

WATERBOUND

(Travel + Leisure, 2000)

Call me an optimist, or maybe just a fool, but as I packed my duffel bag in preparation for the week-long sailing trip I was to take with my father and older brother through the mountain islands and fiords of Desolation Sound, in British Columbia, I was beguiled by visions of long hot days and marine-blue waters. Late June, I was thinking, the start of summer -- not to mention all those photos in the guide book that seemed, by their sun-struck brilliance, to locate this essentially northern territory in some fantasy locale south of Tahiti. The upshot of such dementia was a bag stuffed with just the sort of clothing you might need for a day-trip to Jones Beach: shorts, bathing suit, T-shirts, sun-tan lotion.

The first cool breeze of reality blew over me in Los Angeles, at my father's house, where I stopped en route to Vancouver. My father is a lawyer, but he is also a lifelong sailor, a matching of pursuits and temperament that has imbued him with a particularly clear-eyed view of things like weather, both meteorological and human; neither lawyers nor sailors can afford to be romantic about the elements. It was in such a spirit that he handed me, on a perfect Southern California day, a bundle of gifts for the voyage: a windbreaker, a heavy wool sweater, a set of foul-weather gear (both waterproof pants and hooded jacket), and a pair of thermal long underwear. I thanked him, and tried not to look alarmed.

It's not that I was a novice. Led by our father's zeal, my brother and I had grown up sailing on weekends in Long Island Sound, on a twenty-seven-foot sloop our parents owned with friends. The boat was kept in Old Lyme, Connecticut, and

we would take overnight cruises to Fisher's Island and Block Island, to Nantucket and Sakonnet Point. Some days, armed with a Playmate cooler of sandwiches and drinks, we would simply head out into the Sound with no destination at all.

For us, it was an important, if complicated, way of being a family together. My father was the skillful, occasionally impatient skipper, my mother, brother and I the apprentice crew. Practical lessons lay in even the most mundane actions: how to stand on a heeling ship, for instance; the proper way to cleat a line or turn a sheet around a winch; how to read the telltales dancing in the wind; the utilitarian beauty of blowing on a fog horn; what not to do with an anchor -- or, for that matter, what not to do in almost any given situation. I remember not always being delighted -- a family brought together on a twenty-seven-foot floating island, with a hierarchy no less defined than that of a gorilla pack, is a family exponentially itself - - but I do not remember being bored. Everything counted to a degree generally unknown in the daily land-life of a growing boy. A thing was done right or it was done wrong, there was no in between, no getting away with it, and either way, in a world so surprisingly condensed, the consequences were immediately evident to all. Aside from the sheer physical thrill of sailing full-out under charging winds, it was the intense mutual scrutiny of life on a boat that made it so memorable. I have never forgotten the feeling.

We met up with my brother, Matt, in the Vancouver airport, and took a small plane to Comox, on Vancouver Island, where Desolation Sound Yacht Charters is located. At the Comox marina, our chartered boat was waiting in its slip. A thirty-eight-foot Catalina sloop, practically new. We walked over and through it like prospective buyers, turning winches, flipping switches on the navigation station, checking the

head (toilet) for signs of potential comfort (not likely). Within minutes, a certain proprietary air could be discerned: this was our ship, now. Her name was *Aisling*, which in German means, I was told, *Dream Life*.

It was already six o'clock. The weather was coming on, socking us in, with a shearing wind, and clouds gathering off the massive peaks ranged across the Strait of Georgia. One of the peaks was actually a glacier. The tide was out -- in a place where, my father kept telling us, the tides could drop or rise up to eighteen feet in a few hours. A blue heron fished the muddy flats of the harbor, taking slow steps, stiff-kneed yet graceful, like a Japanese dancer.

We walked into town, and ransacked the supermarket, the liquor store. Three men in a fit of menu-planning: can't have too much beer, throw in a fifth of vodka, half a liter of single malt. And fish? Out of the question. It doesn't keep, and besides, my father doesn't like fish. The answer, then, was meat, meat of all kinds, burgers, steaks, ribs, Italian sausages, hot dogs, sliced ham and turkey, a second ham for good measure, potatoes and potato chips, cookies, half a pound of chocolate. We would rename this The Cholesterol Cruise.

Everything stowed away (intelligent stowage is its own religion on a sailboat), we had dinner at the local pub, then turned in early. There came the crucial moment -- the divvying up of bunks. My father got the captain's berth, in the stern. It was the biggest, but had exceedingly low headroom, a fact that he would come to rue. My brother took the forward V-berth, and I settled for the main cabin, where the dining table lowered to become a bunk. The night was ominously cold, but voyagers are by definition optimists, and we went to sleep half naked, with the cabin hatch open. The thin, summer-weight sleeping bags provided by the charter company offered little warmth. By four in the morning, there was much

stirring in the dark of the cabin, and a general hunting for thermal underwear and thick socks. I woke to dim, grayish light and a sore throat. Outside, the weather was ugly, with twenty-five knot winds; over the VHF radio, we learned that a Small Craft Warning was in effect. We headed out of port under power, ready for adventure. It was Father's Day.

