

ATLANTIC STORMS

British Virgin Islands

Aged eighteen I stepped foot on the British Virgin Islands vaguely hoping to lose my virginity.

The immigration officials are strict and take a dim view of year-off backpackers and yacht-hoppers. You have to keep moving or be deported. I sailed from Martinique to Antigua, there made a friend, Matt, and together we got on a fifty-five foot ketch needing extra hands for a sail to the BVI. We drank a last good luck tot of Pusslers Rum with the skipper and went ashore.

The main town was a ramshackle place of one- and two-storey buildings and we made camp under some coconut trees behind the Chase Manhattan Bank.

Matt had windswept blond hair. He was from the North of England. In Antigua he had belonged to the permanent crew of Great Britain II, the yacht Chay Blythe took around the world in the first Whitbread race.

We did nothing for a while. Near the Chase Manhattan Bank was a yacht marina where we ate chips for one dollar loaded with sauces, Thousand Island Dressing mainly. We nearly got killed taking a lift from some drunk Americans in a jeep. The island was the kind of place where there were well-heeled holiday-makers in beach resorts spending a lot of money, entertained at night by reggae and steel drum bands; and there were the locals living in shanty towns, donning whites to serve in the hotels, their ancestry African, their forefathers having worked the sugar plantations. Conspicuous on the roads were the pimped-up motor cars of these locals, being driven very slowly up and down the island vibrating with music.

Two Swedish teachers arrived and camped next to us behind the Chase Manhattan. With them we walked across the island to see what was on the other side. They were older than us and out for fun, one blonde and bubbly, the other brunette and more staid. We found a beach where the Swedes stripped down to their bikinis and took their tops off. Matt and I retreated to the wooded fringe. We found an old crashed four-seater plane rusted among the coconut palms. When we returned I tried to read my book, Madame Bovary, but it had lost its flavour besides the two topless

girls. In the afternoon a guy came along and unsuccessfully tried to crack a wind-fallen coconut. He was a city type. Matt was also interested in coconuts, the windfalls strewn everywhere in the BVI, and was forever picking them up, jiggling and listening to them. He showed the city guy how to open one. This guy invited the four of us over to his place on the next beach.

He was a New York art buyer. After dark we went from his house to a bay where Texan millionaires sailed in once a year for a party. The anchor lights of their yachts twinkled offshore. They came by dingy and there was a big sand party with the local witchdoctors, shamans and island crime bosses. The New Yorker knew the lot of them. He was a crazy dancer, a notch short of frenzied. There was a live band and he had so much energy on the mud floor the Swedes stood rooted to the spot watching him. Matt and I scratched our necks. That night, Matt slept with the blonde in the living room, I slept with the brunette on the open terrace and no sooner had she and I got into our sleeping bags than she rolled over and went to sleep. I don't think Matt got up to anything with the blonde either.

The next day we returned to our ground-sheet behind the Chase Manhattan Bank. Matt was glad to be back. I felt out of sorts. As night fell we settled down to a night under the stars. A massive rainstorm arrived at 3am, we had to run for cover, and when we returned Matt's money and passport were gone.

He had to call his dad from the police-station for a plane ticket home. He didn't get on with his father but he had no choice. I suggested we ask the New Yorker to use his voodoo friends to retrieve the passport before it left the island but something dour in Matt's personality did not permit such a plan, as if he felt fate was simply against him and he must yield. So Matt was yanked back to the North of England, his escape at an end, and having seen him off at the airport I went to find a new boat.

Delivery Boat

On Christmas Eve we had been at a marina with a steel drum band; a Creole American had used my guitar to serenade the yachts. I decided to return to this marina. I slept under a boat out of the water on wooden blocks and in the morning started to go from one boat to another. When you're eighteen, opportunities come forward to meet you.

You stand there on the pontoon, you've got a small backpack and no life-baggage to speak of, and, hey presto.

