



THE UNKNOWABLE

by Colleen Craig



Genre: Non-fiction/Memoir

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Colleen Craig has worked in journalism and marketing, where she won a number of writing awards. As a freelancer, she enjoyed assisting a range of clients, from fashion houses and national non-profits, to Fortune 500 companies. She has been a member of

the WGA and was recently honored with a Best Screenplay award at the Ojai Film Festival, where she was thrilled to receive a trophy alongside screen legend Eva Marie Saint. She still works as an editor and is currently writing her first book. Born and raised in LA, she has one daughter, and lives with her husband, a retired doctor, in the lovely hills of Los Osos.

“What are you so afraid of,” asked Doug, for the hundredth since I’d known him.

“What do you think is going to happen?”

He was trying to convince me to attend the Captain’s Dinner on our behemoth cruise ship, its name long forgotten. *Nightmare of the Sea?*

We’d been friends since age 14, before he grew up to become, if not the Most Interesting Man in the World, a leading candidate. Friends adored him for his easy way of making them laugh. At themselves. For his quicksilver mind. His charisma.

Doug could cite obscure facts about almost any topic, from geography to literature. You might know there were three Brontë sisters, but did you know they also had a brother? Branwell? You didn’t? And he’d say *hmm* in a way that made you want to rush out and buy their biography.

He produced memorable NYC theater. After the plays we’d gather at his elegant apartment to sample some exotic dishes. Never heard of red rice, *gullah* style? No? How frankly surprising. Said with a tease of a smile, his green eyes flashing.

Above all, he traveled. Everywhere. Often, he flew himself, floating along in a tiny Cessna singing romantic ballads to his Corgi, Stella. He’d jet off to Paris for a dinner engagement and to buy his favorite, almond scented soaps. The next week he’d fly to Rio for Carnival.

Years later he'd return to a distant place and remember every restaurant and secluded beach, and how to get there. It became part of his DNA. And while he never met a country he didn't like, India claimed his soul, He went often, drawn to something he couldn't - or maybe wouldn't - explain. He called it The Unknowable.

In short, Doug was at home in the world.

I, on the other hand, had been labeled The Most Boring Person in the San Fernando Valley. By Doug. He'd drop by my apartment with a last-minute invitation to a party for Madonna at the Chateau Marmont, or a private screening of the latest Robert Altman film. I usually preferred to stay home and read. Not for me the glittering life. It was too much effort.

Even so, we traveled like gypsies in our young twenties, hitchhiking through Europe. On a whim, we bought a beat-up Renault from an unshaven stranger in St. Mark's Square. Three hundred bucks. And we drove it over the Alps. The snowy Alps. A car with a double clutch!

At forty he was struck down by AIDS, in a time when people still thought it could be contagious. Doug hid it for several years, but as he grew weaker and sarcomas appeared, there could be no more pretending. The mask was off.

Exhausted from trying to survive, of the endless drugs and aborted hopes, he wanted to travel. A cruise to the British Virgin Islands was all he could manage, tame for a guy who had hiked the barren slopes of Tierra Del Fuego. Alone.

It fell to me to take him. And I didn't want to go. I had a two-year-old daughter, his godchild, and I'd never spent a night away from her. What if she got sick? What if she fell out of her crib? What if, what if?

But I went. I had to. I was the best friend, and that was that. The cruise photographer snapped our picture walking up the gangplank, Doug handsome as a movie star while I looked murderous. For good reason.

I knew what was coming, enduring the frowns of fleshy couples lounging by an overchlorinated pool, before they quickly turned away from his wasted body. Suffering through the one dinner he bravely showed up for, stunning in his Savile coat and tie.

He'd been charming and witty, but our dinner companions didn't want charm, not if it came with a gaunt face and suspicious bruising. One woman kept nudging her husband, who stared into space.

A retired army man commanded the table with stories he told in short, choppy sentences. He referenced times in military fashion. 0700 hours to rise. 0900 for breakfast. His wife glanced nervously at Doug, and never said a word.

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"What are you afraid of," he repeated. "Afraid you might enjoy yourself? Afraid you might live a little?" I saw the sadness in his face, so I slipped the cream-colored lace dress over my head, smoothed the folds and presented myself.

He studied me from the bed. "How lovely," he said, at last. A rare compliment. "Go on, darling, and try not to embarrass me." Then he rolled over, into the shadows.

I stroked my cheeks with powdery blush to cover up recent tear tracks. But it can't be done. It never matches.

At the Captain's table, surrounded by ten over-dressed couples, aglow with the fizzy confidence of health and almost wealth, I managed to smile. I managed to raise my glass to one and to all, and to laugh once more.

In another universe, that is, on another ship in another place and time. Not at this table, headed by a captain in crisp, immaculate whites.

Water, water, everywhere, and not a drop to drink.

I hated every minute of the forced geniality, where no one asked if I were traveling alone, so I could say "No, I am traveling with my best friend, who now lies in our stateroom, dying." I excused myself as soon as I could and hurried through raucous crowds to our room. The captain had gently saluted me as I scraped the chair away from the table. After so many years, he recognized the desperate.

