# How Sturdy Is Your Sick Bag?

*by* Antonia Malchik

Like snow and rain, winds have developed their own vocabularies. Their personalities evolve in the geography that nurtures them: the damp Chinook that signals the end of a Rocky Mountain winter, the soft zephyrs that cool a hot beach, the bone-gnawing barbers of a Saskatchewan January, and the Harmattan desert breezes that scrape sand over every particle of exposed skin.

And then there is the wind that lingers after a New England Nor'easter, the kind of wind that rips your hair right out of your head, the nameless wind that feels like a beating, and all you want to do is curl up in a corner and wait for it to pass.

This wind attached itself to the three-hour whale-watching catamaran out of Boston Harbor when my in-laws were visiting from England. It bore down upon us with the force of an iron door being slammed until Liz, my mother-in-law, shrank to about half her size. But I couldn't shrink, much less curl up in a corner. I was crouched on the bucking deck, pissed off and terrified, trying to hang onto a leaking sick bag that flapped over the side of the boat.

"Don't litter," they'd told us as the boat moved out of the dock near the New England Aquarium. Don't throw anything over the side; don't leave things on the deck to be picked up by the breeze. "It'll be a little rough today," they added as an afterthought. I fiddled nervously with a thumb. My earliest memory is of a canoeing accident when I was two that nearly drowned my family. I ignored Liz's mention of her tendency to seasickness, and thought instead about the water phobia that grabs my ankles on occasion. Before I could suggest sitting inside—where the water couldn't threaten me—the crew powered up the jet cat and smashed their way to the whales, plunging up and down the leftover waves of yesterday's storm.

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That was when Liz went very, very silent. “Don't talk to me,” she said to our husbands, her clipped British accent still unfailingly polite, her uncreased linen clothes rippling in the wind. She turned pale and gripped an empty Starbucks bag whose contents were soon returned to it. Boston Harbor whizzed by.

I eyed each wave as if it held the grinding teeth of a sea monster. I think I whimpered. Above us, someone narrated the passing of islands and lighthouses. Liz did not turn to look at them, but kept her eyes fixed on a horizon that the bow, most unfortunately, interrupted every few seconds. I tried to ask my husband Ian why on earth he'd sat up front, but the wind forced the words right back down my throat.

The little paper Starbucks bag was insufficient. Ian staggered inside for a stock of plastic-lined sick bags. We huddled in our seats as Liz, and then her husband Tony, filled one, two, three, four of them. I pressed my fingers around the tops to keep the bags from being whipped to sea. Didn't want to mess up lunch for the fish.

Some time later, Ian lifted his head, sniffing, then mouthed something at me as his mother retched into a fresh bag. I shook my head, wanting only for the boat to stop, not caring about the prospect of seeing whales, definitely not caring to hear a witty comment from him about the healthfulness of fresh air. He brought his mouth to my ear and bellowed into it.

“The bags. Are leaking.” A forefinger pointed to the trail of puke glistening its way across the deck.

Well, damn. I thought about racing at a crawl back to the trash bags inside. I thought many unkind things about the teenaged crew members who'd sold Liz the acupressure motion sickness bracelets when we boarded. “Yes, they really work,” the girl had told me. A wave lifted me from my seat, scattering more drops of vomit around, and I thought nastily about bringing the bracelets back inside, dripping bags in tow, to ask for a refund.

There was no way to make it to a trash can without leaving evidence of that morning's breakfast all over the boat. I couldn't even stand up without falling over, and the wind, egalitarian in its

direction, made sure anything in remotely liquid form got everywhere.

I slunk from the seat to the starboard rail, where I hung on, petrified, as the bags leaked their contents into the sea. I hung on tighter, gulping back tears of anger at the weather and the stench, and at uncontrollable terror of the dark water. My fingers grew numb around the bags. The wind fingered the holes (all along the seams—who makes these things?), widened them, and gleefully ripped the bags to shreds.

At times like this, exposed to Mother Nature and helpless before her, some people like to think that they are getting back to their roots as human beings, planting themselves in the earth from which cities and air conditioning so often separate us. Full engagement of life, rather than fear of death, becomes their focus. It's a nice thought, one I've indulged in on occasion. But this time, faced with a deep-water phobia and the demon wind drilling into my eardrums, I found myself commiserating more with merchant sailors and fishermen who have fought with nature over the millennia: dropping my litter into the sea, I cursed the nameless wind.

After two hours the invisible navigator enthusiastically announced that whales had been spotted and we raced to the site. When the boat halted a young woman came up from the back of the boat to view the three humpbacks. Her flat, bright green shoes reflected sunlight off their suede and gold embroidery.

“You might want,” I coughed, waggling my fingers at her feet, “you might want to move back. The sick bags leaked.” She looked down at her jeans dragging above the film of sludge, and jumped.

“Oh!” She ran back to the cabin, pausing only to flick a glare at us.

Even the most brutal wind cannot erase the reek of bile. My in-laws' misery ensured we had the entire front deck to ourselves. Liz and Tony trembled their way to the railing. Three humpback whales cavorted in the sea.

“Oh,” whispered Liz in an entirely different tone of voice from the young woman, “oh, it's wonderful. Fantastic!” she said a little louder

as two whales exposed their tails in a dive. Inhaling stench along with the fierce fresh air, I looked at her, standing there in her now-creased linen, her face pale. She wiped her watering eyes to peer through the sparkling waves at the whales, and laughed as another tail splashed down.

“Worth it, mum?” Ian asked her.

“Oh, yes,” she said, blinking. “Look at ‘im!” A flipper flapped the water. The boat rocked gently. Liz handed her camera to Tony. “I think I'll sit down now, luv.” Tony handed the camera to Ian.

“I think I'll sit down, too.” They shuddered against each other on a bench in the sunshine. Ian took pictures and I double-bagged several sick bags for the trip back. The wind, in one last slap, stole one out of my pocket and littered it into the sea.

Some days later, while researching ancient mythologies, I decided on a name for this malicious wind: the Tiamat, named for a Babylonian goddess whose province included war, despair, and destruction. It couldn't be coincidence that she was also the goddess of salt water.