So I found myself on the gangway at the stern of an immaculate fibreglass-hulled Swedish production design, a thirty-nine foot Maxi sloop, hailing the captain. It was a working yacht just finished the bareboat charter season. A tall man with grizzled sideburns and spectacles hanging round his neck on a chain came up from the cabin. He had flown in to deliver the yacht, which belonged to an airline pilot friend of his, destination the Balearics in the Mediterranean. He could use another crew and offered me bed and board and a flight home at the end of the delivery. He wasn't leaving for a week and had another crew member on the way so there'd be three of us for the voyage. I came aboard, we shook hands and he showed me to a berth.

Now I could relax. Since nothing would happen for a week I decided to take the chance to learn surfing. On the other side of the island there was a beach too narrow for hotel development whose regular breakers drew a handful of committed surfers. I found I could hitch-hike there, picked up by the minivans of shore-staff from the ocean cruisers or by white locals chewing their lips at the wheels of four-by-fours, but never by the pimped-up jalopies of the locals. These rolled by slowly as if the road was too short, reggae music inside, the rear seats a kind of harem of veils and cushions.

On the beach a black guy had a shack and came every day at eleven to make a fire and cook deep-fried chicken for the surfers. The waves, foaming into a reef, defeated me and I couldn't get on with Madame Bovary either, so, nursing various cuts and bruises, I hung out with him. He told me he lived in a lane of bungalows made of wood and corrugated iron where any foreign car got pelted with stones. The island was 'hot like fire' in August. 'The white man don't worry me none,' he said. 'I take life real slow.' With the smell of sand and sea blowing through the coconut palms, we watched the surfers and the bright blue sky and he poked the chicken coming up in colour in the boiling fat.

Back on the yacht I got to know the skipper, Clive, of the grizzled sideburns. He was a tall, powerful man, no worse for being sixty-five. He had moved on to professional yachting after a long career in the RAF as a Warrant Officer engineer. He'd won the Air Force Cross, lying inside the wing of a transport from Malta to RAF Lakenheath with his fingers stoppering a fuel leak that could have burst into flames at any minute, though he made light of the tale when he told it. As there had been a

combined cadet force at school I more or less understood the Services Man in him, the drill sergeant not to be crossed on the parade square but kindly at the end of the day. I was fresh out of school and he seemed taken by me. He was an Ocean Yachtmaster examiner and began teaching me the syllabus. I had learned sailing from my father and knew a bit already. I could use a sextant and had three thousand miles of blue-water sailing in my log book. His wife was on board for a week's holiday and we began day-sailing. While she made lunch in the cabin, he introduced me to blind navigation, extra stuff with ropes and anchors and I began to feel all but a member of the family. We swung the compass in preparation for the voyage. We went to anchorages up and down the coast and to deserted islands nearby, becoming switched on to this clement clean yachting playground. In beautiful bays for fun I used to dive down in clear water to see how the anchor was lying. In the evenings, back at our spot in the marina, we sat in the cockpit and watched dusk fall, enjoying a tot of rum. Rather proudly Clive talked of his son, tall as himself and his match physically. When they argued they would knock seven bells out of each other, he told me.

Clive's wife flew home and the third crew, Todd arrived. We provisioned at the supermarket and Clive wanted two big tyres, sending Todd and I to scavenge for them in the boatyard. Todd struck me as a likeable if slightly empty-headed guy. We were around the same age. He was tanned and his skin looked like it had the toughness of agricultural fertilizer bagging. He was from the rougher side of Portsmouth. As we carried tyres back to the boat he told me about his life: fights outside the pubs after closing time, marauding violence against strangers who just happened to be passing by. That was the bulk of it. And he had lost his virginity at fourteen to an easy girl on the local housing estate, information which plunged me into a funk.

Now we were ready to sail. It was early to go across the Atlantic, Clive admitted. A thousand miles north-west we'd begin to find ourselves in the North Atlantic bang in mid-winter. Yet he was riding high on confidence, having got a smaller Westerly fibreglass production yacht through a bad storm in the Bay of Biscay by the simple expedient of taking all canvas off and trailing two tyres on ropes from the stern. 'All you need in a big storm is plenty of seaway,' he assured us, 'and we'll have the whole Atlantic'.

Next morning we sailed out of the marina, cleared Mosquito Island, and headed north east.

Sailing

The yacht had roller-reefing and auto-pilot and very much sailed itself. Only a loose watch system was needed in daytime as we were all awake. In a blue sea we made good progress, on a close reach in the Trade Winds.

