

Bat and Seabag

I GROPED my way on deck at six o'clock in the dingy morning, yawning and muzzy-headed, with a mug of coffee for each of us. The sea and the sky met in a smudge at the horizon, grey on grey. Dirty foam spilled down the face of the waves. The wind had eased. With only her two headsails set, *Silversark* was shuffling along at three knots, like an old man in carpet slippers.

"We're going to have to get the main on her," said Lulu, sipping her coffee. "Be careful. There's a bat in the sail somewhere."

"A bat in the sail?"

"It was flying around the boat at daybreak," said Lulu. "I guess it was looking for someplace to rest. There wasn't anywhere else for it to go."

I looked around. In the middle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, halfway between western Prince Edward Island and the Magdalen Islands, *Silversark* was alone on the sullen water. The coast was not just hiding behind the mist: it was far behind us. The nearest land was forty miles away.

"I kept saying to it, *Get under the dinghy, you silly bat,*" said Lulu. "But it just kept flying around, and then eventually it crawled into the folds of the mainsail."

We drank our coffee. *Silversark* had made a dozen miles during Lulu's three-hour watch, but the wind had been steadily dropping. I put the mugs below. I cast off the ties on the mainsail and crept forward to the base of the mast. I re clipped my safety harness and hauled the big burgundy sail aloft.

Yanked from a sound sleep, the bat flew clear, fluttering like a self-propelled leaf in the wind and squeaking indignantly.

"I know how you feel," I muttered.

Back in the cockpit, I took the tiller. Lulu sat with me for a companionable moment, watching the bat swoop and circle and cling briefly to the mainsail. She yawned. Her shoulders were weary from three hours of steering, her eyes gritty from staring at the dimly lit compass on the main bulkhead. She yawned once more, then leaned over and kissed me fleetingly.

"God nat," she said, in one of the Danish phrases which have insinuated themselves into our family's language.

"Sov godt," I answered. *Sleep well.*

With one eye on the compass, I watched her through the open companionway hatch as she peeled off her safety harness, her floater jacket, her oilskin trousers, her sweater, her seaboots. Yawning again, she squirmed into a quarterberth and dropped into sleep like a stone.

I glanced up. The bat swooped behind the mainsail and landed on the leech, the trailing edge of the sail — a bright-eyed fragment of brown fur with leathery, humanoid fingers. In the slackening wind, the boat rolled to windward, relaxing the tension on the sail. It rolled back again, snapping the sail taut. The bat clung to her perch, tiny black hands clutching the smooth red Dacron. The boat rolled back and forth. The sail jerked once more, throwing the bat into the air.

She flew forward into the slot between the jib and the jumbo staysail. She fluttered up the mast and back to the leech of the mainsail. The sail flexed and snapped, flexed and snapped. The bat catapulted into the air.

"The dinghy," I said. "Go under the dinghy. Nothing's going to bother you there."

Once more she circled the boat, scanning the rigging, the sail, the hull. Then she swooped behind the sails and disappeared.

I stood up, squinted behind the sails and looked around boat. No bat. She had simply vanished.

I sat down again, looked at the compass, hauled on the tiller to bring the compass card

swinging back to 108 degrees magnetic. I scanned the horizon. Nothing but crumpled grey water and ground-glass sky.

No bat. No Lulu. Not a living creature in sight but myself.

Suddenly I felt small and cold and lonely.

Every cruise has its defining moment, a freeze-frame which encapsulates the essence of the whole venture: a moment of delight, of terror, of insight or wonder. The moment lingers in memory, gaining lustre as it recedes in time. It is not necessarily typical of the cruise: it may even stand out for its distinctiveness. A two-week cruise in fog and driving rain may be defined forever by a single sunbaked afternoon with a pod of dolphins or a perfect landfall on a low, anonymous coast.

For years, Lulu and I had been visited by fantasies of offshore cruising — days and nights at sea capped by arrival at an exotic destination: Nassau, Lisbon, Suva. But it took eight and a half years to build the boat, and by then our son, Mark, was in school and we had other responsibilities. So we had trimmed our ambitions, cruising the waters of the Maritimes rather than the oceans of the world. For Nassau, read North Sydney; for Lisbon, Louisbourg.

