

Something in the Sea

Yves Bonaveno

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Extract

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*I have strange power of speech;
That moment that his face I see,
I know the man that must hear me:
To him my tale I teach.*

S.T. Coleridge,
'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'

I

BEEP-BEEP! BEEP-BEEP!
BEEP-BEEP! BEEP-BEEP!

That's all it took: eight short shrill beeps.

Game over.

Life over.

Just like that. No warning. Well . . . hardly any.

Yet, up to that day, my life had been plain sailing. An easy cruise on autopilot. A doddle.

Bloody hard work – yes.

But a lot of fun.

Those of my friends who think I'm a smug bastard will tell you I had been incredibly, undeservedly lucky on all counts. You won't have to believe them: perhaps, like me, you think that people make their own luck.

Then all my navigation errors caught up with me.

It is only when attempting to make a landfall, of course, that you find out how accurate your navigation has been. Simple: either you end up in the right place, or you don't. More often than not you find out the hard

way: think of all those Armada captains who believed they were steering a safe course back to Spain in the middle of the Atlantic – only to hit the rocks on the west coast of Ireland. Was it their fault if, in their day, nobody knew about the existence of the Gulf Stream?

Mind you, if truth be told (not my forte: I'm a criminal lawyer), I've been off course by more than a couple of degrees over the last few years. Here's an interesting fact: if your heading is erroneous by a mere one degree over a distance of sixty nautical miles, then your cross-track error, as we call it, will amount to one nautical mile. Result: instead of finding the entrance to some snug harbour, you're on the rocks. I, of all people, should have known.

Was it my fault if, on that scorching day, we left the fuel berth in Brindisi too late to make Dubrovnik before nightfall? We had decided to avoid Bari, since it seemed to be totally under the control of the Albanian Mafia. Both our nautical pilot books, everybody we talked to in the ports and marinas we'd called into, from Palermo to Portosirena, from Messina to Roccella Ionica and Crotona, all the tourist guides we carried on board agreed on the wisdom of staying as far away as possible from the Albanians. Now, when Sicilians warn me about crime, I, as a fellow professional, am not inclined to second-guess them.

It is well known that the Mediterranean is rarely ideal for sailing: either it blows a hooligan, or there isn't a whiff of wind. Since we'd left Portosirena, the rather tired

marina on the northern coast of Sicily, right opposite the Aeolian Islands, the strongest wind we had encountered had been a pretty useless anticyclonic breeze. Even the much-feared Golfo di Squillace had proved to be a total misnomer, as, in flat calm conditions, we wearily trundled under power across its forty-mile expanse, mainly concerned that Lucy should drink enough to avoid dehydration. If you are not to get confused, I need to clarify one thing straight away: Lucy is our beloved five-year-old angel of a daughter – sorry, I keep forgetting she’s six now, we celebrated her birthday last week – and *Miss Lucy* is my pride and joy, our 42-foot Bowman sailing yacht. If you ask me, Bowman yachts are, or rather were, the finest craft built in the UK, which probably explains why the Bowman yard recently had to file for bankruptcy. It’s not the quality of your product that counts, it’s your marketing skill. That’s the world we live in. Never mind: precisely two years, six months and fourteen days ago, thanks to my contacts and expertise, we were lucky enough to acquire the last Bowman 42 from the liquidators, thus fulfilling a lifelong dream. My lifelong dream anyway.

How prettily she sits on the water, her low, sleek shape enhanced by the blue line running from bow to stern on her white topside! Gracile, agile, spirited but obedient, lively yet forgiving, a mount fit for a Viking prince. She indulges my foibles, tolerates my whims, balks at no challenge. We are a team, almost a single organism, the nautical equivalent of a Centaur, albeit hopefully less monstrous: half man and half mermaid, perhaps. I trust

Miss Lucy with my life, in the knowledge that no other vessel could provide such an exhilarating ride in complete safety. Easy to control too: all the halyards and sheets run back to the cockpit, so that, in theory at least, it is possible to operate her single-handed. Cathy sometimes complains that I spend more time with *Miss Lucy* than with her; it isn't true, but the temptation certainly is there.

Having spent last summer cruising around the Aeolian Islands, we were now on our way to Croatia and its magical, unspoilt 1,185 islands. Just the three of us: Cathy, Lucy and me.

