

WHY A NEW YORK CITY FAMILY
CAST OFF CONVENTION FOR A
LIFE-CHANGING YEAR ON A SAILBOAT

SEVEN *at* SEA



ERIK ORTON & EMILY ORTON

“Erik and Emily skillfully show it is possible to live big on a shoestring budget while giving their family an astonishing education in adventure, creativity, purpose, and grit.”

—LINDA AND RICHARD EYRE

#1 New York Times Best-Selling Authors of *Teaching Your Children Values*



“A fun, inspiring read.”

—WHITNEY JOHNSON

Best-Selling Author of *Disrupt Yourself*
and *Dare, Dream, Do*

“Required reading for those who dream of adventuring as a family.”

—BEHAN GIFFORD

Coauthor of *Voyaging with Kids*



Working the night shift as a temp in a high-rise cubicle, Erik Orton knew something had to change. He felt the responsibility of providing for his wife and their five children—the youngest with Down syndrome—but craved a life that offered more than just surviving.

Watching the sailboats on the Hudson River during his sunset dinner breaks, Erik dared to dream. What would it be like to leave the hustle of the city and instead spend a year on a sailboat, somewhere beautiful, as a family? Despite having no sailing experience, his wife Emily's phobia of deep water, and already stretching every dollar to pay rent and buy groceries, the family of seven turned their excuses into reasons and their fears into motivation. Sure, they would miss their friends, they could go broke, they could get injured or die. Worst of all, they could humiliate themselves by trying something audacious and failing. But the little time they still had together as a family, before their oldest daughter left for college, was drifting away. The Ortons cast off the life they knew to begin an uncertain journey of 5,000 miles between New York City and the Caribbean, ultimately arriving at a new place within themselves.

A portrait of a captivating and resilient family and a celebration of the courage it takes to head for something over the horizon, this is a deeply compelling story—told alternately by Erik and Emily—for all those who dream of leaving routine in their wake.

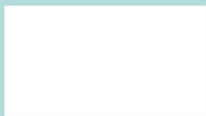


ERIK ORTON is an Emmy Award-winning writer and former Broadway tour manager. He was raised in Germany and the suburbs of Washington, D.C. He has produced various musicals Off-Broadway. His original musical, *Berlin*, won an Emmy Award as well as a CINE Golden Eagle Award and Bronze Telly Award. In 2018 he climbed El Capitan—the tallest granite cliff in the world—got scuba certified, and learned to surf.

EMILY ORTON is a former English teacher turned homeschool mom. She speaks and writes about living with purpose. Her writing is featured in *Dare, Dream, Do* by Whitney Johnson. Curiosity has led Emily to become a rock climber, a sailor, a scuba diver, a world traveler, and most recently a surfer.

ERIK AND EMILY continue to learn, grow, and travel with their five children. They love to gig as a family band when their two oldest children are home from college, and they occasionally post music videos to YouTube. They are currently traveling Europe by sailboat and VW van with their younger children. They blog together at fezywig.com and make their home in New York City.

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PRAISE FOR
SEVEN *at* SEA

“Erik and Emily Orton are extraordinary not only at telling their five children how to live, but ‘showing them.’ In this fascinating real-life story of spending an incredible year fulfilling a dream to sail 2,500 miles from the Caribbean Islands to New York City in a catamaran, they skillfully show that it is possible to live big on a shoestring budget while giving their family an astonishing education in adventure, creativity, purpose, and grit. With great intention they embraced risk and some pretty breathtaking adversity, which changed and refined them all in ways that will leave the reader full of admiration and wonder.”

—LINDA AND RICHARD EYRE

*#1 New York Times Best-Selling
Authors of Teaching Your Children Values*

“We don’t need more stuff to be happy . . . we need less. The lessons of love, determination, and dreaming big wait for you in this adventure on the sea. You will find yourself sailing through each page, lost in the beauty of this family’s voyage. It gives you the courage to do the same in your own life’s travels.”

—CHESTER ELTON

*New York Times and Wall Street Journal
Best-Selling Author of The Carrot Principle and All In*

“I LOVED IT! Absolutely loved it. Erik and Emily Orton engagingly narrate the exploits of their family as they disrupt their conventional New York City life for an adventure at sea, unfazed by the challenges of five children, one with special needs. They can’t imagine everything that might go wrong, but it will anyway. They won’t persuade you to spend a year on a boat—at least, they didn’t persuade me—but they will seduce you into imagining boldly and envisioning setting sail on an adventure of your own. They will persuade you that ‘unconventional’ is a synonym for ‘individual’ and have you contemplating why you would accept an off-the-rack version of your life when you can tailor-make your own. You’ll finish *Seven at Sea* daring to seek a discovery-driven voyage to your dream life, or the dream-of-a-lifetime. A fun, inspiring read.”

—WHITNEY JOHNSON

Best-Selling Author of *Disrupt Yourself* and *Dare, Dream, Do*

“We’re all on a journey. The Ortons’ storytelling of their particular path guides all readers—not just those who dream of seafaring—through lessons on living, loving, and life. They share their hurdles with candor and warmth, and just enough discomfort to remind you they’re real: stretching beyond their comfort zone in the joyful and daunting extremes of life on an adventure. The way that Erik and Emily consider, evaluate, and take on challenges they face is instructive for all, and required reading for those who dream of adventuring as a family.”

