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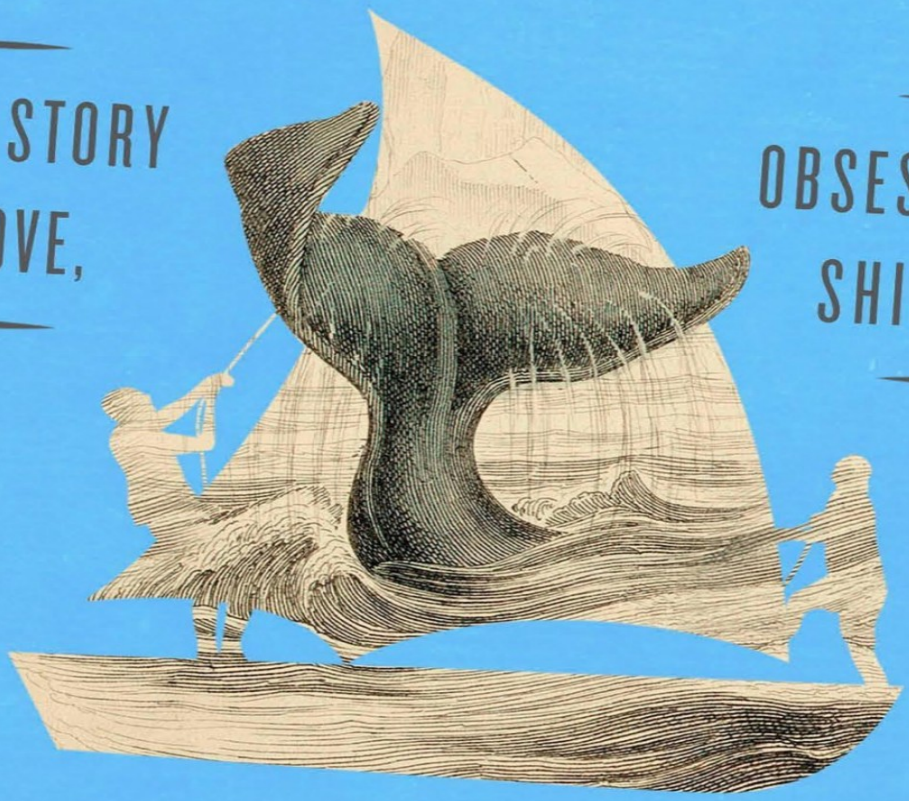
A MARRIAGE AT SEA

A TRUE STORY OF LOVE, OBSESSION, AND SHIPWRECK



SOPHIE ELMHIRST

A Marriage at Sea

A TRUE STORY *of* LOVE, OBSESSION, *and* SHIPWRECK

Sophie Elmhirst

RIVERHEAD BOOKS
NEW YORK
2025

RIVERHEAD BOOKS

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

penguinrandomhouse.com

Cover design: Lauren Peters-Collaer

Cover image: Detail of engraving by William Jardine originally published in *The Naturalist's Library*, 1837 / Photo: Universal History Archive/UIG/Bridgeman Images

Book design and illustrations by Meighan Cavanaugh, adapted for ebook by Cora Wigen

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Elmhirst, Sophie, author.

Title: A marriage at sea: A true story of love, obsession, and shipwreck / Sophie Elmhirst.

Description: New York: Riverhead Books, 2025.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024041610 (print) | LCCN 2024041611 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593854280 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593854303 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Bailey, Maurice. | Bailey, Maralyn. | Shipwrecks—Pacific Ocean. | Shipwreck survival—Pacific Ocean. | Shipwreck victims—Pacific Ocean—Biography. | Married people—Biography.
Classification: LCC G530.B15 E56 2025 (print) | LCC G530.B15 (ebook) | DDC 910.9164—dc23/eng/20250210
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024041610
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024041611

Ebook ISBN 9780593854303

First published in hardcover in Great Britain as *Maurice and Maralyn: A Whale, a Shipwreck, a Love Story* by Chatto & Windus, an imprint of Penguin Random House Ltd., London, in 2024.
First United States edition published by Riverhead, 2025.