Convincing Cathy to sail to Croatia hadn't been easy. Some years ago, her elder sister, Miranda, was spending a few days in Split with Croatian friends when she suddenly fell ill – some kind of food poisoning. Her condition deteriorated so quickly that her hosts decided to rush her to hospital for what should have been an intensive three-day course of intravenous antibiotics. Unfortunately, the junior doctor on duty injected her with the wrong drug; if I remember correctly, some kind of product designed to stimulate the heart. Miranda then found herself inflating at an alarming rate. On the second and third days, wracked by excruciating abdominal pains, she had complained to the hospital doctor, who rudely reminded her that he had better things to do than listen to the whining of a spoilt western woman. On the fourth day her small intestine burst; she was dying. Her friends snatched her, unconscious, out of the unsupervised splendour of Krizine hospital, and delivered her

post-haste, all sirens howling, into shambolic Firule hospital. There, a newly qualified houseman decided she was too young to die. With minutes to spare, he put her guts together; then, assisted by a posse of devoted nurses, off duty as well as on duty, he looked after her day and night for weeks on end. Two months later, Miranda had got rid of her infection, lost four stone and recovered intestinal continuity. Cathy had been doubly traumatised by her sister's experience: shocked that Miranda should have been at death's door, and appalled by the medical negligence that had nearly killed her. The result has been to instil deep prejudice in Cathy, who fundamentally wants no truck with a country that, according to her, has nearly killed her sister.

Nevertheless, armed with glossy pictures of idyllic secluded islands, unpolluted warm waters and permanently blue skies, after months of patient advocacy, I had prevailed. Cathy had eventually accepted that, in the unlikely event of health problems developing on board, her own medical competence was more than sufficient to protect us from the vagaries of the locals. At last, we were on our way.

In spite of their sensible use of sun creams, my two women were turning a richer hue of gold every day. They did not mind the absence of wind; in fact, they were naturally happier motoring through this enervating heat wave than they would have been holding on for dear life in the sort of force six sirocco I kept praying for. Anyway, the weather was pleasant enough for a family cruise, and Cathy and I alternated at the wheel, keeping

our watches short – two hours – in order to fight the boredom that, added to the heat and the low drone of the engine, could easily lead to sleepiness.

All this motoring meant that we needed to refuel before crossing the Adriatic. Having eliminated Bari, our only bunkering option was Brindisi, which we had reached in the early evening. Again, Brindisi isn't the kind of city that gets rave reviews in the Lonely Planet guide, but, arriving from the sea, it was majestic enough. We berthed alongside the low stone quay opposite the town, right at the foot of the monumental staircase built by Mussolini to highlight the end of the Via Appia. There were no facilities, no water, electricity or toilets, but the mooring was secure and the well-tended garden that surrounded the monument was quiet without being spooky. After dinner, I took a waterbus across to the city, to check the location and opening hours of the fuel berth. It was manned (after a fashion) by Pietro, a semi-retired ruffian whom my patient investigations traced, within less than an hour, to the counter of a dark, smoke-filled establishment nowhere near the sea front. I found out that the pump would be open at seven the following morning, bought Pietro a beer and thanked him for the information with the most effusive gesticulations I could conjure up; finally, pointing alternately at my yacht across the harbour and at the phosphorescent hands of my diving watch, I imparted to him that *Miss Lucy* would be moored in front of his pump at a quarter to seven. The fact that I speak only five words of Italian was no serious hindrance, since none of the sounds emitted by

Pietro seemed to belong to any Latin language. We solemnly shook hands, and I returned to *Miss Lucy* with the relief and quiet satisfaction that follow a successful reconnaissance mission. Although the crossing from Brindisi to Dubrovnik, at nearly one hundred miles, is significantly longer than from Bari, I was hoping that, in the middle of summer, it should be possible to do most, if not all of it, during daylight hours – which, ideally, meant leaving at first light.

As I got back on board, Lucy was already asleep. She wore only a small pair of knickers and a sleeveless T-shirt; yet, as I softly kissed it, her forehead was moist with perspiration. She smelt of baby oil, sun and salted caramel.

‘Is she asleep?’ Cathy whispered as I entered the forecabin, where she was lying naked on the V-berth.

‘Like an angel,’ I confirmed.

Cathy smiled and put her book down. She likes detective stories, maybe because she never guesses who the murderer is; I gave them up when I went to law school.

I folded up my shorts and T-shirt and lowered myself on to the bunk between her long, suntanned legs.

At dawn, Cathy insisted on getting up to help me move the boat across, so that we were already moored at the fuel berth by six-thirty. The bustle of the previous night had been replaced by an eerie quiet. Lucy was still deep asleep in her bunk, her breathing sweet and regular. She had woken up once, but a glass of water and a hug had

been enough to send her back to sleep. The only sign of life emanated from a strange street-cleaning contraption, purring in the distance as it slid alongside the waterfront. Cathy went back to bed while I sat in the cockpit, a mug of coffee in hand, putting the final touches to my passage plan. When Pietro finally appeared, eight o'clock had chimed at a nearby belfry, and the temperature was rising rapidly. I waved my hands in histrionic despair, pointing at my watch. Yet the worst news was still to come. Overnight, Pietro had remembered that the level of diesel oil in his tank was very low, so that any attempt to pump it out would likely suck in unhealthy doses of sludge. Not to worry: a road tanker was on its way, and should arrive any minute now.

