucky, I think. And luckier still to be escaping England. “It’s only going to get worse.”

“I’m afraid you’re right. Holland and Scandinavia are more threatened by high waters or cold temperatures but they’ve dealt with it better. And then there’s Ireland.”

“Clever buggers they are. You can’t help but admire the Irish, arranging for their entire population to emigrate to America over the next twenty years. They’ve got lots of support in the congress, let alone in the White House.”

“And it didn't hurt to send the Book of Kells to the Library of Congress on permanent loan.”

The next day’s drive was difficult because of the bad weather. It made for stressful driving even though it was all motorway and not so trafficked once they got south of Naples. They had been so exhausted the night before that they and the girls slept later than usual. They had time to do their email but not their normal perusal of the newspaper. Charlotte checked out a few stories on-line on her phone and read them aloud to Henry as he drove. They decided to listen to the BBC news but not any discussion that followed it.

The big news of the day, new demonstrations and violence aside, was the decision by Cambridge and Oxford to relocate to the US. Cambridge was going to someplace called the Upper Valley in Vermont and New Hampshire, where the two states, with federal backing, had made an offer the vice chancellor said she could not spurn. Oxford was moving to New Jersey. The prime minister was apparently blindsided by the news and insisted that King’s College Cambridge would not be allowed to remove and take the stained glass windows from its cathedral to put into an American replica. St. Paul’s School in London was relocating to Washington, D.C. The Archbishop of Canterbury insisted that he and other members of the ministry would remain in the country as long as there were English people who needed them.

“In that case,” Henry said, “they could leave now.”

They arrived more or less on time in Reggio, had another early night, and took the ferry the next morning across the Strait of Messina. They then drove south to Catania and then

southwest to the small seaport city of Licata. It was settled by the ancient Greeks, later ruled by Romans, Arabs, and Angevins, and Bourbons. The allies landed there in 1943, doing a lot of damage to the town. It was the setting for John Hersey's famous novel, *A Bell for Adano*.

Charlotte filled Henry in on the history when it was his turn to drive. Sightseeing was not on the agenda.

They finally arrived at their destination and checked in at their little albergo. As previously instructed, went to the Café Grangela and gave their names to the proprietor. They bought ice cream for the girls and coffee for themselves. Some twenty minutes later a Signor Rossi arrived and joined them at their table. He assured them that their departure would take place as scheduled at 5 am the following morning. Someone would collect them and their belongings at the albergo. He took their car keys and had them sign over the ownership papers. He told them that he would, as agreed, be depositing the sum they had settled on for the sale of the car as soon as he had it inspected. Henry worried that he could just walk off with the car but could not see any way of preventing it. He had no choice but to trust Sr. Rossi. He did not feel at all good about it.

The kids slept well but Charlotte and Henry were up most of the night. They dragged themselves out of bed, woke the kids, and went downstairs. A man named Salvatore introduced himself and told them they were waiting for several more people. He turned on the lights and the coffee machine, put on an apron, and made them unexpectedly good cappuccini. By now four other people had arrived, also interested in some coffee. He returned from the kitchen with milk and biscuits for the girls and in halting English asked their names.

All eight people followed Salvatore on foot to the waterfront and to a boathouse with large doors and corrugated metal sides. Inside, they encountered another ten people. There were

two English couples, one of them formed by two middle aged men. Four others were speaking what appeared to be Flemish or Dutch. The remaining two people were young men who seemed to be crew. The passengers had been told to come with no more than 25 kilograms of belongings per person, packed in something water-tight. The two crew members collected the luggage and told everyone it would be stowed on the boat. They distributed life vests, including small ones for the girls. Charlotte had brought her own, which were the best available for kids, and two for herself and Henry. Two more young men arrived with pastries and coffee and almost everyone indulged. The group was told that, as promised, they would provide a meal during the crossing.

Henry was impressed by the operation until they were escorted out to the dock and approached the ship. It was nothing like those sleek, modern vessels in the on-line brochure. It was an old, wooden hulled fishing boat that did not look all that seaworthy. There was only a small cabin for the skipper and a couple of crew, which meant that passengers would have to stay on the deck where they would be exposed to the elements.

“Surely that’s not our boat?” Henry asked Salvatore.

“Yes, it is.”

“It’s nothing like the ships you advertised.”

“It’s what’s here and what we are using today.”

Henry was not the only upset passenger. Several joined him in demanding to speak to whoever was in charge. Salvatore was not initially responsive but finally made a call on his mobile when most of the group insisted they were not boarding that tub or doing anything else until his boss made an appearance. Close to thirty minutes elapsed before a late model Alfa Giulietta appeared. A very tanned and sportily dressed middle-aged man in dark glasses emerged and spoke in Italian to Salvatore.