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland, https://eu-contact.penguin.ie.

pid_prh_7.1a_152035053_c0_r0

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and in memory of my father

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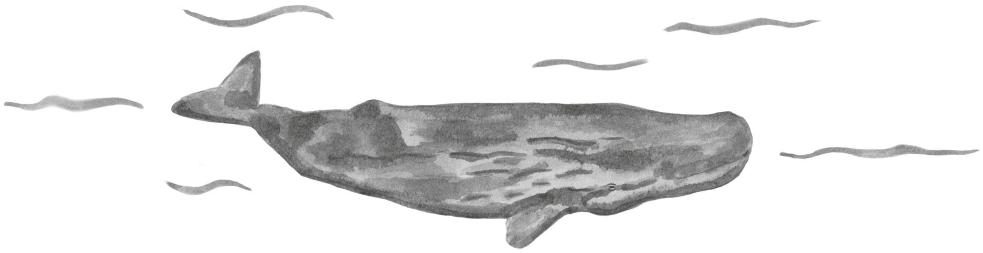

ONE

4 March 1973

Maralyn looked out at emptiness. There was little to see except the water, shifting from black to blue as the sun rose. A clear sky, the ocean, and themselves: a small boat, sailing west.

At seven o'clock, Maralyn left her watch on deck and went down to the cabin. Maurice was still asleep in his bunk, stirring a little. The morning would follow the certain rhythms of every other morning: coffee and breakfast, then all the checks and jobs a boat requires. A formula so practised after months at sea that it had become as automatic as time.

Except this morning, in the precise moment that Maralyn put her hand on Maurice to wake him, they felt a crack, a jolt, the sound of a gun going off, as if the violence had come from her touch. The noise split the air. Books leapt off the shelves. Cutlery flew.

They thought of their boat as their child. To hear her wood tear and splinter was like hearing the pained scream of an infant.

Up on deck, they discovered the cause. A whale was next to them in the ocean, massive and alive. Water was streaming down the dark cliffs of its body as it twisted and writhed. It looked as if it were trying to climb out of the waves, hauling its dark bulk up, then smashing back down, a meteor landing in the ocean, showering spray. Its tail, ten feet across the flukes, was beating at the surface in a kind of fury. Blood poured from its body into the water.

Maralyn couldn't understand where it had come from. She'd just been up here, waiting for the dawn, and seen nothing but a fishing boat when she'd taken over from Maurice at three. You don't miss a whale.

But perhaps you do. It must have risen from the depths just after she'd gone down the ladder and broken the surface right where they were. She couldn't bear the thought that they'd somehow hurt the creature. It seemed uncanny that in the entirety of the Pacific this would be the spot it chose.

What did it matter? There it was. A sperm whale, Maurice could tell, from the blunt, square block of its head. He knew his whales. It was forty feet long, he guessed; a good ten feet longer than their boat.

This close, it was difficult to take in. Whales were best admired from a distance, like certain kinds of paintings. He could identify its parts—the blowhole, the lower jaw, the pectoral fin—but they didn't seem to add up to a coherent whole. The creature was out of proportion, unnatural in its size. One rogue swipe of its tail and they would be cleaved in two. It was monstrous, he thought. Only compared with them.

The whale was still thrashing, as if it were trying to shake something off, or escape its own body. It was dying, Maurice realised. These were its death throes.

And then it was gone, sucked into the unknown darkness of the ocean. It would likely die down there, blood leaking into the water, alerting other creatures to its presence. Great whites and blue sharks would gather, rip it apart, and feast on its blubber.

They stared at where it had been, the surface marked by dissolving trails of blood. Such stillness, after a performance like that.

Wait. The crack. Never mind the *whale*.

Down in the cabin, water was already coming up through the floorboards. How long had they wasted up on deck, staring at the whale! Maralyn worked

the pump while Maurice splashed around searching for the damage. There it was: a hole below the waterline near the galley, about eighteen inches long, twelve inches wide, the size of a briefcase.

Maurice was shouting. Get the spare jib sheet. Clip it to the corner of the head sail. Lower it over the bow and drag it to cover the hole, then make it fast at both ends to secure it. The pressure from the ocean should force the sheet into the hole, plugging it. He adjusted the sails to keep the boat moving at about two to three knots, and they hurried back down below deck.

Maralyn kept pumping, hoping the water level would now go down. But the sheet wasn't working; the water kept rising. They needed a way of plugging the leak from the inside. Maralyn found clothes, cushions, and blankets and stuffed them into the hole. That didn't work either. Perhaps there was another hole they hadn't found. Some unseen damage where the water was pouring in. It was too late to find it now. The water was up to their knees, and the cupboards were starting to spring open, unleashing their contents. Eggs and tins bobbed around them. They looked at each other.