For night-time Clive devised three four-hour single-man watches, one from 8pm to midnight, the next from midnight to 4am, and the last from 4am to 8am, which we rotated daily so no one was permanently stuck with the dog watch. Whoever had the 4am watch had to make the bread. Todd and I learned from Clive how to form the dough in a plastic bowl, two parts white flour to one part brown, how to set that to prove, ready to go in the oven, and how to bake the bread. Every morning at 8am we could all enjoy the fresh bread in sandwiches filled with rough-cut onion and slabs of Kraft cheese from a five kilo drum.

The nights were warm. On one night, on watch alone, I pottered around the cockpit, the belt of the auto-pilot quietly working away at the steering wheel for company. The sky was alight with stars, the full moon blazed and the invisible life in the water sparkled on contact with the hull in friendly bursts of bio-luminescence. So bright was the night that I brought up a book and read by the combined light. I lay on cockpit cushions, my head against the fibreglass deck and picked out constellations. It was unworldly and beautiful to pass through this Tropic of Cancer, moving quietly on the margin between fathomless deeps and infinite heavens.

On the third night, when Todd was on watch, murderous shouting erupted in the central saloon. It seemed Todd had fallen asleep and let the hurricane lamp tip over, threatening a fire – we used it to save the yacht's batteries. Clive, asleep on the long lounge in the main saloon, had by some instinct woken up and was now shouting murder at Todd. I sat up in my sleeping bag in the aft cabin but otherwise stayed put, my blood running cold. I didn't know what was about to happen. Todd was screaming with fright and Clive was going to throw him overboard. It must all be parade-ground theatricals, I said to myself and indeed after a few minutes things did settle down. In the morning I asked Clive what had happened. 'He's got a thick hull, that Todd, but I got the message in,' he answered shortly. I was shocked but agreed Todd did have a thick hull. Todd himself seemed no worse for his ordeal and in fact quite chipper that day.

Now we reached the weird Sargasso Sea where we found ourselves half-stuck in weed. This lasted for a week in light winds. Clumps of yellow and brown seaweed lay in the water and the bigger lumps had their own eco-system of crabs and fish. In places the seaweed lay thick in the water while in other places it was sporadic. Since the charted depth of the sea was two thousand metres all this stuff of tidal creeks was uncanny. I remember we slipped by one area more massed than anywhere else, and an arm of vegetation descended long into the very clear water. I thought of Jack and the Beanstalk, this a long ladder between two remote worlds, and imagined some giant sea-monster using this limb to clamber up out of the black depths. The propeller of our trailing log, which gave us our speed for navigation, clogged up for the week. We hardly averaged two knots.

Then we were clear of the seaweed and on to the next phenomenon, a plopping behaviour in the water one afternoon. There was almost no wind and the boom was creaking back and forth uneasily. As I became aware of a spooky feeling I climbed out of the cockpit onto deck and stood with a hand on a stay to have a look. It was the same blue expanse of sea, unmarked by land or another vessel, which we had become accustomed to. Clive and Todd were drawn up on deck too, sensing something unusual. It is hard to describe but the whole ocean was acting strangely, the surface plopping as if touched by rain, but plopping from underneath, or not exactly that but along those lines. Clive watched intently and then, satisfied there was no danger, turned back below to resume his paperback detective novel, saying, 'Bermuda Triangle, lads. That's what that is.' And indeed we were in the Bermuda Triangle.

First Storm

Every day had been a little cooler than the last. We were no longer in summer tropical weather. We had passed the island of Bermuda some six hundred miles to port and now, pointing a little more eastwards, we had the full Atlantic Ocean before us. The weather was anticyclonic, anticyclones that grew up in the Gulf of Mexico, gathered to their full fury in the Atlantic and, all but blown out, made landfall in Europe, giving Britain its winter squalls and storms.