I tiptoed in, but Doug was awake. "I can't breathe," he said. "Could you find me some oxygen?" So matter of fact, as if he were asking for an hors d'oeuvre. Some melon wrapped in prosciutto, perhaps? Or, no. Maybe...oxygen?

Ten minutes later the ship's doctor was standing by his bed. "This man should not be traveling!" he shouted, his cheeks turning red. "I don't have the resources on

board for someone so ill." It felt less like the truth and more like fear. A man dying of AIDS, on his ship? He muttered *merde* under his breath.

There was no arguing with him. We would be taken off the ship the next morning and sent home on the first plane out. Banished.

But Doug refused to go. When the bursars came just after sunrise, he wouldn't budge. I begged him to get dressed. They began banging on the door as I scrambled to pack. *Sir, you have to leave.* Bang! Bang! *You MUST leave!* I could hear people in the hallway. "What's going on?"

Bang! Yes, yes, we're coming. Doug, please! Please don't do this to me. Stop banging! We're coming!

Slowly, so slowly, he started pulling his clothes on. Held his head high as we were marched through the ship's lobby, people staring. Not knowing what happened, but certain it was something unpleasant. Something that wouldn't ever happen to them. Thank god.

In the taxi, Doug gave the driver a wad of cash and directed him away from the airport, to the most expensive resort on Barbados. "Just be quiet," he ordered me. "For once."

An hour later we were sitting on a balcony overlooking a soft turquoise sea, while he pleaded with me to continue. He pulled out his credit card. "I have a money." he said. "A lot of it. Let's spend it all."

We would go from island to island and stay as long as we wanted. Live large. He would get well! He would not die! We had to stay. But, I couldn't.

I was afraid. Again. Afraid I would end up on some remote shore, unable to help him. Trapped with AIDS. This time, Doug was even more afraid. He wanted to outrun death, something I wouldn't understand until much later.

I would not be persuaded. I had done enough.

Doug looked at me for a long time. "I was wrong about you." he said. "You're the most boring person in the Western Hemisphere."

I didn't care. I booked a charter flight, and the next day we flew to Florida just ahead of a hurricane, the small plane bouncing and juddering all the way to Miami. Doug slept through it, while I prayed and drank a half bottle of rum, thanks to a sympathetic flight attendant.

When we got home, he told everyone he was fine, and if I hadn't been so hysterical, we'd still be traveling.

A month later he died, a sense of betrayal clouding 27 years of intimacy. To my grief.

I never wore the lace dress again.

* * *

Five years after his death I moved to Northern California, where Doug was unknown. A new friend, Kira, – a brunette with a wide smile - asked about the photo of Doug I keep in my office. I simply said he was a close friend who died too young. What I said to anyone who asked about him. Which was everyone, given his remarkable looks.

Kira was herself an unusual person. She would have amused Doug. He liked the quirky and authentic, and Kira was relentlessly herself.

For one thing, she could not pass up a deal. She regularly picked through thrift stores and garage sales, and when she found something that she couldn't use, she'd buy it for a friend. Often, she'd appear at my house with a bag of used clothes, each piece exactly my taste, and a perfect fit. "Only a dollar!" she'd crow.

In a city of devoted gardeners, Kira grew the sweetest lettuce and vegetables. It wasn't unusual to get an early morning knock at the door and have several bags of freshly washed veggies thrust at you.

"Gotta go," she'd say, and hop on her rickety bike before you had a chance to thank her. She was always in a mad rush.

One evening the doorbell rang, very late, and I opened the door to Kira, dressed for a fancy county event, holding 40 balloons. "These were going to be tossed," she explained, and handed them over. The next day my eight-year-old woke to a room filled with rainbow colored balloons.

On a May morning, a month I remember because Kira was hellbent on making a Maypole, she called me.

"Can I come by? I have something to tell you." It was six a.m. "Give me twenty minutes for coffee," I mumbled, and exactly twenty minutes later she pulled up on her bike.

Kira got straight to the point. "My husband went out last night, so I was alone, and it was very quiet. I had a fire going, and as I lay on the rug, your friend Doug appeared."

Oh? Really? "Yes. He said he'd been trying to get through to you, but you're distracted, and your channels are blocked. So, he came to me."

I didn't respond, and she went on. "He said something about a boat, a huge boat, and a journey. He said that he was wrong. It wasn't your fault. And he's sorry." Kira studied me. "Does that mean anything to you?"

I could only nod. These sorts of things didn't happen to me. Kira might have heard about the cruise from my husband, but he rarely spoke of it, and besides, she didn't seem the type to take advantage of someone's pain. It wouldn't have occurred to her.

"I brought you some lettuce" Kira said suddenly, pulling some washed greens from her backpack, as if our conversation was no more unusual than a typical lettuce hand off.

"Thank you," I said. For both the romaine and the wild story. I was going to have to mull it over.

"Oh, and one more thing," Kira remembered, as she strapped on her helmet and slung her leg over her bike.

"Doug said...he said..."

"Tell her she was never boring."

- the end -