—BEHAN GIFFORD

Coauthor of *Voyaging with Kids—A Guide to Family Life*, featured on the *Today Show*, *CNN*, *Business Insider*, and *Inside Edition*

“I love nothing more than seeing someone put his or her mind to something, and then make it happen. Well, that’s not entirely true—I love nothing more than seeing a family put their mind to something, and then make it happen. This is a great story of a loving family working together to fulfill dreams that one of them had—and that the others just didn’t realize they had yet.”

—PATRICK SCHULTE

Head Writing Bum at Bumfuzzle.com and
Cofounder of Wanderer Financial

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For our crew:
Karina, Alison, Sarah Jane, Eli, and Lily.
You will always be our greatest adventure.

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INTRODUCTION

OYSTER POND, SAINT MARTIN, CARIBBEAN

20 Days aboard *Fezywig*



ERIK

I pointed *Fezywig* out of the channel for the third time in three weeks. “Okay, kids, hang on,” I called across the deck. Before we arrived at Oyster Pond in Saint Martin, I’d had no idea we were picking up our boat from one of the most treacherous coves in the whole Caribbean: a narrow channel weaving through jagged cliffs, submerged reefs, meandering buoys, and direct exposure to waves rolling in across the Atlantic Ocean. Now I knew what was coming, and I was scared spitless.

Emily turned up the music, and all five of our kids started singing “Rox in the Box” by the Decemberists. We’d been singing this haunting, jaunty song for years as our family had learned to sail. Karina, our oldest at sixteen, dusty blonde and round-faced, stood across the cockpit, her eyes riveted on the channel. Alison, fourteen, with cropped copper hair, looked up the mast to check the wind indicator. Sarah Jane

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(or SJ or Jane, but never Sarah). twelve and already turning platinum blonde, swung from the canvased bars covering the cockpit. Eli, eight and gangly, was our one boy. Lily, six, with her almond eyes and apple cheeks, was the end of the line. Eli and Lily couldn't swim. That's why they were tethered with harnesses to jack lines running the length of the boat. Emily steadied herself in the doorframe between the galley and the cockpit. Her smile was confident, but her blue eyes were full of questions. I did my best to smile back.

We sang loudly as the boat pitched and the bow pounded into the oncoming waves. Singing kept our minds busy and nausea at bay. We got through the pin buoys and out into open water. I turned the boat toward the island of Tintamarre, which put us sideways to the waves. That's when my queasiness returned, but I was determined. Even with only one working engine, we weren't spending another night in that hot, stuffy anchorage waiting for a mechanic who might never show up.

Putting up the sails would have moved my nausea to the next step, and it was a short trip, so we motored the few miles to Tintamarre. A bunch of boats were already tied to mooring balls along the main beach. There was one ball free, so we went for it. Karina and Alison were at the bow with the boat hook ready to snag the line. Getting the mooring ball on the first try had become a source of pride for me. We'd practiced it constantly since our earliest family sails. Karina and Alison were our best snaggers. But despite my, ahem, nearly impeccable driving, they missed it. I wasn't a good enough captain yet to stay calm. I had something to prove. With the wind pushing the boat sideways and only one engine, I wasn't about to go around for another pass. I shouted up front, "I can't believe you guys! Alison, take the helm!" Emily conveyed the second half of the message, and Alison took the wheel. Jane kept Eli and Lily out of the way. She knew the "Mad Dad" look when she saw it. I jumped down to the stern and grabbed the mooring ball with my bare hands.

"Bring me a docking line!" I ordered. A docking line was fire-brigaded to me. "And another one!" I demanded. Another one appeared

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in my hand. I did a Herculean move, pulling the lines together and tying them to the stern. I didn't even deign to shoot my kids a nasty look. We were now "anchored"—backward. Boats at anchor are supposed to point forward into the wind, not backward.

We spent the next thirty minutes putting on a circus for the boaters moored near us. I imagined the other boaters' mocking thoughts as they sat quietly poised in their cockpits, their bows bobbing up and down, annoyingly pointed into the wind. Meanwhile I was running around untying lines, retying lines, trying to give Emily and the kids the silent treatment but also needing their help, as we painstakingly pivoted our boat to point into the wind. The correct direction. The direction we would have been if they had gotten the line the first time. If both engines had worked. If we all hadn't felt nauseous. If, if, if.

The sun went down but the wind picked up. It was going to be a long, roly night. The nausea was not going away. Everyone lay still, looking pale and trying not to puke. Despite her own nausea, Emily rallied to heat broth for dinner. We all took a few sips.

I looked around the ten-by-sixteen-foot cabin at Emily and our five kids, ages six to sixteen. Eli and Lily lay splayed on the floor in a pile. The older girls flopped face-first on the table. Not one of them was happy.

"Whose dumb idea was this?" I asked. Their heads lifted and looked at me. I wasn't asking about this anchorage or this little overnight stay. I was talking about the whole trip: quitting my job, packing up our stuff, leaving our apartment and friends in New York City, flying to the Caribbean, moving aboard a fixer-upper boat we'd never seen before, and imagining we could sail all over the planet for the next year.

All their fingers pointed at me. "It was your idea, Dad!" They burst out laughing. I couldn't help but crack a smile too.

Emily clarified. "Hey, that's not entirely true."