Later, we found we were the only charter to make it across the Strait of Georgia that day. Most boats never left the marina. One sailboat made the attempt, but turned back in the face of the ten-foot-high swells in the Strait. It was not just the height of the swells that threatened, but their angle and spacing -- bunched together, rolling ceaselessly from the southeast, they hardly gave a boat a chance to right herself before shoving her over again.

The journey across took three hours under power. My father had the helm the entire way. He is sixty-six years old and vital, but perhaps not always as certain of his own strength as he once was. When I'd first seen him in Los Angeles, he'd complained of a lingering viral infection and a general feeling of fatigue. He talked about feeling weak in the legs, feeling old. He stood now on the canted, pitching deck, fighting the wheel against the force of each wave. Water slopped over the rails, drenching us. In the distance we spotted a tug boat hauling two tankers, one behind the other, approaching us on the perpendicular. For about twenty minutes it seemed we were on a collision course, but we held our line and crossed just a few hundred yards in front of the tug. What we felt was no less than victory. Then we were across the Strait and turning northwest past Savary Island and up through the narrows of Thulin Passage. In the lee of the islands, the waters flattened. We were coming up into Desolation Sound itself, its steep, forested islands and inlets beckoning behind a scrim of light rain. My father stepped down from the helm like

a prizefighter, a late-round winner by TKO, and my brother took over. Matt looked sharp behind the wheel, his red beard set off against the blazing yellow of his foul-weather gear. My father sat down. He'd done it. He was tired, feeling pretty good.

We anchored that first night in Squirrel Cove, tucked up into the east side of Cortes Island, past a small but apparently steadfast Indian community at the mouth of the cove. (There are several Indian reservations located on different islands throughout Desolation Sound.) Just a week or two later in the season, I'm told, this and other anchorages like it are crowded with boats, but tonight, still in June, there were few others. We came among them in near silence. The rain had stopped, and the sky had partially cleared. The cove is dotted with rocky islets and adjacent to a lagoon. We secured the anchor, removed our foul-weather gear, and each took a moment to test this new, hard-won calm.

Among the many pleasures of sailing, I can think of none greater than the first moments of tranquility that lie in the wake of a long, hard day at sea. The sails are furled, the lines coiled on the deck; all has been made ship-shape, the rushing sounds and salt taste of the journey are already receding into memory, and suddenly you remember that this was once the way people arrived in the world. An airport is a modern thing, after all, a thing made by machines. But a boat is timeless. And on a sailboat, finally at rest, in the sweet silence at the end of the day, you can still hear the whispering of the Old World. It is like a communing of spirits. I think we all felt it that night, a sense of having traveled from our linked yet disparate lives to be just where we were, together.

In the morning, as we lingered in the cove, the sun shone for about an hour. Under its spell and promise, I saw these things: a hundred purple starfish in the shallow passage into the lagoon; a bald eagle staring back at me from a rocky

outcrop fifty feet away; ten turkey vultures revolving skyward on invisible currents, like a mobile made of living parts, turning in the wind.

Coming upon this uncharted world in 1792, Captain Vancouver, hemmed in by drastic tides and bad weather, and evidently in a prolonged state of melancholy and pique, christened it Desolation Sound. The mountains rising straight out of the fiord-deep waters -- the sheer, granite faces, the impenetrable cloak of pine forest, the thundering waterfalls, the snowfields permanent everywhere above the weather line, like frozen heavens -- well, perhaps Vancouver had had his fill of wilderness and wildness, of being the only boat out there. But just over two hundred years later, it is this unbounded solitude that is the vision for city-dwellers like my father and brother and me. To find that it even still exists, and then to put yourself out there -- it is a kind of faith. The weather, one might say, is beside the point.

Which leads me to my last confession: in a week of sailing in Desolation Sound, we had only one full day of sun. But I'm not sure I've ever loved the sun as much as I did that day. We woke in Waddington Channel, in perfect Walsh Cove, and for the first time in three days took in patches of blue sky with our morning coffee. Clouds were forming to the north and west of us. We struck out for the blue -- Pryce Channel to Deer Passage to Lewis Channel, where the sun and wind finally found us in force. For an hour or two we tacked back and forth across the Sound for the simple thrill of it, taking turns at the helm, the sails hauled close, seeing who could pull the most speed from the boat.

Need I say it? The old man won with seven knots.

John Burnham

Schwartz