

Under the Waves by Benjamin Markovits

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When I was 17, I was dismayed in the Baltic. For years, that's how I told the story, to make a joke of it.

My English friend Sam used to visit us every summer in Flensburg, in Germany, at my mother's childhood home. (It's across the water from Denmark.) Sam loved sailing but didn't have much opportunity. Maybe that was why I decided to take him out one windy afternoon, with my youngest sister, Rebecca, who had just turned 12.

The waves were as big as I had ever seen them. It was gusty too — one feature of that coast is the way the wind chops and changes. I knew that we shouldn't go out with more than two people; the boat was too small. But Rebecca wanted to come, and I let her.

Just rigging the boat on the beach in all that wind was a struggle. The noise, the flapping canvas were hard to bear. But we got the sails up, hauled the boat into the water and set off. It stays shallow a long way out, and until I could push the centerboard down, we drifted.

The centerboard holds the boat in the water. Once it was down, the mast, which was old and wooden, snapped in the strain of the wind. It fell back across the boat, just missing us. The mainsail was stretched so tight across the middle that nobody could move. I groped under the sail to unhook the halyard when a gust of wind came and we flipped.

The stump of the mast hit me on the head. For a second, I couldn't see. I felt the cold first, and then the wet. When I came up, I could make out the hull of the upturned boat ahead of me, so I swam toward it and climbed on top.

Sam surfaced next. As he put his palms on the gunwale, I noticed Rebecca was missing. I told him to check for her. He dived down, and a few moments later popped up. He couldn't see her. I felt the first inklings of panic, an intuition about disaster, that it was coming. But then Rebecca emerged, her wet head bobbing out of the water. It was just an ordinary accident, something from which you recover.

Later I found out that she had been trapped underneath. Her life vest kept thrusting her up, into the underwater tangle of sails and ropes, but she found a pocket of air. Eventually she took a breath, dived down, swimming against the buoyancy of her vest, and came up clear of the wreckage.

Afterward, the whole situation descended into farce. The maritime search-and-rescue service, really a bunch of kids doing a summer job, banged into our boat. Their motor cut out, and they couldn't get it started. The kids on shore kept calling them on their CB, so they turned it off. Eventually, one of them stripped to his shorts, tied a rope around his waist and dived in. He was going to swim us all home, two boats, one of them face down in the water, through a heavy swell. We got nowhere.

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Next they tried rowing and gave me one of the oars. I was shivering by this point, postshock, freezing in the wind, but the truth is, the rowing also warmed me up. There weren't enough blankets. Rebecca, blue in the mouth, was huddled under one of them. But then the engine started up, and we made it to shore. Everybody was O.K.

When we got home, the storytelling began. But I noticed at once there was a glitch in my story, something I wanted to pass over: the part where I was resting on the boat. I had no idea how long I sat there, doing nothing, while my sister struggled underwater. Or why I sent Sam instead of going after her myself.

I made excuses. I had just been knocked on the head by four feet of mast. Because I ended up nearest the hull, I climbed on first, before I knew what was going on. When Sam came up, he was still in the water, so I sent him down. But the excuses didn't help much, and I had to consider another possibility: not that I was scared, but that in some terrible way, I was lazy or selfish. That this was one of those moments when you get a taste of yourself, like smelling your own breath.

I recognized even that night, when we went over what happened again and again, that I was basically a good brother. Whatever flaw had been exposed was compatible with other virtues — like love and sympathy. But I had also had a glimpse of something else.

In a way the search team let me off the hook. They turned the incident into a funny story. The moments I was sitting on the boat, cold and alone, began to seem less and less real. It was almost as if I had had a disturbing dream, the kind you feel guilty about in the morning. But you also feel relief when you wake up and think, nothing happened.

Benjamin Markovits, 41, is the author of seven novels, including "You Don't Have to Live Like This," about an experimental community in Detroit, which will be published in July.