It was not a terrible sacrifice: yachts come from all over the world to enjoy the beauty and character of this coast. This summer we were making a 600-mile voyage from our home on the Atlantic coast of Cape Breton through the Strait of Canso into the Gulf of St. Lawrence. We had traversed Northumberland Strait, touching the coasts of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, and then sailed down the west coast of the Island before jumping off for the Magdalen Islands, a crescent of red bluffs and sandbars in the middle of the Gulf. Later we would turn south to the eastern end of PEI and home. This was our longest passage ever: 143 miles non-stop from West Point, PEI, to Cap-aux-Meules in the Magdalens. When I came on watch, we had been 24 hours at sea, and we were still 40 miles short of the Magdalens, 50 miles short of Cap-aux-Meules.

I scanned the horizon again. Forty miles off or four hundred, the sea would be like this: wide, featureless, lonely. *The lonely sea and the sky.*

The notion of voyaging stretches back into the soft-focused reaches of a bookish child's vivid imagination. Perhaps it came from that wonderful writer Arthur Ransome, whose novels of youth and sailing I can still read with pleasure. Whatever its source, it seems always to have been there.

In 1949, when I was just entering junior high, I somehow acquired a bag made of khaki duck with a drawstring threaded through brass grommets, the sort of bag one might use to pack sails or a tent or a sleeping bag. I loved that bag, and throughout my school years, I carried loose-leaf binders and textbooks in it. When we travelled, it held my clothing. Eventually the bottom wore out, and my mother reinforced it from inside with a disc of blue denim from a pair of terminated jeans. Some people called it a school-bag, and my mother called it a dunnage bag. I usually called it a duffle bag, but I was affronted when someone else called it a gunny sack. I knew perfectly well that it was none of those things, but I was unwilling to speak its real name aloud.

It was my seabag.

Now this was very odd, because I had no real intention of doing anything so useful or interesting as going to sea; I was going to be a lawyer. Nor was there any salt water in my blood: both of my parents were educators, one of my grandfathers was a Manitoba farmer, and the other had been an accountant with the Canadian Pacific Railroad. True, we lived in Vancouver, but for many Vancouverites the city is only peripherally a port. From my little bedroom at the top of the house near Dunbar Street, you could just barely see the water. In 1945, when the freighter *Greenhill Park* exploded and burned at a downtown wharf, I saw the plume of smoke from my window, and on foggy nights I drifted off to sleep listening to the distant foghorns — *BEEEE-ohh! BEEEE-ohh!* But that was as close as we got to the harbour.

There was no harbour at South Beach, in Washington State, where we spent our

summers. The shore was just a wide swath of sandbars below a crescent of bluffs which rose like a wedge from west to east. The beach was splendid, but it was completely exposed to the 15-mile fetch of the Strait of Georgia, and when the wind blew hard a big surf broke on the beach. The falling tide exposed a quarter-mile of sand — lovely to run on, superb for sand castles, but not much of a place for a sailboat.

Walter Largaud had a fishing boat there — a thirty-foot gill-netter with a flaring bow and a stern wheelhouse. I thought Largaud an old man, but he was probably in his fifties. Unusual though she was, his boat was the most graceful small fishing vessel I had ever seen. My father and I met Walter on the beach once, and my father complimented him on her.

“She has lovely lines,” said my father, shading his eyes as he gazed out to where the boat tossed at her mooring. I cringed. My father was a professor of education, an indoor man who wore vests and watch-chains: what did he know about boats and “lines”? But he was quite right, and Walter Largaud smiled with satisfaction.

Largaud’s farm was at the west end of the beach, where the sand and the bluffs disappeared and the beach became a steep bank of cobbles. East of the house, right on the cobbles, was a boneyard of boats — a whole line-up of locally-built workboats which had outlived their usefulness: seine-boat skiffs, dories, gill-netters with stepped cabins, reef boats.