The first time the weather grew sharp we sat snug in the main cabin with the hatchway slid shut leaving an inch for ventilation. This was Clive's storm mode where we were to keep off deck, let the autopilot do the work while the two tyres dragged in the water on a long hawser. The storm was blowing us in the right direction east and though we had no sail the log was reading a satisfactory 4 knots. From the hull came gurgling sounds and the odd thud, all quite peaceful until the wind came up in the rigging which began to whine like Brighton Marina in a gale. Yes, it was all a piece of cake, Clive's face as much as said, as he finished one detective novel, stroked his grey sideburns and started on another. We had long got used to seeing no shipping in this part of the ocean and had no need to be on deck. For a day, safe in our cosy den, we baked our bread and lived from meal to meal. But on the second morning Clive stood in the hatchway, examined at the sky, and came down wearing a solemn face. He had not liked the look of the straw-colour in the sky at all.

The storm grew. The boat rode up and down the waves. The cabin windows were either filled with black water a few feet away or by the distant grey sky and its scudding clouds. Here was a chance to see what a hurricane-force storm looked like (were the waves really the size of houses?) and I periscoped my head out of the hatchway at times, but with a certain squeamish reluctance, not sure I really wanted to look. What I saw was a grey sea streaked with white foam, the waves tall, broad and regular. Like a bob in a pond we rode buoyantly up and down the incoming waves, a long climb from the troughs, flying high at the crest when the whole potent field of water was open to view for miles in every direction. These long glimpses showed two things. Somewhere a crest would be smashing down like a Maui surf wave and somewhere else a break in the clouds would be lighting a patch of the sea in sparkling blues and whites. Behind every broken wave was a beautiful short-lived turquoise.

We were all in the cabin when the yacht was knocked down. It was quick, violent and without warning. The food from the cold box took flight in the cabin in zero-gravity then fell to the floor as the yacht righted itself. We sat up unhurt but shocked among the sofa cushions. A little water had dripped in to wet everything and UHT milk and corn-flakes were now swilling up and down the floorboards among broken eggs.

A couple of hours later, another knock-down. In this one, jarred by the mast-head slapping into the sea, the companionway hatch came out of its runners and shot overboard. As the boat righted itself the weather squalled inside the cabin. I was

frightened but there was no time for fear. I followed the others outside, each of us clipping on harnesses. We could see our hatch, a trapezoid varnished wooden pane with a metal clasp, floating a hundred yards away on a wave. Clive started the engine and fortunately the oil and fuel systems were no worse for their up-ending. Clive steered and Todd and I lay down on deck, hanging our hands out prepared to catch the hatch, and we succeeded in grabbing it and bringing it back on board. We all retreated inside and Clive slotted the hatch back and pulled over the top part all the way so it couldn't fly away again.

The storm went on. In the cabin praying which I took an instant dislike to. If you hadn't believed in God until now (and Clive and Todd had given no sign of doing so) it was too obvious to suddenly start, I thought. We were frightened and contemplating boat-wreck but there was still self-respect.

The storm abated a little overnight then came back with more fury. We could hear part of the mainsail beginning to flap loose from the boom and had to go out with more sail ties. This was a different sea. The speeding wind had flattened out the seascape into a rolling Sussex Down veiled by a blizzard of grey spray. It was hard to breathe and I was reminded of a Tolstoy short story, Snow Storm. It seemed a safer sea than the earlier one though the wind was higher.

At last the wind eased, we hauled in the tyres and began to sail again.

Prayers at sea

For the next few days I spent time in the cockpit alone, switching off the auto-pilot and steering in what were generally force sixes, glad to escape the confinement of the cabin. I was in a bad mood, looking at the water and sky with bitter frightened irritation. I was all too aware that in other parts of the world my year-off peers were having a high life enjoying female companionship. They were achieving partnerships in the Alps with chalet girls, on the beaches of Thailand at Full Moon parties, in Indian Ashrakans among the multicoloured tents and on bikini scuba diving swims in the Barrier Reef. Yet here I was stuck with Clive and Todd, at risk to my life, in a baleful wasteland of water. I was deeply fed up.

The second storm, after a week's respite, imposed itself as the first one had and we were knocked down three more times violently. The interior of the boat disintegrated. Yet outside, the rig – mast, boom and stays – remained intact, which meant no loose metal banging against the hull fracturing it, and no struggle to try and cut it free.

