



We were talking just now about how my neighbour, Jack Montgomery, lost his young son swimming in the river last year. A tragedy it was. His mother never stopped blaming herself for letting him out of her sight, and I don't want to put anything on her, but you got to do what you must and take account for it. Thinking about it puts me in mind of what happened ten or so years ago, before we moved here.

We had just left New York and I was setting up a business with what equity I managed to claw out of PRS. I had a little office on the fourth floor of a building right under the interstate and promised Mary that if we broke even in that first year I'd take her sailing. We just about made it, but I'd just lost a big contract, the first to top fifty thousand, and was plain exhausted after seven months of fourteen hour days. The money I could take out of the business wasn't much, but Mary said I needed to recharge. That way I'd come back knowing what it was I had to do.

"Fine," I said. "Let's go to Canada. There's good waters up there."

So we took ten days and followed the wind north up the channel between the mainland and Vancouver Island. It was beautiful, though in a different way to Chesapeake Bay. The coast was rocky, rising so sharply you could sail within a boat length of the water line and there'd still be twenty feet clear under your keel. Once, we saw a bear sitting on its butt, toes in the water, eating a salmon like it was a corn cob, pulling the flesh off the bones from one end to the other. It must have been twenty inches long.

"Twenty five," said Mary, one hand on her hip, one hand shielding her eyes.

That surely made me laugh. It reminded me of how much she knows me and how much I love her.

"We're gonna need a bigger boat," I said, and she had the good grace to nod.

"It's good we came, Michael," she said. "It's been months since you smiled."

The wind in the channel that year was consistent in direction but wholly uneven in nature. One day it blew for twelve hours and we made thirty-eight miles. The next was as calm as a summer's evening, so we moored in a little bay to watch an eagle taking fish. The inlet was full of logs those Canadians tie up in chains and haul down to the city using diesel tugboats. As the tide fell, they jammed together like pickles in a half empty jar. We had to watch they



didn't hole the boat.

The lack of progress that day made me crabby. I kept nagging Mary, saying she should tie a knot one way and she another. She kept talking about silly things so by early afternoon we'd gone to opposite ends of the boat, me fishing off the bow and her reading in the stern, to give each other space. Sailboats are like that. Being so close and intemperate picks at you like wind on a torn sail. If you're not careful, very soon you've got two pieces of cloth flapping in the air and the boat is going nowhere.

"You better start being nice, Michael," Mary said that evening. "Or else I'm going home and you can stay up here till you learn to converse."

About four days north of Nanaimo there's an area of narrow channels and inlets that's almost totally deserted. Desolation Sound, it's called. Beyond the pine trees you can see the Rocky Mountains, some still with snow on them, even in summer. We got there late and moored up in a little bay, aiming to talk about turning round. We were both thinking enough was enough; when we got home we'd forget about being crabby and some warmth might return between us. We ate on deck as the stars came out, but the mosquitoes kept whining and we both went to bed without saying much. Come morning the sea was thick and shiny, like oil, and dotted with the husks of a million insects. All I wanted was to keep going.

"Anywhere but here," Mary said, her legs all red from scratching.

So I took the boat, *Vigilance* she was called, out beyond the islands, into deep water, where the breeze would blow off the buzzers. I wanted to go up the coast some more as the further we went the less I had to think about the decisions I'd have to make when I returned. *Vigilance* wasn't new, in fact she was the cheapest in the catalogue, but she had a narrow beam and a long skeg, meaning she took heavy seas without the slapping that wider, deep fin boats are prone to. As the wind rose, she sliced into the water reminding me of my mother pushing a buggy up the hill in the town where I was raised.

But it was the fifth day and we had to have the boat back on the Sunday. Someone else had her booked and we had a ferry to catch. It had taken us four days to sail up there, three if you don't count the one moored up, and it would likely take as long to get back against the wind.

That far north there's no outer ring of islands. The next stop west is Kamchatka, in Russia.



The water's deep. So deep the gauge stops reading and all you get is these three little dashes where the figures ought to be.

"Let it go," Mary said. "You lost the contract, period. There'll be another."

This just made me sore. It was not that I'd lost the contract, it was that I'd lost it to PRS, the company I'd set up with Paul Farrah. The bid became a fight between him and me. It was ugly, actually, looking back on it. But at the time it was important. I was younger then.

"We should go back," Mary said, standing on the steps into the cabin.

"Yes, we should," I said, but did nothing about it. I was enjoying the emptiness of it all. There'd been no other boats all day, just the distant smoke of a diesel tug and an eagle splashing and rising with a fish twisting in its claws.

"You'll do right by them, Michael, you wait and see."

At first I didn't understand what she meant, but she had this way of knowing what was on my mind quicker than I did.

"Turn the gas on, will you?" she said. "I'll make us some coffee."

So after a little while, knowing she was right, I gybed the boat and took us south. On Monday I'd have to tell the staff that losing the contract meant some of them would have to go, and hiding myself up here was doing nothing to help them face what that meant. I put my sunglasses on as the sun on the water gives me a headache, but it was pleasant sailing, the wind being such that I could get a steady six knots when close hauled. Gradually, with every hour passing, I found myself preparing for what lay ahead. The sea rippled in the afternoon sunlight. I was five miles from land and nothing, save a stray log, would be in the way. I liked listening to the genoa luffing and the water splishing over the rudder, and feeling the tug of the tiller against my fingers. There were maybe seven hours of sunlight left and if we pressed on we could make an island that I noted on the way up.