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PART ONE

6 Years
to
1 Month before *Fezywig*

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CANADA

Maine

Vermont

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Massachusetts

New York

Rhode Island
Connecticut

NEW YORK CITY

Pennsylvania

New Jersey

Delaware

Maryland

Virginia

North Carolina

South Carolina

UNITED STATES

Florida

THE BAHAMAS

CUBA

HAITI

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

CAYMAN ISLANDS

JAMAICA

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NICARAGUA

Isla de Providencia

Isla de San Andrés

Isla del Maiz

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COLOMBIA

VENEZUELA

ARUBA

NETHERLANDS ANTILLES

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

PUERTO RICO

BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS

U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS

ST. KITTS AND NEVIS

MONTSERRAT

MARTINIQUE

ST. LUCIA

ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES

GRENADA

SAINT-MARTIN/
SINT MAARTEN

ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA

GUADELOUPE

DOMINICA

BARBADOS



CHAPTER 1

BETTER DONE THAN PERFECT

UPPER MANHATTAN, NEW YORK

6 Years before *Fezywig*



EMILY

I'm not sure why Erik first fell in love with sailing. His first sail wasn't pleasant. He and two buddies sweltered on a blazing, windless day up the Hudson River. Erik threw up five times between his friend's boat, his friend's car, and our apartment. Still, he loved the water, being on the water, and traveling by water rather than being hemmed in by it. He figured he could work around the seasickness.

Twenty miles down the Hudson, Erik worked a graveyard shift managing desktop publishing jobs for investment bankers in a skyscraper in Manhattan's financial district. But we hadn't come to New York City so Erik could sit in a windowless office from four to midnight five nights a week. We came for Broadway. Erik writes musicals, plays, novels, and songs. He has a degree in music. He's also analytical—creating budgets, timelines, and contracts. He's one of those right-brained *and* left-brained people.

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We moved to New York City, straight out of college, with our toddler, Karina, and our newborn, Alison. We rented a two-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment in northern Manhattan. Erik had his first Broadway management job. In theatre, each show is a business. Over the years he worked on several different shows, progressing from payroll to producer. My responsibilities expanded as well. Every time we had a baby, Erik called it a promotion. Our daughter Sarah Jane was born shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attack.

Erik quit his job managing national tours for *Wicked*, one of the most stable and prestigious shows in the theatre industry, to produce a new off-Broadway musical. He picked the project, raised the money, hired all the actors, directors, and designers. The show closed after five weeks and was a complete financial loss. Erik was featured on the cover of *Crain's New York Business* magazine; his cleft chin facing forward, his unruly blond hair defying the gel he used to slick it back—literally the poster boy for failure. People who think all producers are rich have probably never produced anything. When we took the risk, our chins were barely above water financially. We were unemployed when we welcomed our fourth child, our only boy, Eli. Simultaneously in love with our son and heartbroken over the show closing, Erik got a night-time office temp job.

During the day, he obtained the rights to produce a musical on Broadway and started fundraising. He produced workshop readings of two of his plays. I called his creative efforts his day job. “Don’t quit your day job,” I’d say. Usually, that means, “You’ll never earn a living in the arts.” I meant, *I believe in you*. No matter how often we called his cubicle work a disposable job, it morphed into a permanent position. Two years later, our last child, Lily, was born.

Erik was never excited to go to his job in the glass tower, but he liked paying the rent and filling the cupboards. He made friends and studied investing, despite his supervisor’s advice not to bother understanding the bankers’ deals. He was happy to have his days free to write

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and explore creative opportunities. At the end of the shift, he was always happy to come home. But that first blazing sail opened his eyes to the water. He'd seen the marina adjacent to his office building on hundreds of dinner breaks. He'd seen the sailing school. The first warm season after he'd actually been sailing, he decided to cross the invisible barrier—the paradigm that sailing is for rich people—and ask about classes.

Every night, around eight o'clock, he took a dinner break and called me.

"They're scanning our thumbs now when we clock in," Erik said.

"Sounds like a spy movie. Next they'll be scanning your eyeballs," I said.

"Pretty soon they're gonna start paying us by the minute."

"The fact you don't want promotions tells me you don't want to grow there. You're not in the right place," I said. We'd had this conversation before.

"Speaking of going places," Erik changed the subject. "I talked to a guy at the sailing school today. He said they will form a daytime class if I get three other students to join me."

"You'll love that!" I said. "Do you know anyone who wants to learn to sail?"

Erik couldn't find any friends or coworkers to take the class. A couple of weeks later he hopped out of the shower, a towel around his waist.

"I've got a brilliant idea. You, Karina, and Alison can fill the other three slots. Then we'll all know how to sail."

"I'm scared of deep water," I said. "Six feet deep in a swimming pool and I get irrational."

"That's why you need to learn to sail. You can stay in the boat."

I knew he couldn't do it without us. "What about Sarah Jane, Eli, and Lily?"

"We'll hire a babysitter. It's *one* afternoon a week for five weeks."

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“Five hundred dollars each for the class, plus childcare . . . that’ll be like twenty-five hundred dollars. How are we going to pay for that?” I asked. Erik countered my money concern by taking on a short-term second job reviewing theatrical contracts for a previous employer. He was embarrassed to go back for this temporary demotion but grateful to be able to learn to sail.

Eleven-year-old Karina and nine-year-old Alison counted down the days until class started. The course was the American Sailing Association 101, Basic Keelboat Sailing Certification. The first week, we mastered basic vocabulary. The second week, our instructor motored us into New York Harbor, raised the sails, and cut the engine. We were sailing.