Clive was now high priest and chief supplicant, making copious apologies to God for his past indifference, promising to change, begging for intercedence. My uncooperative atheism put me strongly out of favour with him. I was better off alone on deck.

Todd was in a sort of hibernation mode, doing a good impression of waiting for it all to go away; he'd mouth along with Clive's prayers gladly. He hadn't had the sense to keep his spare clothes dry and lay in a ball in the forward cabin in a T-shirt. We put the spare mainsail over him. Then the hawser on the dragging tyres snapped and Clive took that sail for a replacement sea anchor.

Also to escape them I stuck my head out of the hatch. I still had a weak stomach for the spectacle of the storm, the massive displacements of water shot with occasional sunlight. Like witnessing a battle, in order to see it you had to be uncomfortably close to the action. Really I disliked the emptiness of the ocean and loathed the whole business of transatlantic yachting, from phony prayers to salt-encrusted fingernails to five kilo drums of processed Kraft cheese.

Navigation

After the second storm passed our big problem became navigation. The Azores, a peppering of dots on the oceanic chart, was getting close, a few hundred miles away we figured. We'd had no sight of land since Mosquito Island three weeks before. Navigation was by way of a cheap plastic sextant Clive had brought with him from England. Sun readings had been hard to make in skies knit with cloud and days passed without one. Wind and wave were sweeping us east in the right direction but if we overshot the Azores it was a thousand more miles to Portugal.

Making sextant sightings was my job. Clive was too big and stiff to stay on his feet in the cockpit using the thing. Todd and I took a certain pride in our agility about deck. We could run about the pitching craft like circus performers. Each successful sun reading yielded a position line on our damp Atlantic chart after performance of various sums using books of tables, two such sightings, two lines, and a position where they crossed.

If there was any chance of sun I stood in the hatchway holding the sextant under my jacket, ready to throw it up to my eye. We had five minutes of sunlight in three days.

It all became very tense and we couldn't enjoy our good progress while we weren't sure where we were.

But it was all right. Todd, who had the sharpest eyes, was the first to see land. A smudge on the horizon, Faial Island, part of the Azores archipelago plumb bang in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Then, what had appeared a cloud formation shifted to show a volcanic mountain standing in the sea. This was neighbouring Pico Island. To starboard, a ship came smashing out of the horizon moving North-West, in VHF range. In one go we had found both land and shipping lanes and the ocean had become like Piccadilly Circus.

Todd and I shook hands and whooped. He pulled the fog horn out of the cockpit locker and let off joyous blasts. Meanwhile, after a brief smile, Clive went to sit at the navigation table. Watching him suspiciously from the hatchway I saw his big hand swathed in yellow oilskin switch on the VHF set, pull out the handset on its spiral flex and thumb down the talk button.

'Mayday, Mayday, Mayday,' he began in a firm voice. 'This is the yacht Slipway, the yacht Slipway, the yacht Slipway. Mayday.'

Unreal to hear those words. The madman was sending out a distress signal to the ship.

I demanded an explanation. With cool audacity, this honourably decorated and pensioned RAF stalwart told me he intended to scuttle the yacht (there was a plug in the bilges) forcing rescue. He was reckoning on the ship picking us up and then our being transferred by pilot vessel to Faial.

I stared at him and, despite myself, I understood. When we got ashore Todd and I would be expected to pay lip service to whatever account of the sinking he concocted. The insurance people would be given a good story, ensuring they paid up,

and thus Clive would be paid by the airline pilot, and we would all fly back to the UK without encumbrance.

It was true the interior of the boat was no longer fit for that intended charter season in The Med. The yacht probably needed surveying for structural damage. Someone was going to be out of pocket and Clive didn't want it to be him. Possibly he was at the end of his tether too and in the SOS call he was letting go weeks of pent up stress. I didn't know. To me his mayday call, apart from being a lie, was flawed in strategy. If we had to deploy the life-raft lashed on deck as the yacht sunk under us we'd find the ocean a very angry place again and would be taking a big risk.

Matters were decided for us. The ship didn't respond and was soon away. Perhaps the watch didn't hear our distress call or perhaps it was ignored. And we may have failed to transmit since our VHF aerial was at the top of the mast where it was partly unseated from its brackets and bent out of shape by the numerous sea bashings it had received.