He then turned to the group and explained in passable English that their two principal ships were in use and this was the only other boat he could press into service today.

“The we will wait until tomorrow,” one of the Flemings or Dutch said.

“That won’t be possible,” the man in sunglasses said. “Those ships are booked tomorrow and this is what is going out today.”

“I said we will wait until tomorrow,” the man repeated.

“You can wait as long as you like,” signor sunglasses said. “Tomorrow’s ships are fully booked. There’s no room for you unless some people don’t show up, and that is unlikely.”

“And why is that?” someone else asked.

“Everyone from northern Europe is anxious to escape. I turn people away every day.”

“Surely, you can fit eight more people on one of your ships.”

“I can’t and I won’t. We book to legal capacity and I don’t want to get into trouble.”

“You’re in trouble with us,” someone else shouted. “You took good money for a passage on a seaworthy vessel and now you want to send us across the Mediterranean on this aged fishing boat.” There were murmurs of support from the group.

“I understand you are unhappy,” signor sunglasses said. “And I will make you an offer. First, let me assure you that this old fishing boat is completely seaworthy. It has fished in these waters for many years without a problem. It has a solid hull and is only slightly slower than the bigger ships. Best of all, the sea today is calm, the crossing will be some six hours, and if we leave now you will be in port by mid-afternoon. Tomorrow and for two more days the weather will be bad. My regular ships can make it across but the passage won’t be pleasant.”

“What is your offer?” Henry asked.

“I will refund half the cost of your passage.”

Discussion ensued among the passengers and most seemed willing to accept the deal. Henry asked how they would know if actually honored his commitment. Mr. Sunglasses thought for a moment, held up his hand for silence, pulled out his mobile and made a telephone call. He then explained to the group that he had awakened his banker who promised to do the transfers as soon as I got to work. "That's the best I can do," he said. "The alternative is to hang around and wait for no-shows and that could be some time. I can't predict."

Henry and Charlotte walked a short distance back from the pier to consult. They didn't like the boat but felt reassured by why Signor Sunglasses had said. They wanted to leave today and did not want to face the uncertainty that refusing this passage would create. The weather was lovely and a smooth crossing would be much easier for the girls. "Even if we don't get half the money back," Charlotte said, "we will still get to Africa."

The gay couple decided to wait for a larger ship and have a little holiday in Sicily in the interim. Everyone else accepted the offer and their luggage was loaded into the hold and they were invited on board. One of the crew motioned to Charlotte and explained to her in a mix of Italian and English that that it would be safer for the girls in the cabin. Charlotte could come inside too.

The sun had already risen when they pulled away from the dock. They made their way past the rock barrier on their port side until they were in the open sea. The water was calm and there was only the gentlest of swells. Charlotte went into the cabin with two loudly protesting girls in tow. Henry stayed on deck and chatted up the other English couple. It soon became uncomfortable on deck because of the heat and passengers sought cover under the tarp the crew had slung across the ship forward of the cabin. They altered course and were now running abeam of the swells rather than into them. The ship rose and fell and swayed to one side or another.

Several of the passengers found the motion uncomfortable, including one who had previously put on an anti-seasickness patch. Charlotte and the girls were unaffected, as Henry found out when he went inside to check on them. Boredom soon set in except for those struggling with the motion of the ship.

All ships underway are required to have their transponders on at all times. Unknown to the passengers theirs was traveling black to stay undetected because it was not licensed to carry passengers. For the same reason their sonar was not turned on. This put everyone at risk because they were crossing busy sea lanes plied by giant tankers and cargo ships. All these vessels had good, active radar, sonar, and computer programs that warned the bridge of ships in their path. Any collision would be fatal for a smaller vessel, as would passing too close in their wakes. The crew was not worried because the visibility was good and they periodically scanned the horizon with their binoculars. Mostly, they were on the lookout for coast guard and naval vessels that might intercept them. Their number had increased as the trade in illegal crossings of the Mediterranean had become routine. The crew knew they would have no trouble leaving port because all the local officials had been paid off. The risk of interception increased once they were out of Italian coastal waters. Coast Guard and naval vessels also avoided the busy commercial sea lanes unless they had a special mission that brought them there. Knowing this, the fishing boat headed out into one of the busiest waterways to keep it out of sight.

