

ATLANTIC STORMS

British Virgin Islands

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

In all these Leeward Islands there are well-heeled holidayers in beach resorts spending a lot of money, entertained at night by reggae and steel drum bands, and there are locals living in shanty towns, donning whites to serve at the hotels, whose ancestry can be traced to the slave sugar plantations and who, by the way, take to the island roads in uniquely pimped up motor cars. The immigration officials are strict and take a dim view of year-off back-packers 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. Here 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.

We were both eighteen. Matt had windswept blond hair and resembled Bjorn Borg. 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, but Matt had just thrown it up.

In the BVI we did nothing for a while. There was a yacht marina restaurant where we could order chips for one dollar and load up on sauces: mayonnaise, ketchup, mustard and a novel one, Thousand Island Dressing. We nearly got killed taking a lift from some drunk Americans in a jeep. Then some Swedish teachers arrived to camp next to us.

In their company 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. On the other side of the island we found a beach where the Swedes stripped down to their bikinis and took their tops right off. Matt and I were barely ready for this and retreated to the bush where 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, liking to have one always in hand, putting choice ones to his ear to listen for coconut milk inside and he knew how to open them with his bosun's knife. This guy invited the four of us over to his place at 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 on their boats once a year for a party. The anchor lights of their yachts twinkled in the bay. They came ashore and there was a big 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 dance floor the Swedes stood rooted on the spot in the wings 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 might have had more luck with the blonde, who was the more game of the two, especially as Matt had no designs on either of them.

The next day we left and returned to our ground behind the Chase Manhattan Bank. Matt was glad to be back, I felt I had left behind a good and important opportunity. The Swedes had stayed behind. As night fell we settled down on our groundsheet for a night under the stars. A massive rainstorm arrived at three am, we had to run for cover, and when we returned Matt's money and passport had been stolen.

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 bound to turn against him anyway. So Matt was yanked back home, from which he had escaped, and having seen him off at the airport I went to find a new boat.

A new yacht

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 pontoon 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, to the Balearics in the Mediterranean for the summer season and could take another crew in return for bed and board and a flight home. 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 a berth.

Assured this neat move out of the Caribbean winter season into the Mediterranean summer season I could really relax, and 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 here, 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 blacks. These rolled by slowly as if the road was too short, reggae music inside, the rear seats a kind of harem of veils, cushions and wall-to-ceiling carpeting. On this beach, operating from a shack a black guy 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 this guy. He told me he lived in a lane of bungalows of wood and corrugated iron, flotsam and windfall, where any passing 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 big 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 around sixty. He had moved on to professional yachting after a long career in the RAF as an engineer and a Warrant

Officer. Suggesting valour was his Air Force Cross (I never saw it), awarded for 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 when he told the tale he made light of the matter, as if it were no more than ordinary duty in action. We'd had a combined cadet force at school and I understood the Services Man in him, the drill sergeant not to be crossed on the parade square but kindly in his eyes at the end of the day. I was fresh out of school and he seemed taken by me. For instance he was as Ocean Yachtmaster examiner and at once set me to learning the syllabus, wishing me to gain that qualification. I had learned sailing from my father as a child and knew a bit already. I could use a sextant and had three thousand miles of recent 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 their son. We swung the compass in preparation for the voyage. We went to anchorages up and down the island and to deserted islands nearby, become switched on to this clement clean yachting playground. 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 to me of his son, tall as himself and his match physically. When they argued they would knock seven bells out of each other.

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 bag. 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.

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

Setting off

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 the night 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 were rotated each 24 so no one was stuck with the dog watch. Whoever started 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 8 we enjoyed warm sandwiches filled with rough-cut onion and slabs of Kraft cheese from a five kilo drum.

The nights were warm. When I was on watch, Clive and Todd asleep below, I pottered around the cockpit with 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 sparked bio-luminescence in contact with the hull. Once, so bright was the sky that I brought up a star book and the constellations were capable of illuminating the print of the book. I lay on a cockpit cushion, my head on the hard fibreglass deck and began easily to pick out stars. Tiredness vanquished, I was a happy witness, glad to be on this quiet passage through the Tropic of Cancer moving quietly on the margin between fathomless deeps and infinite heavens.

On the third night, during Todd’s 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 preferred it over cabin lights 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 and Clive seemed about to throw him overboard. It must all be

parade-ground theatricals, I said to myself and indeed after a few minutes things did settle back down. In the morning I asked Clive what had happened. 'He's got a thick hull, that Todd, but I think I got the message in,' he answered shortly. I was somewhat 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 more 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, where an arm of vegetation descended long into the very clear water. I was reminded of Jack and the Beanstalk, a long ladder between two remote worlds, half-imagining some giant climbing up this living limb out of the fathomless depths and was glad when we had moved past. The propeller of our trailing log, which gave us our speed for navigation, clogged up for the week and we hardly averaged two knots.

