

## Land Line

by Barry R. Taylor

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This was the time of year when he could never decide which pajamas to wear. If he switched to summer pajamas too soon, he might be cold all night. If he stayed with the heavy winter pajamas, the ones with the snowflake motif, he might awaken in the middle of the night drenched in sweat. It was difficult to know. The spring weather oscillated randomly between late winter and high summer.

He laid the two pairs of pajamas formally on the bed. He stared down at them until he realized he was tearing up. He was exhausted, and wretched.

Alyssa always knew which pajamas to wear. She would say, “You’ll want the heavy ones tonight, they say we may get frost.” Or, “goodness don’t wear those, you’ll be much too hot. I’ve opened the window.”

The pajamas question was a stark example of how he had come to depend on Alyssa to help with all the little decisions that filled his day. She would tell him when he needed to wear a fresh shirt, remind him of appointments, patiently read his first drafts. He would help her cook, and put things on the grocery list, and listen with real attention when she unloaded about work. Alyssa doubted herself a lot. Thomas devoted himself to boosting her up. Thomas was prone to over-criticizing his work, and his ability as a writer. Alyssa wouldn’t let him get away with it.

It wasn’t until the crisis of the past few days that Thomas realized how the lives of two people living together became intricately interwoven over time. There were strands of Alyssa all through the fabric of his own personality now. She was the reason that he liked sushi, listened to jazz, paid attention to weather forecasts, cared so much about marine conservation. In ten years he had grown accustomed to consulting Alyssa on every decision, concerning whether to buy a house or what to have for dinner. Joint decision-making had become internalized, automatic.

Now that Alyssa was gone, he would have to relearn how to live on his own. It felt like his spirit was unravelling.

Now that Alyssa was gone. He still struggled to accept that awful fact. It was appalling, terrifying, like staring into an abyss, dark and vertiginous, and risk falling in. He knew there was

no point in holding on to hope. As the days passed with no word, hope had frayed from a strong, steady rope to a slender thread, ready to snap at any moment and send him hurling into the abyss. Yet something inside him wouldn't let him cut the thread and move on.

He began to undress. Tonight was the first time he had been truly alone since the crisis began. He looked over at the black and silver cordless telephone sitting on the bedside table. The land line. It had been the peak of telephone technology when they installed it. Now it was an antique. Yet he and Alyssa still used it. Alyssa's last words to him had been, "I'll call you when I get back." She always said that, every time she left on another marine survey. And she always did call, on the land line, as soon as she was back on shore and matters of the sea were no longer paramount.

But not this time.

Of course they both knew that Alyssa's job carried risks. Anytime someone sailed onto the open ocean in a small boat there was a chance they wouldn't return. Better weather forecasting, rapid rescues, unsinkable life boats, these had all reduced the risk. But it could never be eliminated. The ocean made its own decisions.

"The boat seems so small," he had complained once, as Alyssa was about to step on board. She had her rucksack over her shoulder. Her long brown hair was tied back in a ponytail. That had been in early days, when he still accompanied her down to the pier.

"We need something small and manoeuvrable," she replied. "To get in close among the ledges and shoals."

"What if you hit one of them?" he said.

She smiled at his concern. "The ship doesn't draught very deep," she said, not realizing that he didn't yet know what that meant. "Don't worry, I'll be fine. I'll call you when I get back." And of course she did call, on the land line.

Thomas's friends openly wondered why he and Alyssa kept the old-fashioned land-line telephone when so many of them had switched to using only their mobiles. It seemed to them both quaint and inefficient. Of course Thomas and Alyssa did have cell phones. Thomas spent too much time on his, talking and texting when he should have been writing. Calls from his publicist, his editor, his friends, his brother and sister, tumbled in almost on top of one another. The little machine sat on his desk beside the computer. It was constantly buzzing and vibrating, as angry as a trapped hornet, until he picked it up and pushed a button.

Alyssa seemed to live on her phone, when she was on shore. Texting and speaking and posting on social media were all part of her job. Thomas complained sometimes that he was jealous of her little phone, as secure in its cherry red case as a hermit crab in its shell, because the phone got to spend so much time with her. “Quality time too,” he said, “with your full attention.”

“Oh it’s just work,” she replied. But her thumbs never stopped moving.