Nine o'clock.

Ten o'clock.

I was pondering two questions. First, should I leave with an empty fuel tank, and rely on my sails? Unfortunately, the weather forecast did not point to any useful breeze and, becalmed under the July sun for days on end, we might just get very hot and bored. Second, how could one expel Italy, or, at the very least, Brindisi, from the European Union?

We waited. And waited.

By the time we left with a full tank, we had no chance whatsoever of making our landfall before dark. Since I am a fully qualified yacht master, this did not worry me unduly; I am used to night navigation. In fact I like the unique sensation that comes from slicing through the darkest of nights with nil visibility, the boat rocking back

and forth to the soothing rhythm of an invisible swell. However, it meant that we would have to rely on Croatian lights, whose dependability was unknown, and also that Cathy, who has no training in night navigation, would be unable to take the helm after dark. After a long and tiring day, we'd probably arrive in a poorly lit port, when all mooring manoeuvres would be difficult. None of this however presented us with an insurmountable challenge, and no sooner were we out on the open seas than I started to relax. We headed almost due north as I set the autopilot on our course for Dubrovnik and sat back to enjoy what promised to be a wonderful day. All around us, the sea was vibrantly blue and lasciviously oily, shimmering as it evaporated under the pitiless Adriatic sun. Due to the high moisture level in the air, the visibility was moderate, perhaps a couple of miles, but not restricted enough to worry me. Cathy brought me a glass of cold apple juice in the cockpit and returned down below to give Lucy her breakfast.

If you know anything about the sea, you will already have noticed how extraordinarily lucky I am. Very few women like the sea. Out of all my sailing mates, not one – *not one* – has a wife or girlfriend who likes sailing. In fact, most hate it. One of my mates says that women are as allergic to the briny as mermaids to dry land: he may have a point. Before we met, Cathy was into walking and mountaineering; her ideal holiday involves trekking in Nepal or Bhutan at a minimum altitude of 10,000 feet above sea level. Maximum? There is no maximum altitude. The higher the better. I, for my part, do not like

being higher than Mean Low Water Spring Tides level; in other words, I already get giddy at high tide, let alone in the Himalayas. People with such opposite tastes are normally incompatible. Not Cathy and I, though: my wife has taken to sailing like a duck to water. She even trained to Competent Crew level, which means just that: competent. When I tell my friends that she's the most competent doctor I've ever met, they shake their heads and smile – but it's true. She sailed through her medical studies, started work as a GP seven years ago, aged twenty-seven, and is by far the most popular doctor in her practice. Not only does she get diagnosis and treatment mostly right, but I think her patients sense that she really cares. And she managed to produce our little blue-eyed Lucy, who is now five. Sorry – six. Why is she growing up so fast?

Forgive me if I appear to repeat myself – but this is how lucky I am. With Cathy, I have on board a wife, a cook, a doctor, a first mate – and a lover. I mustn't downplay the lover. For, in the course of our annual cruising fortnight, we seem to make love more often than during the remaining fifty weeks of the year. You know how it is. The pressure of busy lives, conflicting schedules, different priorities, permanent stress. The life of a successful modern couple. Slightly out of control? Possibly.

The last few months have been more hectic than usual. Allenby & Brook, my firm, combines criminal law and family law; as a result, we were inundated with new clients following Operation Ore. You may recall Operation Ore: it was mounted by the UK police on a national

basis after they received from their American colleagues a list of some six or seven thousand UK citizens who had paid by credit card to view pictures of naked children on the Internet. America loves policing the world; additional piquancy in this case stemmed from the fact that, out of the 250 new child-porn sites that crop up every year, more than half originate in the States. Dozens of family men from all walks of life – doctors, workers, police chiefs, teachers, salesmen, judges even – streamed to our offices in search of legal advice. In addition to criminal proceedings, many of them quickly became embroiled in messy separations or divorces, which were then handled by Sarah, our family-law partner, and her expanding team. I couldn't help feeling sorry for a couple of these fellows, who were being hounded, their reputations shattered, their families destroyed, for what might have been a momentary lapse of judgement. What misfortune caused them to be titillated by pictures of minors? What compulsion led them to risk everything? I guess those are questions for psychiatrists. As lawyers, we were doing well: Allenby & Brook's fee income doubled in six months, with my department leading the charge. Everybody in my team was working sixteen to eighteen hours a day. Except for a few hours' sleep, I had hardly been home for weeks, and was utterly exhausted. More often than not, when I finally made it home, Cathy would be out on call or working nights. Whenever our paths crossed, we argued: she felt I was spending far too much time in the office, and doubted that my clients were worth defending. Reminding her that they were innocent