I stood at the bow smiling into the wind. Under a bright blue sky, the Statue of Liberty presided over a busy harbor filled with water taxis, tankers, and us. I turned to smile at my family and saw Erik upright at the tiller, grimly concentrating on not vomiting. Karina was unusually quiet. Her blonde head rested on the starboard deck, and Alison’s red head rested on the portside deck.

“How much longer until class is over?” Karina asked. Alison moved only her eyeballs to look at me. I wasn’t seasick at all. I wondered if I had a knack for sailing.

The third week we arrived with generic motion sickness pills, ginger gum, and wristbands that tell your brain you’re not queasy.

Things evened out. I got seasick, too. We learned to manage our seasickness when it came. I kept my eyes on the horizon and kept the conversations light. We pulled ropes tight, cleated them off, winched them, released them, raised and lowered sails, and best of all, turned into the wind. Our instructor ensured we didn’t catch our thumbs in the winch or cut in front of a water taxi.

Erik was the best sailor. Alison had a knack for wind direction and what to do with it. Karina was mildly surprised to be bested by her younger sister. I aced my written test, but I was the worst sailor in our

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family. That was no surprise. Erik seems to have been born with an internal compass. *I* usually don't know what direction I'm facing. When we first moved to New York City it once took me so long to parallel park that a stranger got off his front stoop, asked for the keys, and parked for me. For me, sailing was an exciting exercise, a cool learning experience, a one-off.

Erik, however, wasn't done sailing. After all that effort, he wanted to see if we could sail a boat without an instructor. Being in a boat wasn't as bad as being in the water, but it certainly wasn't my idea of a comfort zone. I talked myself into one more outing to support him and to extend the experience to Sarah Jane, Eli, and Lily. They'd never set foot on a boat. Like any mom who wants her child to taste a new food, I wanted them to try it. Erik shopped the tristate area for a budget-friendly rental. His persistence paid off.

"My wife and I are ASA 101 certified, and we'd like to rent one of your boats," he said into the phone. When he hung up, he hugged me.

"No instructor. No charter captain. Just us. We're all going sailing!" he said. That's my soft spot right there, a happy Erik. He's been my best friend since our freshman year of college. He cheered me through graduation and my first year of teaching middle school before Karina was born. Even though he was raised in a dual-income family, he shifted his paradigm to support and truly value my ambitions as a stay-at-home mom. What exhilarated Erik sometimes exposed me—usually in a good way. His aspirations expanded my horizons. I didn't want my fears to hold him back.

"Awesome!" I hugged him. "Which direction is Toms River, New Jersey?"

Maybe if you flew a helicopter from New York City to the Jersey coast it would be fun, but the same trip in a minivan in mid-August is no fun. After a couple of hours the kids were all motion sick.

"Finally!" Karina said, stepping into the gravel parking lot. I unbuckled the little kids while Erik checked in at the office. He returned

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with a preppy employee who guided us to a twenty-foot open cockpit daysailer, the same size as our sailing class boat but much nicer. It had long white benches down each side—perfect for a family of seven. The tiller was made out of teak, beautifully sealed and polished. Striped ropes lay in flat coils on the dock or passed through shiny shackles. The mainsail wrapped snugly around the boom, tied down with crisp square knots. Too bad we weren't dressed for a Ralph Lauren photo shoot.

The employee handed us a stack of stiff life jackets in all the right sizes. The three older girls managed their own while I snapped Eli and Lily into theirs.

"This jacket makes me look fat," said Sarah Jane. At six, SJ was already too feisty to play the mild middle child. Nothing about this trip excited her. "Let's get this over with so we can go home," she said.

Karina and Alison went to the bow to hank the jib, which means they attached the small triangular sail to a cable at the front of the boat. Eli was nearly three and so scared that he wanted to sit right next to me. He was so close our life jackets rubbed every time I leaned forward. Lily was eight months old, but she couldn't yet sit up on her own. I put her Bumbo seat on the cockpit floor, where she could face me, and held it steady between my feet. After supervising the jib work, Erik reached out to remove the rope from the dock cleat.

"This boat is really nice," he said. "I feel a little guilty, like they're giving me keys to a Porsche when I barely got my driver's license."

"We passed the class," I said wrapping my arm around Eli, his face buried in my ribs.

"Let's do this," Erik said, pulling in the rope and shoving off the dock. "Alison, coil up the docking line. Karina, grab the mainsheet. Heading up."

"Heading up," Karina repeated, rope in hand and ready to trim the sails. Eli started to cry. Several poles marked the entrance channel. To inexperienced sailors like us, they posed a big challenge, because on our

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way out Erik was trying to captain and steer the boat while sorting out all the rigging. He got tangled in the lines.

“Karina, trim your line,” Erik snapped.

“I can’t! Alison has to release her line first,” Karina snapped back.

“Alison!” Erik yelled.

“I’m trying. It’s really tight,” Alison said.

We nearly ran into the pylons on our way out of the marina toward the main channel. I rubbed Eli’s chubby arm and looked for Lily’s pacifier to prevent her from starting a sympathy howl. I could at least try to keep the noise down.

Instead of the predictable professionally piloted ferries and tankers of New York Harbor, we shared the river with deeply tanned weekend amateurs in motorboats, powerboats, speedboats, and jet skis. Everyone, except us, had an engine.