Still, they kept the land line. For Thomas and Alyssa, the land-line telephone was more than a slightly dated means of receiving phone calls. There was history in it, and continuity, and therefore a gravity that their trendy, app-heavy cell phones could not possess. It represented tradition that demanded respect.

Thomas’s parents, who had grown up before cell phones and never grew to like them, had kept the same telephone number for most of his life. Their tan phone with its push-button keypad and receiver on a spiral cord sat on the table in the hallway, seemingly forever. Even after he left home and struck out on his own, even after he met Alyssa and all the welcome change she brought to his life, the telephone remained an essential, fortifying link to his parents, and to his past. No matter where he went or what he did, in the endless tide of tweets and texts and new technology, Thomas knew that if he picked up a telephone – any telephone – and entered a certain ten-digit number, his father would answer the phone. “Talk to your mother now,” he would always say, after a few minutes.

When his parents eventually moved into an assisted living residence, they gave up their old phone number. In some barely expressible way, Thomas found this mundane event unsettling, like the death of a long-lived monarch or the demolition of a landmark building. One of life’s few constants was no more. Continuity had been broken.

Nowadays, the telephone beside Thomas’s bed, and its sisters in his office and the living room, seldom rang more than twice a day. They still received occasional spam calls from businesses trying to sell something. Those calls invariably rang around the time he and Alyssa were sitting down to dinner. They learned to ignore them. The other calls, of course, were from Alyssa, assuring him that she was back in the harbour, safe and sound, and would he mind coming by to pick her up? She knew Thomas would be at home worrying, though he promised not to, as he did every time she was at sea.

She always made those calls on the land line. She could have sent a text message, a quick “I’m back!” to his mobile, but she never did. A call on the land line was an announcement. It meant that she was unambiguously back on the continent. She was on land.

The call telling him that something was wrong had come in on his cell phone, of course. Late at night, just as he was about to turn in. He had worn the winter pajamas that night. He tended to work very late when Alyssa was on a cruise.

“Mr. Dayne, I’m afraid there’s been an incident at sea,” said a deep, male voice. He was with the Coast Guard. Thomas put down the phone with a shaking hand. In thirty seconds his life had transformed into a waking nightmare.

Over the next few days the details of the accident clarified. The boat had struck a rock ledge in the dark, taken water and sunk in less than ten minutes. The pilot had barely enough time to send a distress signal. All three people on board had gone into the sea.

The site of the wreck was located swiftly. The pilot and the other biologist were rescued the following morning, bobbing on the waves in their inflatable life raft, not far from where the boat had gone down. There was no sign of Alyssa. The pilot said he had seen her, visible even in broken moonlight in her bright orange life jacket, swimming strongly toward the boat’s second life raft. It was floating nearby, uninflated, still inside its protective sleeve. He wasn’t sure if she made it. The sea had been rough.

Search vessels combed the sea all around. There was no sign of the second raft. The deep-voiced man from the Coast Guard, who identified himself as Captain Lamonte, said that was actually a hopeful sign. If the lifeboat were found, empty, they would know that Alyssa had drowned.

The search for Alyssa continued, of course. Thomas was in fact impressed by the resources marshalled in the search for one missing person: Coast Guard boats, military ships, civilian craft manned by a navy of volunteers. Oceanographers on shore plotted the currents and where they were likely to carry Alyssa, to guide the search. Captain Lamonte complained that the myriad shoals and shallows in the area made the current models unreliable. Alyssa’s life raft, if she was on it, could have drifted off in any direction.

Thomas wanted to go out with the others, to help in any way he could. The searchers told him, gently, that he would only be in the way. Thomas was no seaman. Keep your phone on, they said. We’ll call you when we find her.

Thomas's brother Gregory and his sister Anne came down to keep vigil with him. They were optimistic, at first. "Modern life rafts are floating survival kits," Gregory said. "They carry water, food, blankets, paddles, signal flares. She'll be fine."

"What if she didn't make it to the raft?" Thomas said, bleakly. They were in the living room, where he had been pacing, off and on, for hours. His brother and sister were sitting on the sofa.

"They'll find her," Anne said.

Captain Lamonte was more direct. At the end of the second day, when the sun set without any sign of Alyssa or her life raft, he explained the situation to Thomas. "The recovery rate for persons lost at sea is very good," he began, "but most persons in distress are rescued within twenty-four hours. After that . . . the odds decline swiftly."