Maurice fetched the life raft and the dinghy, then collected as many freshwater containers as he could find. Maralyn waded round the galley, filling two sail bags with their things. Two plastic bowls, a bucket, their emergency bag, passports, a camera, a torch, their oilskins, her diary, two books, two dictionaries, and Maurice's navigational tools: his *Nautical Almanac* and *Sight Reduction Tables*, his chart, sextant, compass, and logbook.

They worked fast and in silence, strangely calm as the water rose. It wasn't easy, gathering possessions from a vessel filling with ocean. Ten minutes, it took, to gather what they could. Then they climbed off the boat into the dinghy.

Around them the Pacific was moving gently. Maralyn watched cushions she'd spent hours embroidering float away on the waves. Their boat settled low in the ocean, then lower.

Maralyn found her camera and took a picture of Maurice, who was sitting in front of her, shirtless. He turned back to look at her, every muscle of his

back delineated under the harsh glare of the sun, wearing an expression not of fear, not yet, but of a kind of taut blankness, as if he had not quite grasped what was taking place, the sight of their boat tipping to one side as she sank in the middle of the ocean.

She went down so gracefully. The solid bulk of her hull, the deck, cockpit, sails, and ropes all quietly swallowed by the water. Maralyn took a picture as the last triangle of sail and the tip of the mast disappeared beneath the surface. Frozen in the photograph, the mast looked as if it might be coming the other way, emerging from the water like a thin arm hoping for rescue.

TWO

Maurice Bailey, in 1962, was working as a compositor at Bemrose printers in Derby, a fine old press that in its prime had printed the large railway timetables pinned up on station notice boards across England. Maurice arranged blocks of text in mirror image on the slate, a technical job that required long training, an exacting eye, and the ability to read upside down.

In the evenings, he returned home to a cramped flat on Rose Hill Street, a thin road of squat, redbrick houses near the centre of the city. Halfway down the road was a reminder of how a different class of Derby had once lived: A grand manor with pea-green gates and square chimneys overlooked the Derby Arboretum, a gift to the city from Joseph Strutt, a nineteenth-century mill owner, grateful to the local workers for making his fortune.

Like much of England, Derby was in the middle of a building spree. Council estates and suburbs were spreading at its edges. A looping sequence of ring roads and roundabouts were being constructed to encircle its old Tudor heart.

Maurice didn't much like the place. He called Derby a backwater, a city where nothing happened.

The people were unworldly, he felt, judgemental of anything that seemed to threaten their own existence. In a letter to a friend, he noticed how families newly arrived in his neighbourhood from the Caribbean were greeted with "brutish racism." He escaped whenever he could, driving up to the hills of the Peak District, where he went rock climbing or flying in small

planes. He played tennis, too, and lifted weights at a local gym to improve his tennis. And he sailed.

Maurice's hobbies were not just distraction. They gave him a sense of freedom, of a life beyond the limits of his own. Other than work, he had little else. For years he had been alone in the stubborn sort of way that lodges in people when they can't imagine sharing their life with someone else. "A pattern of detached bachelorhood," as he put it. He never saw his family, who lived only a few miles away in their end-of-terrace house in Spondon, a quiet village east of Derby.

Maurice's father was Charles, but everyone called him Jack. When he wasn't working at the Rolls-Royce factory down the road, he had his hobbies, growing vegetables out back and ringing bells in local churches on the weekends. Maurice's mother, Annie, had once been in service, working at a large house in Spondon. She stopped to bring up the four children she had over two decades: Reg, the eldest, then Maurice, Joan, and, last of all, Bob. Their births bracketed the Second World War: Maurice was born in 1933, Bob in 1947, into a different world.

Four children of the same parents do not receive the same parenting. Maurice was unlucky. He had a stutter and a hunched back, then caught tuberculosis before there was effective treatment. Annie's ginger hair turned white overnight, she always said. To recover, Maurice had to stay in bed for months, alone in his room. It can stay with you, time like that; conditioning loneliness, baking it in.

Maurice became a problem to be fixed. He'd missed so much school being ill that he had to spend weeks catching up. Later, he told friends that Annie had made him copy out the dictionary, standing over him with a ruler in her hand to swat him if he made a mistake. It wasn't so unusual then for parents not to kiss or cuddle their children, but that didn't make the absence of affection any easier to bear.

The silent room, the stutter, the ruler—they did their work. Maurice, as a teenager, couldn't bear himself. He was mortified by how he looked and how he was. He became awkward around people, hobbled by self-consciousness.