“Do you think they can tell we don’t know what we’re doing?” Erik asked over Eli’s sobs.

“I’m sure they’re thinking about themselves and their boats,” I said.

Karina and Alison untied half a dozen square knots to release the mainsail. Karina dropped a sail tie. She lunged to catch it and slumped as it slipped into the water. Erik ran into one of the channel posts trying to recover it. Alison’s hat blew into the water.

“I’m not going back for that,” Erik said. Alison’s usual rosebud mouth made a slim line across her pale face. She nodded, stoic under pressure. When Erik was flustered, the savvy kids went quiet so he could think.

“It’ll be our offering to Poseidon today,” I said extra cheerfully. Nobody laughed. My job was to boost morale. Whatever the task, relationships are my goal. I didn’t care whether the kids liked sailing or not. I wanted them to like being a family. Karina slid her eyes to one side, flared her nostrils, and sighed. Alison maintained her straight-line mouth. SJ curled into the fetal position and rested her face on the

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bench seat. If Eli was scared in the marina, he was terrified in the channel. He started wailing. Screaming.

“What is wrong with Eli?” Erik snapped. Lily cried too, but it was only the frustrated, hungry cry that follows a long drive. It’s hard to nurse a baby through two life vests. We rocked through the wake of the most recent speedboat crossing. We probably looked like we were bobbing a little aimlessly, but it felt like we were in the movie *The Perfect Storm*.

Jane clung to the deck repeating, “I want to go home. I want to go home. I want to go home.” The boat leaned deeply to the right. That’s called heeling. I didn’t like it any better than Sarah Jane. I nearly touched the choppy surface of the water. Salt sprayed me in the face. I doubted Erik’s claim that sailing would keep me out of deep water. Eli’s scream modulated up. The deeply tanned people aboard the speedboat were pointing at us and laughing.

“They *are* looking at us,” SJ glared. I laughed, hoping to keep the mood afloat. This was supposed to be a fun, memorable, family adventure. I hushed and snuggled the babies. I hollered praise to Karina and Alison as they winched or released ropes to control the triangular jib sail. I hugged Sarah Jane. Erik sat stiff on the bench across from me, his right hand on the tiller, brows furrowed behind mirrored sunglasses. We escaped the wake of the main thoroughfare. Beginners need lots of room to make mistakes.

Eli and Lily calmed. The boat stopped threatening to dump us out. With one arm still around Eli, I set my hand on Erik’s knee for a moment. He lifted his sunglasses to see my smile better. He winked at me. We were going to be okay. I may not be a great sailor, but when it comes to our family, I know which way the wind is blowing.

Erik regained his bearing and apologized to the crew. We were all new. There is more to captaining than tillers and mainsails. The captain has to look ahead, think ahead, and decide ahead. On a boat, it’s essential to have one person in command to prevent confusion and injury.

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Erik ran ideas past us, asked for our opinions, and then told our young crew what to expect. With this preparation, Karina and Alison learned to identify conditions and anticipate commands. Each of them took a turn at the tiller. Erik issued clear orders in a calm voice. I figured out how to trim the sails while nursing a baby through two life jackets on a tippy boat. I'm still waiting for my tiara for that one.

We zigzagged our way up and down the river, jerky and making wide turns, but without crashing into anyone. We did not run into any more poles. We did not run aground. We kept all the Ortons inside the boat. Most importantly, we still loved each other.

"It wasn't as boring as I thought it would be," Sarah Jane pronounced as she tossed parking lot pebbles from the pier into the water.

"We just did that," I said, congratulating Erik with a hug.

"I wish that *had* been more boring. That was rough," Erik said, still glassy in the eyeballs. "Not sure I want to take the family again."

Better done than perfect.



ERIK

The summer ended and winter set in. I spent those down months trying to find ways to practice sailing within our budget. My best idea was sharing the cost. None of my coworkers or friends wanted to pony up for sailing lessons, but plenty of them wanted to go sailing. I found a place out in the Bronx called City Island that rented sailboats: \$100 for half a day. As spring rolled around we drove out as a family to check it out. It was a mash-up of Cape Cod and, well, the Bronx. Most people in the city don't own a car, so with our minivan, I could be both chauffeur and captain to my friends. I put together a group of three or four people a couple times a month between spring and fall and charged my friends \$20 to \$25 per sail. My friends got a steal of a deal on sailing. I got to practice, have fun, and stay within budget. I

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Better done than perfect.

managed one sail with just Karina and Alison. I'd become a much better captain since our first family sail, and they were on point as crew.

That's how I passed the first season after sailing lessons. The main bummer was we weren't sailing as a family. I hadn't officially said that was something I wanted to do, but I felt pulled in that direction.

The following winter, on a cold February day, I wrote in my journal, "Sail as a family." It was part of a far-fetched "blue-sky"

exercise I did with a friend who wanted to practice her life coaching course. In my mind I imagined a whole year relaxing on a sailboat, probably in the Mediterranean. I'd grown up in Europe as a kid when my dad was stationed there with the military. The question my friend had asked was, "What would you do if you weren't afraid?" or "What would you do if money were no object?" I forget which. It was probably both. Later that month I had some downtime at work. I found myself googling "sailing as a family."

I'd spent a lot of time over the previous year taking stock of my life. When the show I produced folded, I felt professionally embarrassed, emotionally vulnerable, and financially scared. I wanted to disappear but I needed to provide for my family. I found an anonymous job where I didn't know anyone and no one could find me. My family

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knew what I did for work, but to others I kept quiet. I earned enough for us to live on.