"How long," Thomas managed. "How long can she survive on the raft?" Anne had told him stories from the internet of sailors adrift in lifeboats for weeks who somehow survived. But he knew those stories made the news precisely because they were so rare.

"Water is everything," Lamonte replied. "As long as she has fresh water she can hang on. But survival isn't the issue. The question is whether we can find her. She may have drifted far away from the wreck by now. The ocean is big." They were standing near the dock where the Coast Guard rescue ship was moored. Lamonte was a fifty-ish man with sandy hair and a no-nonsense air. He had spent his career in search and rescue.

"But you will keep looking?" Thomas pleaded.

"For another day or so," Lamonte replied. "The chances of rescue after three days are extremely low. After five days is a miracle."

Thomas made a strangled sound. "Mr. Dayne," Lamonte said, his voice unexpectedly gentle, "Prepare yourself for the reality that your wife may never be found."

At the end of the third day, Captain Lamonte gave his daily update to the press. The formal search was being called off. The chance of a rescue had become remote. Some volunteers from the nearest coastal village had agreed to keep on looking for a few more days. Of course all vessels passing through the area would be on alert. There wasn't much marine traffic among all those islets and shoals.

Thomas watched the news conference on television with Anne and Gregory. Captain Lamonte had called him earlier, on his cell phone, to tell him of the decision. Three days was the

usual limit. The odds of a rescue now had become too long to justify the resources of a major search. Alyssa would be reported as lost at sea.

Thomas stared at the television, stunned and silent. His Alyssa, lost at sea. A part of him refused to accept it. Alyssa lived for the sea. The ocean made its own decisions.

Gregory said: "I'm so sorry, Thomas."

"I'll make some tea," said Anne.

How long does one hold onto hope before it becomes irrational, a stubborn fantasy instead of a reasonable aspiration? As the days passed with no word of Alyssa, Thomas asked himself this question over and over. His rational mind knew that she was gone, almost certainly drowned. She had been swallowed up by the vast and powerful ocean she devoted her life to studying. Yet a tiny part of him refused to let go. He kept clinging to slight hope, even as it receded in the distance, growing smaller and fainter, as a ship heading out to sea disappears from the wharf, until it is nothing but a tiny dot on the horizon.

It was the not knowing that kept him in purgatory. It would have been better, somehow, if they had found her drowned body, or even an empty life raft. Then he could be certain she was gone, beyond all doubt. That irrational part of his mind would be silenced.

Thomas's sister and brother had stayed with him as long as they could. After five days, when the television news stopped carrying stories about the marine biologist missing at sea, Gregory left to go back to work. "She was special," he said as he left. "We're all going to miss her." The words were anodyne, but Gregory, not given to emotional displays, was near tears. "Call me if you need anything," he said.

Anne had left that morning. It wasn't fair to leave her husband with the kids any longer, she explained. For the first time since the accident, Thomas found himself alone in a house suddenly too large for one person.

Thomas removed his shirt, and his trousers. He still couldn't decide which pair of pajamas to put on. The room was lit only by a bedside lamp. It cast a soft glow over the stubbornly silent land-line telephone and the mockingly lively cell phone sitting beside it. He was beyond tired. Since Alyssa's disappearance, sleep had proved impossible.

Abruptly, in the depths of fatigue, too exhausted for hope or sorrow, he found a strange clarity of thought. Alyssa was gone, gone forever. The land-line phone would never ring again. It was time to let reason overrule emotion. It wasn't a question of closure – Thomas didn't

believe in all that – but acceptance of an obvious truth. He remembered what Captain Lamonte had said: rescue after three days is extremely unlikely; five days is a miracle.

It had been seven days.

The reality hit him like a wave. He nearly collapsed beside the bed. Yet he felt oddly relieved. No longer clinging to a foolish hope, he could finally move on. Purgatory had become hell. But hell promised eventual redemption.

He chose the winter pajamas. Without Alyssa, the bed would be cold. He turned out the lamp and climbed into bed. The only light now came through the windows, and from the cell phone sitting on the bedside table.

Thomas was too tired to feel anything. Tomorrow, he knew, the full force of Alyssa's passing would hit him. He would grieve, and his friends and family would grieve with him. There would be a memorial service, a funeral without a body, for his beloved, lost at sea. He would cry, and descend into that endless, empty loneliness that only fatigue was holding at bay. He would probably get very drunk, and probably more than once.