Aged fourteen, in his Spondon House Secondary School photograph, he stood a head taller than almost everyone else. With his hooded eyes and solemn expression he looked a weary forty compared with the thin-legged, bright-faced girls and boys around him.

All he wanted was to escape. His first attempt was intellectual. Annie had been brought up in a strictly Christian household, had it stuffed down her throat, she said. While she no longer went to church, she made her children go, just in case, like an insurance policy. Faith wasn't about belief as much as behaviour. Sunday school and reading the Bible—it was what you did and it made you good.

Maurice, rebelling, discovered science. He read about the origins of the universe and natural selection and decided that the theory of evolution made much more sense than Christian theology. He voiced his reservations; his parents objected. It was as if he were trying to dismantle morality.

So he left. Two years of military service in Egypt and he came out a sergeant. Then home again, for evening classes. He only ever came into the living room to eat. Otherwise, he kept himself apart from his family as much as he could. He had a Morris Minor, a small car that was good for getting away, and took his younger brother, Bob, up to the Peak District to go walking. They climbed Kinder Scout. Maurice would tease Bob, which Bob hated, but it was only the natural order of things, the way families pass down pain like an inheritance.

Once Maurice had his job and his flat in Derby, he was gone for good. To Bob, it seemed as if he wanted to start again, to pretend his childhood had never happened. They hardly saw him after that. He never spoke of them. Years later, he turned up at his father's cremation. He didn't go to his mother's funeral at all.

Once a month, on a Sunday, there was a local car rally in Derby. Mike, an acquaintance of Maurice's from the gym, asked Maurice if he'd like to go along in his place. Mike usually went with a colleague from the Derby tax office but he couldn't make it this week, and she wanted a companion.

Maurice panicked. He was nervous around new people, and he knew nothing about cars. Generally, he liked to do things that he'd done before. This was the kind of situation he'd ruin, just by being himself.

Mike reassured him. You'll be fine, he said, not knowing Maurice very well.

On Sunday morning, Maurice waited at the agreed spot, the Market Place in the centre of Derby, overlooked by the old clock tower, bells ringing out the hour. Cars kept passing and slowing. He watched with relief as they drove on. Perhaps she wouldn't turn up. Then a car stopped in front of him, a large Vauxhall Cresta driven by a young woman with long dark hair. She wore jeans and a blue sweater and smiled up at him. Maralyn.

What was it? The casual way she leant across the seat to open the passenger door. The ease with which she smiled. Her vigorous driving towards the start of the rally. She seemed to know instinctively how to *do* things, a way of being that was at odds with Maurice's conception of what people, or at least himself, were generally like. She could talk, just talk, even while driving. And the Cresta was something in itself. A four-door carpeted saloon, bench seats and heater fitted as standard, modelled on the American Buick with tail fins and white-walled tyres. Pure chutzpah. It made the Morris Minor look parochial.

Maurice crumbled. If you believe you're a disaster before you've even begun, it tends to go that way. Everything he said was wrong. He was supposed to be navigating as she drove, but he kept confusing left and right. When he tried to correct his mistakes, he made things worse. At the end of the day he offered to buy petrol for the car, but when he put his hand in his pocket, he had only ten shillings and fourpence. Maralyn had to pay.

How did he not have the money? It seemed absurd, yet somehow inevitable. Like all practised self-saboteurs, everything he did seemed only to confirm the abject opinion he already had of himself. “That was the end of it,” he wrote later. “My first contact with this wonderful girl was to be my last.”

A formal apology was called for. He wrote Maralyn a letter and sent her the largest bunch of flowers he could afford. A few days later, to his surprise, she replied, thanking him. Mike, on subtle questioning, revealed that Maralyn was just a colleague, nothing more. Maurice wrote to her again, asking her out. Maralyn replied, not by return post, but by calling Maurice at work. The boldness of it! Just ringing him up like that at the press, as if that were a normal or acceptable thing to do. Maurice had to pretend it was a business call.

Their first evening together, Maurice took her to a Chinese restaurant. They drank wine, then went to the theatre. Maralyn had never done any of these things before. She was only twenty-one and still living with her parents, Fred and Ada, in their home in Normanton, south of Derby’s centre. Fred and Ada were Maralyn’s uncle and aunt who’d adopted Maralyn after her mother, Mary, Ada’s sister, got divorced. Maralyn became their only child. They were protective over her, kept her world small. Maurice liked the feeling of introducing her to things.