When I was a teenager I delivered newspapers and looked up at the stars each morning. They were always there, timeless. Throughout history, people sailed the planet guided by stars that still move across the sky in the same rhythms and patterns. I wanted to connect with that.

Looking back on my anonymous, disposable job, I can see what sailing meant to me. I needed to feel safe. I needed to feel hope. I needed something to look forward to. Too many aspects of my former dreams depended on the decisions and choices of others. Sailing as a family for a year was something we could control. It wasn't dependent on the decisions and actions of others—or so I thought. It was a big enough dream to give me hope. It was something to look forward to. That was what I needed.

My google searching turned up some good results. In March, the Orton family—that's us—started following the Norton family website. They were a British couple with two young daughters and a son. They lived on a sailboat, *Miss Tippy*, and were planning to take two years to sail around the world. We caught up with their blog after they'd started their trip. They were still close to home. We quickly watched everything they'd already posted: videos of their boat being built, their farewell party, receiving a big box of nautical charts, getting their dental work done. The first leg of their journey was from England to Gibraltar. The son looked over the bow and said, "There's Africa!"

Emily turned to me and asked, "You can *see* Africa from Spain?" We were learning all kinds of things.

I checked every day for new posts and videos. Every time something went up, we gathered the kids around the TV to watch and read together. We found other families already out there on boats: *Bumfuzzle* in Mexico, *Totem* in Papua New Guinea, *Galactic* in the

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South Pacific.¹ These weren't families with big budgets. They lived simple, lean lives. They valued time with their families over careers and over stuff. They parted ways with nine-to-five jobs, minivans, suburbs, and other mainstays of a culture Emily and I knew well. They figured out their actual physical needs were minimal and found ways to earn enough to provide those. They were learning about the world by being out in it. They knew their "prime earning years" were also the same precious years they would be healthy and active enough to be out there with their children. For them, waiting to retire at sixty-five made no sense, and retirement wasn't an all-or-nothing proposition. They talked about mini-retirements, mobile jobs, and unconventional solutions. Each family took a custom approach. Their lives were made by hand, from scratch, based on their own recipes. They knew what mattered most to them, and their life choices reflected that. They weren't saying everyone should do what they were doing, but what they were doing was working for them. They shared it openly, and Emily and I liked what we saw. Maybe we could do it too.



EMILY

Maybe our family was already a little unconventional before we considered living on a sailboat. While washing our clothes in the basement laundry room, a gentleman folding his towels told me about growing up in our neighborhood. In the 1960s, a family with five children and a stay-at-home mom was not rare in New York City. Forty years later, I knew only three other women like me. In that sense, my old-fashioned choices made me unusual. I didn't know *any* other

1. All three of these families are awesome and, as of this printing, are still living mobile lives. You can find them at bumfuzzle.com, sailingtotem.com, and thelifegalactic.blogspot.com. Tell them the Fezywigs sent you. :)

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families of seven trying to pull it off in a two-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment.

After the birth of each new child, Erik's parents would say, "Now you'll have to move." They live in a typical suburban home with a driveway and a yard. We figured out how to be happy right where we were. I was grateful for my marriage, my growing family, my friends, and good health, but it was easy to want more. Once, I took Karina to Target. Before we left for the store, I asked her if she needed anything, and she said she didn't. After we arrived, she asked me to buy her an armful of items.

"I thought you didn't need anything," I said.

"I didn't know I needed it until I saw it," she replied.

"Me too," I said. I had moved to New York with the conventional mindset that having more stuff and more space to put it would make my life better. But my apartment wasn't getting any bigger.

Back at home, I had just stepped on a wooden alphabet block and wished for the hundredth time that we had a basement playroom when a thought occurred to me: *What could I subtract from my life to make it better?* Adding was difficult. Adding a closet organizer, a bookshelf, or even a new pair of shoes required money, which meant a budget strategy meeting. Subtracting could be simpler. I started by subtracting toys instead of adding storage containers. The kids and I assessed, sorted, and kept what mattered most. Our apartment felt bigger. I was learning to curate my space.

I wondered if I could curate my calendar, too. I wanted our whole family to spend more time together. Erik's night job didn't allow him to see Karina and Alison on weekdays. He left for work before they got home from school. He wasn't in a position to quit. We tried an unconventional route: homeschool. Subtracting public school was a thoughtful, protracted process that involved research, discussions with administrators, and prayer. I had a clear vision of why I would fail at homeschooling. Our home was tiny. Erik's day job was at home. I

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had three small children at home. I didn't think I had enough space, stamina, or patience to have everyone home all day. Through books, conversations, and an unshakable buoyant feeling, God showed me that we could thrive: we would be together as a family.

We departed from conventional wisdom again when it came to Lily's birth. With each child, my labor time was half that of the previous child. If the standard held, and my labor with Lily was half of what it had been with Eli, I'd have only one hour's warning before she was born. I wanted the professionals to come to me, so Lily was born in our apartment. That old-fashioned birth and bonding experience was calmer and more comfortable than my previous hospital births, and I had delivered at four different hospitals.