How long his time in that awful dark place would last he could not say. All he knew now was that tomorrow, and for many, many tomorrows after that, life would seem desolate and hopeless. How could he go on without Alyssa? Why even bother?

Eventually, perhaps, he would rise out of it. Someday, maybe, he would begin to gather up the unravelled threads of his life. He would begin to re-weave himself as an individual after so long as the interwoven fabric of a couple. He would find a way to make himself whole again.

But all that was to come. Tonight he sought only rest. He turned over and closed his eyes.

Yet sleep was denied him a little longer. He was just settling in when the cell phone buzzed. Annoyed, he picked it up and looked at the name on the screen. It was Anne. He thumbed an icon. "Hey Sis," he said.

"Hi," she replied. "Sorry to call so late, I was just turning in myself and . . . I wanted to make sure you were all right. How are you doing?"

"I'm ok," he replied. "Better, actually, than I have been, I think."

"Are you going to sleep? You really need some rest."

"Tell me about it. But yes, I'm going to sleep. Very quickly, I think. I'm exhausted. So tired of . . . waiting." He took a deep breath. "I think that's done now."

“That’s good, Thomas.” He could hear the relief in her voice. She understood the folly of holding onto a foolish hope. “Gregory and I will stay in touch. Remember, if you need anything, just call.”

“I’ll remember. Good night, Sis.”

“Good night, Thomas.”

He set down the phone and closed his eyes again. It was faintly ironic that his sister was keeping him awake by calling to ask if he were asleep. He would have found it amusing were he not so tired. He felt his body relax as exhausted sleep overtook him.

Again he was jolted awake by the cell phone. It had buzzed seven times before Thomas roused himself enough to pick it up and glare at the screen. There was a text message from Captain Lamonte, reporting on the search.

A few volunteers, mostly stubborn or under-employed fishers and sailors, were still searching around the site of the wreck. Searching at night could be as effective as in daylight, if the weather was good. Every life raft carried a mirror, and on calm seas the reflection of searchlights could be seen far away. Signal flares were even brighter, visible for many miles in every direction.

Still, the volunteers must have known, as did Thomas, that there was no real chance of finding Alyssa. They were enacting a kind of funeral ritual, really, by sailing on the ocean under sun and stars, wave-dancing in ever-widening circles and shining lights about. It was four days and nights of mourning, a wake on the open water. Men and women who lived by the sea were showing their respect for the lost, and for the ocean that claimed her.

Tonight’s sojourn was the last. Thomas glanced at the text message: “Three boats in harbour, one returning later. No sightings.” Thomas had seen the same message every night for the past four days. They were exquisitely timed to crush his spirit and guarantee another night of tossing and turning. He would receive yet another message when the fourth boat returned.

Thomas decided he had had enough of this too. It was time to move on. He didn’t need messages from empty-handed searchers, or support from well-meaning friends or Gregory or Anne or his editor or anybody calling at all times of the day or night to ask how he was holding up. Right now he needed sleep. He needed to escape the pain of losing Alyssa for a few hours in dreamless slumber before facing that rent in his soul in the morning.

He found the rarely used switch and turned the cell phone off. He watched the light fade from the screen until it turned black. The room was even darker now. He tossed the phone on the bedside table. For a long time he sat there in the darkness, listening to the quiet. He found himself remembering a line from Paradise Lost, when Satan, banished from heaven after his failed rebellion against God, first discovers the hell into which he has been thrown: “No light, but rather darkness visible served only to discover sights of woe”. Thomas’s life had become visible darkness.

He was fully unravelled now. Alyssa was gone. He finally accepted that awful reality both rationally and emotionally. Abandoning a tiny, foolish hope was, paradoxically, the key to getting on with his life.

His gaze fell on the cordless telephone, sitting silently beside his bed. It was faintly illuminated by the light from the window. He picked up the receiver and listened to the dial tone for a few moments. He set it back in its cradle. Tomorrow, he decided, he would take the first step toward living without Alyssa. He would call the phone company and have the land line removed. He saw no reason to keep it any longer. Continuity had been broken. Resolved now, he turned over, closed his eyes and embraced the blessed oblivion of sleep.

Yet it was still not to be. Half an hour later he was awakened again by the persistent ringing of the telephone.