Then we were clear of the seaweed but met with something else unexpected, 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 the odd phenomenon 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 got used to by now. 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 just 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 exactly the right direction west and though we had no sail up the log was still reading a satisfactory 4 knots. From the hull came gurgling sounds and the odd thud, all quite peaceful except as the wind came up the rigging 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 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 or two, safe in our cosy den, we baked our bread, lived from meal to meal. But one the third morning after Clive had stood in the hatchway and examined at the sky he wore a solemn face. He had not liked the straw-coloured 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 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 too, but with a certain reluctance, not sure I really wanted to see. 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 in 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 entirely different things. Somewhere a crest would be smashing down like a Maui surf wave, somewhere else a break in the clouds would be lighting a patch of the sea in sparkling blues and whites. Between these two impressions I had an uneasy ambivalence how long I wanted to stare at the picture.

We were all in the cabin when the yacht was knocked down. It was quick, violent and not preceded by anything to warn us what was about to happen. 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 must have come out of its runners because it shot overboard. As the boat righted itself the weather squalled into our cabin. I was frightened but there was no time for fear. I followed the others outside, clipping on harnesses. We could see our hatch, a trapezoid varnished wooden pane with a metal hasp, floating a hundred yards away on a wave-slope. Clive started the engine and fortunately the oil and fuel systems were no worse for the up-ending. He steered and Todd and I lay down on deck, hanging our hands out prepared to catch the thing, which we succeeded in doing. We all got back inside and Clive slotted the hatch back and pulled over the top part all the way so it couldn't fly off again.

The storm went on. In the cabin a certain amount of praying began to which I took an instant dislike. 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 shipwreck but there was still self-respect.

The next day we had to go out to put more ties on the mainsail which was flapping loose from the boom. 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 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 with girls. They were achieving partnership 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 tours 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 or four more times violently over several days. The interior of the boat disintegrated. Yet outside, the rig – mast, boom and stays – remained fortunately 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 intercession. I still didn't care for this sort of thing and this put me strongly out of favour. I was better off on deck.

Todd was in hibernation mode, doing a good impression of waiting for it all to go away, except he'd mouth along with Clive's prayers which was easy enough. 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 reclaimed the sail for a replacement sea anchor.

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 processed Kraft cheese.

Navigation

After the second storm had 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 our last sight of Mosquito Island three weeks ago. Navigation was by way of a cheap plastic sextant Clive had brought 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 west in the right direction but if we overshot the Azores it was a thousand miles to Portugal and probably another storm.

Making sextant sights was my job by now. Clive was too big and stiff to stay on his feet in the cockpit operating the thing. Todd and I took a certain pride in our agility about deck. Each successful sun reading yielded a line on our damp Atlantic chart, after performance of various sums among 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. A clear view of the sun for thirty seconds was enough.

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

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, 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 seemed like Piccadilly Circus.

Todd and I shook hands and whooped. He pulled the fog horn out of the cockpit locker and starting letting off joyous blasts. Meanwhile, after a brief smile, Clive went to sit at the navigation table below. 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 came down the steps and 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 to a pilot vessel coming out from Faial.

I stared at him and understood despite myself. When we got ashore Todd and I would have to pay lip service to whatever account of the sinking he concocted. The insurance people would be given a good story, ensuring the airline pilot paid him and we all flew home without encumbrance.

It was true the interior was no longer fit for that charter season in The Med. The yacht probably needed surveying for structural damage. Someone was going to be out

of pocket, and Clive would rather it wasn't him. Possibly he was at the end of his tether too and in the SOS call he was letting go of weeks of pent up panic. I didn't know. To me his mayday call, apart from anything else, was unrealistic. 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 man on watch didn't hear our distress call or ignored it, or 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 sailing to harbour, preferably before nightfall. We put on more canvas and Clive 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, neat 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, fish and seaweed stinks in our noses. A Portuguese warship lay along the main pier and out came three sailors in uniform who marched to the high, proud stern and went through a brief ceremony of ensign dipping. 'Go and lower something,' Clive told me.

On our rear stay a frayed pennant flew. I clambered to the stern and bunched it in my fist. We were not much to look at. One indignity of the second storm was the wedgie it had inflicted on the yacht, taking 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 battleship the party of seamen marched to a door and stepped back inside. 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 thought I might lose my virginity in the The Azores, too.

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 islands were 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 put on expenses, except I had to share it with Todd who 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 the coming days. 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 their church statuary, medieval in period, crucifixion scenes of lurid blood and gore. 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 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 in the Azores to my advantage and seize the main chance.

The main chance was taking on the final leg of the delivery myself. 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 firmly on course again. Even if the airline pilot

couldn't use me to charter his boat, certainly Ibiza and Majorca would be dense with beautiful girls drawn there to tan their skin, preferably on nice yachts in nice marinas – such was my rudimentary understanding of girls.

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

So, after a week, an Air Portugal flight took Clive, Todd and I to Lisbon and there we said goodbye. They flew on to Gatwick, I intended to make my own way home. Clive was supposed to send me the money for the airfare I'd saved but never did.