Now it was a matter of getting into harbour before nightfall. Clive unrolled more jib and took the helm. The world was beginning to pass from the monotone existence we were used to to a more colourful one. We could see wave-smashed cliffs, farmhouses perched on green slopes and soon we would be able to see the harbour: cosy little houses, boats on the quay, traffic on the road. As if to guide us, dolphins appeared, three, then five, then fifteen, slowing down to match our speed, playing at the bow wave then heading away and disappearing. Watching the dolphins, Clive, Todd and I couldn't help being friends again, delighted.

At length we motored into the harbour, greens, pinks and yellows fresh to the eye, interesting fish and seaweed stinks in our noses. A Portuguese warship lay along the main pier and out came three sailors in uniform. They marched to the high, proud stern and went through a brief ceremony of ensign dipping. 'Go and lower something,' Clive told me.

A frayed pennant flew on our rear stay. I went to the stern, bunched it in my fist. We were not much to look at. One indignity of the second storm was the wedgie it had inflicted, grabbing the rubber raking around the hull and hitching it up tight over the railings. Poor old Swedish tub. But it had taken care of us. On the warship the party of seamen marched back indoors. We bumped against the public quay, tied up and Todd and I danced a jig on the oddly solid pier which didn't heave or pitch at all.

Portuguese Azores

I vaguely thought I might lose my virginity in the The Azores.

We left the squalid yacht and didn't returned to it. Clive made arrangements for it to be pulled out of the water. We didn't see much more of Clive. He began to spend his time in the yacht club with a new set of storm-bound cronies.

I won't claim Todd and I found ourselves celebrities in town but many people said they'd seen us arriving or had heard about us. Apparently the town was keenly attuned to all comings and going in the harbour. The island was girt by four million square miles of desolate ocean. It seemed they could easily imagine our voyage and wanted to be nice to us.

The first rich morsel of pleasure was the Portuguese hotel room we now slept in, which Clive had put on expenses, except I had to share it with Todd. He rang Portsmouth in the middle of night and I had to listen to the fictitious drivel he regaled his family with about our trip.

He and I somehow got to know a lot of young people in town. We went to a dance in a school gym. There were a few derelict Europeans about who'd arrived and never left, perhaps similarly boat-wrecked. A Frenchman in his fifties was a notable character. We went out with some girls to dancing in a church on the coast, where everyone was in the traditional get-up for feast days, the nave cleared, mostly old women and children dancing. The girls we had come with took Todd and I down to the crypt to show us examples of the island church statuary, medieval in period, mostly crucifixion scenes luridly done with the blood and gore amped up. Todd got the creeps and went up. I remained with a soft attentive Catholic girl. 'I hope life is fair,' I said. 'There should be a reward for our hellish time.' 'What sort of reward?' she said and kissed me with sugary lips.

But this didn't happen, this kiss. It's the only falsification of this story and I shouldn't leave it unexplained. I've an impulse to give this story the neat, pleasant ending it didn't actually have. Not only was the voyage an unedifying experience, it also ended unsatisfactorily. Why? Because I failed to turn the situation to my advantage and seize the main chance.

The main chance was taking on the final leg of the delivery alone. There was Todd and there were plenty of potential crew among our new acquaintances. In my heart I knew the yacht was still seaworthy. I should have put aside my distrust of Clive and made terms to subcontract from him. I should also have put aside the fact I didn't want to go to sea again. What was on promise was a Mediterranean summer which could have put my year-off back on course. Even if the airline pilot couldn't use me to charter his boat, certainly Ibiza and Majorca would be dense with beautiful girls tanning their skin to lovely colours – such was my rudimentary understanding of the Balearics.

No, I failed to rouse myself and instead behaved like Matt who, having had his passport stolen in the BVI, didn't exert himself to get it back. It seems we were both, in this period of our late teens, straws in the wind.

After a week, an Air Portugal flight took Clive, Todd and I to Lisbon and there we parted ways. They flew on to Gatwick, I had decided to make my own way home. Clive was supposed to send me the money for the airfare but never did.