The road less traveled was less crowded. We traveled in September when the summer tourists returned to work. Erik asked for sabbaticals instead of promotions. When Brigham Young University produced one of his musicals for TV, we took eight weeks to be on set for the shoot. Erik earned enough to replace his lost wages. The TV show won some awards. They didn't change our lives and only came up if someone saw them on our living room bookshelf, but ditching work for a creative project was way more satisfying than getting promoted. Promotions meant less flexibility. We were not on the same schedule as everyone else, but we were on the same schedule as each other. The autonomy was delicious.

Erik proposed Family Day: one day a month with just members of our immediate family, usually without an agenda. I liked it, and we went for it. It was hard. We had to put Family Day on the calendar before anything else. We had to turn down birthday parties, baby showers, babysitting jobs, and sometimes even church meetings. But as we made it a priority, the kids looked forward to it. They would rather have their parents' full attention than earn a few dollars or go to a party. Our friends started to catch on too. They'd preface their invitations with, "If it's not Family Day . . ."

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Erik and I regularly evaluated but couldn't always control what to add to or subtract from our lives. Shortly before our Toms River family sail, we discovered a tiny addition—the size of a microscopic chromosome. That one extra chromosome explained why Lily didn't hold up her head and why she slept so much. I'd spent six months researching and worrying, even though her pediatrician had assured me she was fine. I told God that if Lily needed something extra then I needed to be a more substantial person. I felt spiritual ballast enter my soul. Lily was diagnosed with Down syndrome. Erik wrapped me in his arms as we sat on the steps outside Columbia hospital.

"We can make T-shirts that say, 'We put the O in chromosome,'" he said. O for Orton. I smiled through my tears. I quit wasting time worrying and started learning. Along with Lily's diagnosis came speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and play therapy. Over the next two years, while Erik created by day, earned by night, and occasionally chauffeured buddies to sail, the older kids and I fitted our lives to Lily's eight weekly therapy appointments.

We had taken two steps forward toward autonomy. This therapy schedule felt like one step back, but we were all happy to take it. Lily's siblings were her biggest cheerleaders. Karina read and sang to her. Alison tickled her. SJ bounced with her on an exercise ball. Eli loved to hold her. They all mimicked her squishy faces. We raved about every incremental success—not only Lily's success; each child's success. Obviously, Lily's path would be atypical. She helped me realize *each* of my children would progress at his or her own pace. I quit expecting them to achieve on a predetermined schedule. This meant less worry about timed milestones and more focus on interests and strengths.

With therapy, the kids and I stayed close to home on weekdays. In between, we bounced from co-op to playdates, playgrounds to the local library. Saturdays were our family days. Sometimes, Erik took a vanload of friends sailing. It wasn't much to ask. On Sundays, we all attended church. Erik and I volunteered in our local congregation. That

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was part of what made life abundant. Our days were full and our routine worked—for now.



ERIK

I was born in late March. March is technically still winter, but—inspired by the Nortons—I thought a great way to celebrate my birthday would be to go sailing. Emily thought I was crazy. Steve, who rented out boats in the Bronx, was always happy to make a buck, so he kept one twenty-three-foot boat in the water that time of year. Emily wanted to make my birthday dreams come true, so she joined me in City Island on the last day of winter, which I prefer to think of as the first day of spring.

There was another, equally “enthusiastic” guy who also wanted to sail. Steve insisted we take him with us on our date. Steve didn’t want anyone sailing alone in the still-very-cold water. It wasn’t the most romantic date, but we did get a good piece of intel. Our new sailing buddy told us about another sailing option that might be a better fit for our family.

The New York Sailing School was farther up the Long Island Sound. They offered classes but were mostly a club. Members could sail as often as they liked for a flat monthly fee: \$160 a month between April and October.

I did some research and pitched it to Emily. “Since we’ve already done ASA 101, our entire family could join for roughly the cost of basic cable TV. Did I mention it’s a flat monthly fee?”

“Really?” she said. “So anyone could give up cable and join a yacht club?!”

“Pretty much.” We didn’t have cable, but that was beside the point. “And you do realize, since we don’t mind sailing when it’s colder, we could *really* get our money’s worth.”

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“You mean, since *you* don’t mind,” Emily said. I seemed to be the only one who liked bundling up in coats, scarves, gloves, and hats to go sailing. Weird.

We splurged on a full set of life vests and started taking the kids sailing nearly every week.

People assumed we were loaded. In reality, I had an average income that Emily stretched to fit a larger-than-average family in an expensive city. We weren’t money-rich, but we figured time with our kids was its own kind of wealth. We did the math on the intangibles and decided it was worth it.

The boats at NYSS were called Sonars and were a lot like the boat at Toms River—about twenty-three feet long, a small jib sail at the bow, and a mainsail in the middle. The varnish on the wooden tiller was weather-worn and sometimes gave me splinters, but it did the job. Parallel benches lined the open cockpit. There was a small “below-deck” cubby that held a couple of sail bags, a bailing bucket, and some extra life vests. Jane would tuck in there with Eli and Lily to keep them out of the way while Emily and I rigged the sails with Karina and Alison.

Those day sails were a bit of a production: getting five kids ready with snacks, first aid kit, ginger candies, seven life vests, sunscreen, etc. Emily and I hiked to wherever we’d most recently found parking on the street and piled the kids into the van. Then there was getting from the van to the dock: stairs, vending machines, random cats wandering the docks, coils of rope, hoses. Any distraction could derail our train. Then we piled into the launch for a ride out to the boats in the mooring field. Lily had learned to walk, so the main goal was to keep her seated. After pulling up alongside, we transferred everybody and everything to a sailboat. Once we finished our sail, we repeated the whole thing in reverse.