One small double-ended gill-netter on Largaud’s beach was called *Gypsy*. She was weathered and dry and brittle-looking, probably rotten, but she was complete — engine, shaft, steering wheel, everything. She had wooden berths, primitive cupboards and an old stove in her snug fo’c’sle. Who needed more? Mired in the melodramas of youth, I dreamed of reviving her: caulking, painting, reconditioning the engine and taking her back to sea. She would be my home. Nobody else seemed to have any use for *Gypsy* — or, I thought, for me. Two rejects. Together we would show them. I used to climb aboard and stand in her wheelhouse, my eyes narrowed, the wooden spokes of *Gypsy*’s wheel in my hand, steering with a certain casual elegance earned through years of experience on the seven seas. Gazing landward from her wheelhouse, I steered her over the beach and the hayfields beyond, wishing they had towed her up by the stern, with her bow still pointing out to sea.

The only boat we ever owned was a ten-foot plywood rowboat for which my father paid \$40. It was a fine little boat, light and strong and beautifully balanced, with plenty of freeboard, safe even in strong winds and thundering surf. Once, when I was about 12, I pulled her down off a log, and a broken branch on another log punched a hole in her bottom. My father came to inspect the damage. I was crying bitterly, sick with remorse. How could I have done such a stupid thing?

“I love that boat more than anything in the world,” I sobbed. My father looked at me in astonishment. I had just paid 65 hard-won dollars for a new Royal Enfield three-speed bike.

“More than your new bike?” he said.

“Way more,” I said. “Way, way more.”

“We’ll get it fixed,” he said quietly. He put an arm around my shoulder and gave me a short, hard squeeze, and I suddenly knew how much I loved him. He died two years later, and I mourn him yet.

That rowboat was the crucial resource in my first business ventures. I had a paper route, summers only, delivering the *Vancouver Sun* all along the shore. We were in the United States, but the cottagers were all from greater Vancouver: Point Roberts remains the only place on earth where Americans are worried about Canadian domination. My paper route included 15 or 20 cottages at Crystal Waters Beach, right on the shore beneath the eastward bluffs. They could not be reached by road; the only approach was down endless flights of stairs from the parking area high above. Rather than riding my bike to the clifftop and then trudging up and down those stairs, I rowed to Crystal Waters and walked along the shore. Sometimes, at high tide, I could row close enough to throw the rolled newspapers right up on the porches without even beaching the skiff.

My friends and brothers and I also made money from the fishery. During the season, the waters off the point were flecked with purse seiners — big boats from Anacortes and Tacoma which set pouches of net around schools of salmon, drew them tight and then brailed the fish aboard with huge dip nets. When the seiners anchored off the beach in the evenings — and sometimes when they were fishing — we would row out and visit. The fishermen were robust, genial men, lounging on deck, drinking Rainier beer and smoking Lucky Strikes and asking whether we knew any girls “that’d like to rassle a bit on the seine pile.”

The salmon they caught were running towards the Fraser River to spawn and couldn’t be caught with a hook and line. In my innocence I once asked a fisherman why.

“Well, my friend, look at it this way,” he said. “If you were on your way to get laid, would you stop for a sandwich?”

They always caught some “blackmouth,” salmon too small for processing but plenty big enough for supper. If a boy rowed up beside a seiner and asked, most crews would give their blackmouth away. When we had ten or twelve fish, we would row ashore and sell them for a dollar or two each to cottagers and daytrippers from Vancouver. It was the ideal business: a ready market, no operating costs, pure profit.

But a ten-foot skiff does not make a seaman. Yet I had a seabag, and — secretly — I had oilskins and seaboots, too. It pleased me to think that my high school peers believed I was wearing gumboots and slickers just like theirs. It was the perfect disguise. They were landlubbers: I was a voyager — at least in imagination. Ortega y Gasset once said something to the effect that the novelist represents the truest model of human consciousness: just as the novelist imagines a reality and strives to embody it in the shape of a book, so the human individual imagines a reality and strives to embody it in the shape of a future life.

So now I sat, forty years later, in the snug cockpit of a red-sailed 27-foot cutter, like the one in Ransome’s *We Didn’t Mean To Go To Sea*. I was steering towards an archipelago of sandy islands still hidden below the horizon — islands which had captured my imagination years before, but which I had never seen. They were not tropic islands, admittedly. But perhaps the destination matters less than one thinks. When you arrive, after all, the adventure is over. The joy is in the journey.

And perhaps the seabag represented not a fantasy, but a promise. That morning, in the middle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the promise seemed fulfilled.