Later, they drove back to her house and she asked him in. They whispered to each other for hours while her parents slept. She told him the short story of her life: Parkfields Cedars Grammar School for girls, then teacher training, a brief stint at a private school in Shrewsbury, her job in the Derby tax office. Beyond work, her life mostly revolved around her parents: baking with Ada, listening to Fred play his trumpet in a local band. Her biological mother, Mary, remarried and had two more children, Patricia and Brian. As

half sisters, Pat and Maralyn became close. Pat often came round to Maralyn's on weekends: playing in the garden as children, listening to music and Radio Luxembourg as they grew up. Later, Pat would try to persuade Maralyn to go to dances at the local barracks, but Maralyn always said no. She didn't seem interested in the things that busied her peers. It wasn't out of timidity, more that she preferred to be outside, going for walks. She never put on makeup or minded what she wore. Pat used to give her castoffs, the only fashionable things Maralyn ever owned. Early in the morning, the sky still dark and the streets empty and silent, Maurice and Maralyn crept out of the house to the Cresta and slept together on its wide bench seat. A seat, Maurice noted later, that made it "an excellent courting vehicle." As the sky grew light, they drove out of the city. In the open country they stopped by the side of the road and walked through a field of long grass, dew soaking their feet.

Maralyn showed Maurice where to find newly sprouting mushrooms and explained their life cycle, how their threadlike mycelium forms a network through the soil connecting everything that grows. Maurice marvelled that she knew such things.

THREE

Love, when it works, can feel like such a terrifying fluke. Two people have to choose and be chosen, and, most unlikely of all, these choices must happen at roughly the same time. Why Maurice chose Maralyn was obvious. "I needed someone like Maralyn in my life to make up for the confidence I lacked," he wrote. She coloured in his gaps.

Why Maralyn chose Maurice seemed more perplexing, at least at first. Pat always thought that Maralyn could have had anyone she wanted. She was so confident and pretty, so at ease in herself. Maurice was sure she must have other suitors. Her life was just starting to open out. Maurice, nearly thirty, had narrowed his to a dark flat and a low opinion of himself. Loneliness had closed around him like a case.

But Maralyn was stuck too. Fred and Ada liked the old ways, things done properly. Fred worked on the railways; Ada, who'd worked in service, had standards. When Pat visited, she and Maralyn were put to work by Ada: shelling peas, polishing the brass knocker on the front door, scrubbing the front step with a donkey stone. As the seasons changed, they swapped winter curtains for summer ones. Maralyn would not leave home until she was married.

Then what? Cooking, cleaning, children: the domestic formula. But Maralyn wasn't Ada; the cyclical work of a home wasn't enough. She liked to push at the limits of things, according to Pat. Before she met Maurice, she used to smoke Stuyvesants, the long ones with a tip. She liked large, flashy cars, and was the kind of person who drove her Cresta to rallies on the

weekends; who had no qualms about ringing up a man she liked at his office. Beyond the confines of her parents' house and the Derby tax office, she sensed the possibility of a different kind of life. Here was a man, nine years older, who already appeared to be living it, sailing boats and climbing mountains. He flew *planes*.

As soon as he could, Maurice took Maralyn out to the hills. He wanted her to try climbing and flying, to like what he liked, but it was also a kind of test. Would she manage up a mountain; would she love it as much as he did? It was satisfying, showing her things he was good at. Maralyn didn't take to flying, but she did turn out to be a sturdy walker, unafraid of bad weather. Maurice took her to the Lake District, where they camped in a farmer's field. It was Easter but still so cold that it snowed. He worried she might be put off, but she never complained or suggested they pack up and go home. After a day's hiking, they returned to their tent, frozen. Maralyn declared that they would eat the first thing she could find in their box of provisions and warmed up a pan of custard over their Primus stove. She didn't even ask him what he wanted: She already seemed to know.

She showed the same flair on mountain ascents. Maurice purposefully took her on a difficult route up Yr Wyddfa on a hot day, and Maralyn stripped off her top to walk in her bra, not minding who saw. When they climbed Ben Nevis, she insisted they reach the summit even once they were enveloped by mist and wind. They ran back down holding hands to escape the storm and spent the whole night awake, clinging to the tent's poles to stop it from flying away.

During that first year together, Maralyn had her own test for Maurice: a week's holiday with her parents in Cumbria. Maralyn drove them up from Derby in the Cresta, and on the way home suggested that Maurice have a turn at the wheel. Maurice found himself going a hundred miles an hour