Getting cable would have been easier.

We sailed with the NYSS for the next three years.

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I came to love those sailing days. Cell service was lousy, so Emily and I didn't worry about getting calls or checking emails. The kids didn't have phones yet. There was nowhere else to go and nothing else to do except be together for three hours. We read books aloud. We played question games. We sang a lot of songs, preferably ones that involved nautical terms and stomping. We all became better sailors.

Everyone had a chance to steer the boat and trim the sails. I gave Alison control of the tiller and said, "Okay, you're driving." She sat up a little straighter and did her best not to smile too wide. We practiced man-overboard drills and heaving to.² One week we'd head up the sound. The next week we'd head down the sound. We tacked and jibbed, sailed wing-on-wing.³ Karina became expert at snagging the mooring ball on our first pass. She got low on the forward deck as I eased us up to the mooring ball. Once within reach, she grabbed the mooring ball line and quickly looped it over the deck cleat. She smiled big when she got it right.

One bright, crisp afternoon, Lily knelt on the bench, facing out and dragging a bit of extra rope in the water. "I do ropes," she said, looking back at me and Emily with happy eyes. Our kids were growing up on the water.



EMILY

Over those three seasons of family sailing, Lily grew from a wobbly baby into a running toddler. The kids and I had spent hours walking her up and down our building stairwells with therapeutic weights

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2. Heaving to: a maneuver in which the boat is stopped by setting the jib sail and tiller in opposition to each other. Nothing to do with vomit.
 3. Tacking, jibing, wing-on-wing: not dance moves; rather, sailing maneuvers. Tacking = sailing with the wind in front of you. Jibing = sailing with the wind behind you. Wing-on-wing = sailing with the wind *directly* behind you.

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Velcroed around her ankles. We all took pleasure in her progress. She was into everything, as any toddler would be, but the messes didn't bother me as much. When we took Lily into new environments, like a weekend at Grandma Orton's, I noticed her natural curiosity catapulted learning. Her motor skills and language skills



Our kids were growing up on the water.

jumped. The kids and I were still tethered to our same, boring apartment thirty-two times per month for therapy. I wondered if Lily was getting too much therapy and if it was actually holding her back. The rhythm of the routine wore thin. I persuaded her team to run a trial month cutting back to twenty-five percent of her normal therapy so we could take more field trips. Afterward, Lily's therapists agreed she was continuing to progress at the same rate or better. All of the kids were thrilled.

After a few more months of prayerful consideration, Erik and I decided Lily would quit therapy altogether. That is not the answer for everyone, but we were able to provide a language-rich environment where Lily got constant feedback and encouragement from her siblings and me. The world of special education puts a lot of emphasis on kids with special needs being allowed to progress in the "least restrictive environment," and we totally agreed. When I discovered that what was best for our whole family was also best for Lily, I happily threw off the restrictions of therapy. We went to the Jersey Shore for the day. Lily built sandcastles—well, she mostly ate sand, but it was a tactile experience. We saw dolphins. We met new people. We had our life back.

The older kids were working on their homeschool assignments one

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morning when Erik leaned against the wall next to me and said, “I think the seven of us on a boat would be enough universe to keep me engaged for the rest of my life.”

“Really?” I asked. “You wouldn’t get bored with just us?”

“I don’t think so.”

“And you’d want to live on a boat?” I asked.

“We’d be together,” Erik said. “I would be with you and the kids full-time. We could explore the world together. There would be no packing and unpacking. We wouldn’t have to leave home, because we’d take our home wherever we went.” Erik strummed all of my major heartstrings at once: family, home, and firsthand experiences. I was happy with my life. Even without sailing, having a family is an epic adventure—a long-term, high stakes proposition with daily surprises and unpredictable outcomes. If I stood our children in a row from youngest to oldest, each was a head taller than the last. But I could see where this was going, and it was going too fast.

At Karina’s recommendation, I read *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years: How I Learned to Live a Better Story*. The author, Donald Miller, says the same elements that make a great story—dreams, struggle, risk—also make a great life. If I were watching a movie of my life and I were the hero, what would I want myself to do? I wanted to create memories that would strengthen and sustain us individually and as a family. I wanted to live a more dynamic story. I wanted to pursue a dream so big there was room for my whole family. I wanted us to deliberately disrupt our family, not just to do more or see more, but to *become* more.

I wrapped one arm around Erik’s waist and rested my head on his chest. Lily pressed the buttons on her musical pop-up toy. Eli rolled a red car across the floor. Karina and Alison read on the couch while Jane drew at the table. I liked this universe of seven.

“When should we go?” I asked.

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“Sometime before Karina leaves for college,” he said. She was fourteen. We had four years.

“I guess we’d better get cracking.”

Erik didn’t waste any time. Driving home from another day of family sailing, he said, “We should take some more ASA classes. 103 and 104. Then we can take out bigger boats. Maybe even overnight.” He’d looked into this.

“Do they have home study?” I asked. “Or daytime classes?” Erik still worked nights.

“No. You can’t learn that stuff home study,” he said. Clearly, I knew nothing about it. “But we could finish both classes in a week if we take them in the Caribbean.”

My usual questions sprang up: time, money, and childcare.

I said, “That’s a lot to pack into one week.”