

BY COLEMAN HOUGH '78

I always knew I'd be dead



I used to think I would die on my tenth birthday. It was an unusually warm day when it came. November 7, election day. Nixon was running against Humphrey. My parents were having a party—though not for me. Paper-mache donkeys and elephants hung like mistletoe above every doorway.

My father had been puffed up that fall—a Republican, poking my mother—and she, like a thorny angry fish, would bite—snap her jaws and thrash violently on his line. I knew their game.

It was election day and the day of my death. I was not afraid. The coast guard had posted a gale warning. No big deal. The winds always came and howled. All bark—no bite.

We were daredevils—my whole family: Democrat mother, Republican father, sassy-pants sister, and me. Just before a storm we walked at the edge of wind on the battery—a high wall around our town that kept the sea out. High wire dancers, we—balancing—getting soaked—hollering death away with whoops and yips and twirls. My father gave us each a poncho that filled up with danger and made us look like fallen balloons.

*My birthday. Election day.
The day I fell into a wild
wild welcoming sea.*

No one knew I was going to die that day. The house was quiet. Election day. I imagined the elephants and donkeys casting their morning shadows on that giant poster of Nixon and his clown-wide smile. Humphrey had a bend to his brow. He looked worried.

I must have fallen back to sleep because I woke up to singing—my whole family still in robes, gathered around the foot of my bed singing HAPPY BIRTHDAY. My cousin was visiting. He was five. It was his first time alone with the high-flying Houghs but he joined right in. My father plumped my pillows and served me breakfast on a tray. His voice boomed above the rest and then he said, ‘We’re going sailing sweetie, eat your eggs.’

“Today? It’s November.”

“Your birthday treat,” chirped my mother.

Drowning. I imagined it. The ease of it, weightless.

“Drink your O.J.” My mother blended it with banana. I didn’t have the heart to tell her it made me

nauseous. She continued, “Get dressed. Be quick. We’ll meet downstairs and go.” I was slow. My family was perky. My mother drove fast. My father ate fast. My sister ran fast. I couldn’t think of anything I did fast. Maybe I would have a slow death.

“Hurry up,” clapped my mother. “We need to be back here by 4. We have to vote and get ready for the party.” My mother gave directions at home. On the boat, she was silent.

My dad was captain and I was his boat slave. He would shout, “Coming about—hard a lee—run up the sail. Good job.” And then he’d sit back—tilt his face to the sun—drink an ice cold beer that would drip into his beard.

That day we ignored the gale warning flag—we always did. A red triangle flapping at half mast. My sister seemed worried. I wondered if she knew about my death—sensed it.

“Let’s drop anchor and eat.” Mother was licking the side of a bowl of potato salad, sorting through forks and plates.

I can’t remember now if we ever ate that day—ever felt the cold weight of a plastic plate in our laps—pulled the sog of fried chicken skin, teeth searching for meat and bone. It came so fast. The storm. The gale. I pointed to the sky. Look, Dad. A pencil shading the horizon—darkness—sheets of rain—topple twisting high flying chaos.

Mom took my sister and cousin underneath where they sang hymns and prayed. I had followed them but my father grabbed my ankle—“Take down the sail.”

And I did. I walked fearlessly to the front of the boat as if that was what I was always meant to do. My birthday. Election day. The day I fell into a wild wild welcoming sea. **e**

Coleman Hough wrote the screenplays for Full Frontal and Bubble, both directed by Steven Soderbergh. She also wrote a script for HBO about the life of Katharine Graham, which is scheduled for production in '09. Her short play, Glancing at the War, was included in Theatre of Note's late night series last spring, and her plays The Diagnosis and Dressed for Dinner were produced by Padua Playwrights. She currently lives in Los Angeles where she teaches screenwriting at USC in the MPW program.