Fog or haze can develop very quickly at sea with little or no advance warning. This happened at lunchtime when everyone – the odd queasy stomach aside – was munching on sandwiches provided by the crew and drinking bottled water. Most people were feeling relaxed now that they had reached the halfway point of their crossing. As the fog thickened the swell increased and the temperature dropped. Their vessel maintained its speed and the captain turned

on its searchlight. This had little effect, as expected, and he cut the light. He also slowed down but it was too late. The fishing boat plowed into some low, unforeseen object. There was a crunching noise as it penetrated their hull. Their sudden loss of weight and buckling of the deck threw passengers overboard, or worse, into the cabin wall or a bulkhead. Moments later the vessel and those in the water were hit by the wake of a large ship. Water washed over the damaged fishing boat because its prow was at the waterline and could not rise over the wave. The remaining passengers and crew were carried overboard and many were quickly separated from their vessel and one another by the successive, if now receding, wakes.

Charlotte and her daughters were lucky. Charlotte was pushed hard against that wall of the cabin on which she already leaning and then flung forward. She collided with a crew member, not a railing or wall, and was bruised and stunned, but not badly injured. The two girls were sleeping on a mat beneath her and were tossed about. They were young, had been totally relaxed, and were uninjured despite their encounters with the sides of the wheelhouse. Charlotte gathered them up once she collected her own wits. Her next thought was about Henry, who was nowhere to be seen. Looking through the smashed wheelhouse windows she could see no passengers on deck, and only some of the deck as the rest was under water. She realized the boat was sinking and knew she needed to get off and away before it dragged her and the girls under. She pushed the still dazed girls out of the wheelhouse; its door had been sheared off and was lying at the back of the boat, most of it overboard. She somehow managed to get the girls to the door, on top of it, then climbed on herself and with a heave pushed it away from the boat. This was not hard to do as the fishing boat was gradually sinking and the door about to float free.

The last of the waves generated by the big ship had passed and the sea had calmed down. Charlotte made the girls hang on to the rope that ran across the door and was previously used to

open it from the inside. She lay down and paddled, moving the door away from the boat and looking out for Henry. It was hard to see anything much in the fog; visibility was limited to about ten feet. She shouted out his name but no received no reply. She saw no other passengers, which was not a good sign. She told herself that Henry was safe and would find them. She continued to shout his name, as did the elder of the two girls. Charlotte flashed Olivia a big smile.

“Daddy will find us,” she assured both girls. “Let’s shout out his name together every half-minute.” To her amazement, her watch was still working, not that she really intended to be precise about when she called out for Henry. It was the only thing they could do to find him, other than keeping their eyes peeled, and, she thought, it would give the girls something to concentrate on. Someone loomed into view and Charlotte paddled in its direction. To her horror, it was a man’s body gently rising and falling on the swell. She had the girls look away but they had already seen it.

“Daddy! Daddy!” Emma shouted. Charlotte and Olivia look behind them and there was Henry swimming slowly towards them. Tears came into Charlotte’s eyes. She quickly brushed them away and paddled hard on one side of the door to turn it in her husband’s direction. Paddler and swimmer quickly closed the distance and Henry reached out to rest himself against the door. This was more weight than the door could stand and it angled sharply with end Henry was holding on to sinking below the water. Emma would have rolled off if Charlotte and Olivia had not caught her. Henry eased off the door, treading water and holding edge of the door only with his fingers. The door righted itself.

“This is not going to work,” Henry said. “I’ll sink the three of you if I put any of my weight on this board.”

“What are you going to do?” Charlotte asked.

“Let me find another piece of wreckage that will support me and paddle back on it.”

“How will you know where we are?” Charlotte asked

“Do what you did before.” Give me a few minutes to scout around and then shout out every minute or so I can find you.”

“What if you don't find another board?”

“I will.”

“Lean over and kiss me,”

Charlotte eased forward on the board until her face was close to his. Henry raised his head, kissed her, smiled at the girls and swam off into the mist.

Charlotte looked at her watch this time and waited for a minute to pass. It seemed like an eternity. She counted down aloud and at the end of a minute the three of them shouted “Henry” in unison. There was no reply, but she really didn't expect one so soon. They kept shouting every thirty seconds until they grew hoarse. Charlotte insisted that they continue doing so but was losing hope.

“Maybe daddy found a good board or even a raft,” she told the girls but we have drifted too far apart for him to reach us.”

“I hope it has water aboard. I'm getting thirsty,” said Olivia.

“Me too, mommy,” said Emma.

Charlotte was struck by how quiet everything became. The only sound was made by trickles of water coming off the board when its position shifted in the gentle rise and fall of the sea. “How peaceful everything is,” she thought.

Postscript: The day I finished writing this story, 23 August 2021, the Associated Press reported that a boat crowded with dozens of migrants capsized off Libya, and at least seventeen people were presumed dead. It was only the latest disaster in the Mediterranean Sea involving migrants seeking a better life in Europe. In August alone, some eighty migrants were presumed dead in two separate shipwrecks off Libya's coast.