The Bates Island race is the best race of the year. We sail out to Bates, have a picnic on the rocks, and sail back. My first year brought screaming winds and frightening swells. It was awesome. I could only hope for similarly exciting conditions this year. Anna couldn’t come this time because she had to work, but Abby and I woke up early to make sure we didn’t miss it. The sun was warm and bright when we left my house at nine o’clock. Its warm rays seemed to smile down at us, encouraging us to hurry.

We sped down the dusty road on our bikes without noticing the change in atmosphere as we neared the boat yard. The air became thicker, wetter. Our visibility diminished. Mist clung to our skin and hair as we made the turn onto John Small Road. It wasn’t until we coasted past the Birketts’ house and reached the top of the road to the boat yard that we noticed it: fog. It hung in patches. We were encased in a pocket of sunshine, our foreheads glistening with perspiration. From our vantage point, we had a full view of the cove and could see that it was plagued with lesions of disgusting gray mist. Crow Island lolled quaintly in the warm rays of the sun, but just behind it, Bangs Island donned an eerie mask.

“Crap.” Abby’s terse statement hung in the air like a slap.

As we headed down the road our bikes careened over rocks, dirt, and debris left by fishermen and boaters until our tires met the welcoming sand of the beach and halted to a stop. Everyone else was already there.

“What’s going on,” Abby asked Taryn. “Are we going out?”

“Dunno. We’re waiting for Bob.” Bob—president of the Yacht Club, commander in chief of the Chebeague Island Community Sailing School—he had the final say as to whether we would put out to sea. We lathered sunscreen on each other and devoured an entire bag of Goldfish before we heard the familiar footsteps of Bob hurrying down the wooded path from his house. He emerged from the wilderness accompanied by Nancy, Scott, Jay, and Toby.

“Are we still on?” It was Taryn who asked the pressing question that was on everyone’s mind.

“We can’t decide. It seems as if it’s going to blow off, but we can’t be sure,” Bob said. He seemed stressed. We all knew he didn’t want to cancel, but he didn’t want to be irresponsible either. Good ol’ Bob, always careful. He decided to go ask Paul, who ran the boat yard, what the fog was supposed to do. A few minutes later he returned with a big grin. The race was still on.
It didn’t take long to get the sail boats rigged and off to sea. There was a great array of small boats; Bob was on his 32-foot Ensign, Ripple, and the older boys—Scott, Jay, and Toby—had commandeered a powerboat. I was in the Foxy, a sixteen-foot JY, with Taryn and Stuart. The Foxy is by far the best small boat there is. It is the fastest, and heels the most so you cut through the water like a bullet. There’s also a trapeze to keep us aboard on windy days. I would love to say that the Foxy looked magnificent that day, but that is a hilarious overstatement. The Chebeague Sailing School fleet consists of six small boats, two 420’s and four JY’s; they all look exactly the same. It seems at first that all these boats, because they look the same, are equivalent, but each sails quite differently. Their personality isn’t in their appearance, it’s in the way they glide through the water, or how they tack. The Foxy is an extremely difficult boat to handle, but it’s a lot of fun. The Foxy is that friend you have who drives you crazy, but you love to be around. The other boats are fine, in fact they’re great, but the Foxy has the most personality, the most spunk.

But I digress, so back to the story it is. It was obvious when we reached Bangs that the fog had not blown over. It hung like a large, looming brick wall between Bangs and Stockman Islands. We were now enveloped in the dank mist. It clung to us, making the boat slick so we couldn’t get a good hold on anything. Emma, Abby, and Alice were in another boat nearby. We could hear their pirate songs, accompanied by the ding, ding, ding of loose mooring balls. The effect was chilling. It wasn’t long before we lost our sailing counterparts to the fog. It was odd, we could hear everybody, but we couldn’t see them. After awhile the girls’ voices drifted away and the chug, chug of the powerboats faded into the distance. We were completely and totally alone.

Stuart assured us, with a flip of his red hair, that all was well, he was a Boy Scout, but Taryn and I were not so confident. I could sense Taryn’s tension as she ran her fingers through her blond curls, setting her sunglasses askew. Despite her anxiety, I felt quite comfortable. Sailing is relaxing in itself, but sailing in the fog is something else entirely. Of course I’ve been out on the water in the fog before, but always with radar. This was a new experience. Being totally surrounded in fog is like being cut off from everything. You are the only people in the world; it’s empowering. The soft hush of the hull sliding through the water was as loud as a jet engine. Our voices carried for miles, but did not echo. I loved it. It was so exiting, refreshing, at least until we got lost.

Taryn had been keeping track of all the landmasses we passed, locating them on the chart, and determining where we were and where we needed to go. Stuart and I tried to figure out his compass, and though by all appearances it was a simple instrument, using it was deceptively difficult. Taryn was confident we were on the right track and everything was going relatively well, except for the whole fog thing, until…

“What’s that?” Taryn asked, an alarming question when asked at sea. Stuart and I tried to follow her line of vision.

“The green can?” He was referring to the green marker buoy that was bobbing up ahead. “That’s on the chart.” Stuart brought the battered chart to his face. The can was certainly on the chart, but if we were near it then we were about 300 yards off course. “Whoa, that’s not good.”
I took the chart and compass from Stuart. We were certainly near the can, which confirmed that we were off course, but the compass disagreed, it seemed to think we were going in the right direction.

“Uh, Taryn we’re headed straight for Bates, like were supposed to be. It’s the can that’s in the wrong place.”

She examined the chart, discarded it on deck and told us to keep an eye on the compass. We did. About twenty minutes later we saw some breakers up ahead. They seemed to be crashing onto something. Was it Bates? No it was a ledge of uncharted rocks that lay lurking beneath the surface waiting to gouge out our hull. I closed my eyes and waited for a deafening crack, but I had forgotten that Taryn was very skilled skipper and she dodged them with ease. My heart still fluttered, but I was relieved.

“We’d better find Bates before we crash into something else.” Taryn studied the chart, perplexed. She no longer trusted it. Before we could fret over being truly lost in the fog, or facing the Rock Ness monster, a huge dark shadow appeared in the distance, an island with a single, tiny house on it. Taryn sighed with relief. She was convinced it was Bates, but Stuart and I were not so sure.

“No guys, this is it. I know Bates when I see it. It’s got the little house on it, see?” We did see, yet we still consulted the chart and compass a few more times before finding ourselves convinced. Finally, we had made it. The journey was not very long, but it was treacherous. We may not have been faced with life or death, but each of us gained some insight from the experience. We had been young and alone at sea; all we had to keep us afloat were our wits. I was unnerved by the experience, but I had enjoyed it. I leaned my head back, dipping my ponytail into the water; I smiled, catching a song on the wind.