So I wasn't concentrating too hard, just thinking about how I was going to apologise to Mary for being so irritable, when the depth gauge made this beeping sound. The dashes flashed and disappeared and the screen went blank, before reading forty metres. That couldn't be right. I was so far from land that a whole pine tree was the size of my thumb. There was



nothing on the water and though I made a hasty check of the charts, I knew exactly where I was. You could bury the Twin Towers under my keel and never know.

But it happened a second time. The depth gauge read three little dashes, then beeped, then flashed, then read thirty feet. I stood there feeling a panic rise, then breathed a sigh of relief when it flashed again and came up with the dashes.

I walked the deck, looked out through the binoculars, then returned to the cockpit.

“What’s wrong,” called Mary from the galley.

“Nothing,” I said. “Just a little craziness in the depth gauge.”

She shook her head as she stood over the gimbal stove, watching the kettle. “Sure there is,” she said, a comment that made me wish she’d stay below, even if I wanted her on deck.

The thing was, the boat was on my credit card. I could helm, sure, but was not infallible. Having lost the contract, the balance sheet was going to be a little thin for a few months, so I sure as heck didn’t want a two-thousand dollar repair bill coming through. I wanted Mary to tell me I was doing the right thing, even if I wouldn’t be told.

Then it happened a third time. The depth gauge beeped and I bent my knees a little, in case we struck something. The depth gauge read thirty feet, then twenty, then fifteen, before flashing again and returning to three little dashes. I breathed a sigh of relief, but was too quick to do so.

As loud as a fog horn and sudden as a car crash, something spurted hot water into the air. It splattered across the cockpit, soaking my back. I nearly jumped out of my skin. Thirty feet away was the curving, rolling spine of a Humpback crossing my stern. Blue-black underneath a sheen of water, it was lacerated with scars and dotted with barnacles. The twelve foot span of its tail floated up and sank out of sight without leaving a single ripple in the water.

“My God,” I said.

The whale was two or three times the length of *Vigilance*. If it hit us, we’d sink.



“Mary, get the life jackets would you?”

She was waiting for the kettle to whistle and like always, did nothing I asked. I wanted her to see, but also wanted her to be safe.

“Mary do it now, please,” I said, and just at that moment the depth gauge beeped again. I watched the numbers reduce from forty feet to fifteen and then to ten. The whale was getting closer to the keel and if she knocked it I’d be left unable to steer and topsides heavy. I’d better get the sails down.

But then it rose again, a hundred yards off the port bow. I was transfixed. No spurting from the blowhole this time, but the long ridge of spine breaking water at speed. She had a calf with her, right close, as if she was teaching it to swim. Tiny in comparison, it was perhaps twenty feet long and probably weighed over a ton.

I’d seen the scene before, of course, on the television. The camera crews always got tearful about how amazing it was to swim in the same waters as an animal the size of two Greyhounds end to end. But the view of them together, pouring through the water right in front of me, made the hairs on my arm stand on end. As graceful as love and as terrifying as failure, they ghosted below me, became visible, and vanished.

Mary came up from the galley carrying two mugs.

“What’s wrong?” she said, seeing my face, but then the mugs tilted in her hand. “There’s a...”

I turned. An orca rose and splashed behind the boat, a hundred yards off the stern. We watched the sea for some minutes, but all we saw was the bow wave expanding towards us. It arrived, lifted us, then moved on.

“Wowee,” Mary said. “That was something, wasn’t it?”

She took the binoculars off my head but there was nothing more for a half hour. I stopped thinking about the life jackets and started worrying about the calf. Would the whale get it to safety? Could she fight off a pod of orca?

Mary went below, backing down the steps to put the mugs in the sink. No sooner than she



was out of sight, the depth gauge beeped and flashed a fourth time.

Fifteen feet. Ten feet. Eight. The whale was right below us, swimming the length of the keel.

“Mary, hold on!”

Something in my voice made her take a hold of a grab rail. I gripped the tiller. All it needed was one flick of the tail.

“What is it?” she shouted. “What’s the problem?”

I had a vision then, of looking down on myself from above, seeing how insignificant I was on this vast expanse of ocean, a shadow passing below me through the deep water. The gauge flashed and returned to three dashes. Mary came on deck demanding to know why I was shouting.

“Sorry,” I said. “Thought we were in trouble.”

She sat on the side, looking astern, the wind blowing hair over her face.

“There he is,” she said after a while. A mile astern, the orca rose and splashed backwards, one fin out sideways. “Isn’t that great! We’re so honoured to see such a thing.”

And sadly that was the last I saw of the whale and her calf. I never told Mary about the gauge, or the fear that rose when I saw the size of the thing. Or the love I felt in how she guarded her calf.

Instead, I took pleasure in listening to her telling the folk at the boat yard we’d seen a killer whale breaching and splashing, so close as you could touch it. We got the ferry back to Seattle. My staff agreed to take a twenty per cent cut in wages, every man, to keep their jobs. The following year I got the government contract, which turned us round. Me and Mary been married twenty years next month and I’m taking her to Europe. They say the tidal range in Greece is a single foot, and the waters are so clear you can see the bottom.

And now that I think of it, a few years after that trip, during the sub-prime fiasco in fact, PRS went bankrupt. They’d taken on too much debt. I heard Paul took to drinking and later took his life off the Lewis-Clark Bridge.



Who's to know what the deep waters hold.

Author's note: with sincere thanks to Jenny Sanders for her comments