until proved guilty failed to impress her. Thankfully the firm had just recruited a couple of juniors to help with the backlog, but for the time being they were just additional hassle. Furthermore, your average fifty-year-old dentist is unlikely to want to discuss his pornographic web-surfing habits in front of some lass just out of law school. In fact the pressure had kept increasing right till my departure, by which time I had practically reached breaking point. For some reason, Operation Ore was getting to me. In my recurring nightmares, wide-eyed kids were silently sobbing on the Court benches while I masterfully orchestrated the legal defence of their abusers. I had to get away. Cast off. Put as much clear blue water as possible between that office and me. Mind you, even on the boat, I had to turn off my mobile phone on day one in order to stop the stream of increasingly frantic voice and text messages from the office.

Christ, how impatiently I had been waiting for this sailing holiday! I was desperate to get away from the slime of Operation Ore and be reunited with my wife and daughter. Indeed, after so many weeks spent practically without seeing Cathy, I sometimes wondered whether husband and wife shouldn't make it a rule to work together, as the persistent lure of illicit sex in the office or the surgery might contribute more than domestic routine ever will to a healthy relationship.

Anyway, there we were, husband, wife and daughter. All three of us afloat at last. Which reminds me of yet another of Cathy's functions aboard *Miss Lucy*: Lucy's mum. Pretty crucial, since small children on boats de-

mand full-time attention. Yes, I am lucky with that woman. I am not quite sure about her precise surgical qualifications, but, should an emergency arise, would trust her entirely to perform an appendectomy on board. The amount of drugs, medicines, medical and surgical equipment we carry on *Miss Lucy* is phenomenal, and far exceeds our stock of victuals. Sometimes I wonder whether I am sailing a yacht or a floating hospital; indeed, there are no bacteria we could not vanquish, few viruses we could not keep at bay, hardly any wounds or traumas we could not sterilise, stitch up and dress. And then there are the eye-drops, the ear-drops, the insect-bite creams, the rehydration powders, the bandages and gauzes, the painkillers and sleeping pills, the stethoscope and blood-pressure monitor . . . our two biggest lockers are crammed full with Cathy's medical junk. I don't really object, since I know that she would be reluctant to embark on prolonged cruises in foreign waters – let alone to Croatia – without the comfort of this mobile surgery. She has a point, of course: young children at sea are constantly at risk, however closely one tries to supervise them. The biggest risk, however, is falling overboard and drowning. I suspect that, in such an emergency, my first-aid skills might prove as valuable as all of Cathy's stuff, but, frankly, I prefer to avoid dwelling on nightmare scenarios.

This isn't always possible, of course; nor would it be advisable, since a keen awareness of dangers remains the mariner's best insurance policy. For example, I was in two minds when, early that afternoon, Lucy asked to go

swimming. We were not halfway yet, and I did not want to waste too much time. On the other hand, the temperature had risen well above thirty degrees Celsius, and, in the total absence of wind, only the slight breeze produced by the boat's steady motion provided any relief. Unfortunately, the fierceness of the sun made it impossible to sojourn on the foredeck, where the motion-induced airstream was best enjoyed; Cathy and Lucy soon had to retreat to the cockpit, where we all sheltered in the sweltering shade of the blue sun awning.

It's funny how some people, even excellent swimmers, are afraid to swim in the open sea. Somehow, the idea of the abyss underneath, the hundreds of yards, miles even, of unfathomable marine life right underneath their soft underbelly and dangling parts spooks them, as though they were expecting attacks from the deep at any moment. It probably comes from watching Hollywood movies, too many of which, like *Jaws*, have infected the collective unconscious. Cathy tends to be apprehensive of the invisible mysteries and alien inhabitants of the deep. My own views are more prosaic: I hold that the waters are less likely to be polluted offshore than near the coasts, and that, in the open sea, there are no currents, rollers or breaking waves to jeopardise swimmers – and yet . . . in all honesty, I must confess to feeling a certain frisson whenever we lower the sails or stop the engine in order to swim *in the middle of the sea*. I suppose that, deep down, we all associate the idea of swimming with that of shallow waters next to safe shores and friendly beaches – dry

refuges to which, as noisy toddlers, we used to run when attacked by marine monsters.

‘Terence, please, look at Lucy,’ Cathy said.

I did not like what I saw. My baby was red-faced and puffed-up, like a child with a high fever.

‘I can’t keep her cool,’ Cathy continued. ‘I’ve tried everything, from wet towels to cold drinks. It’s just too hot.’

I made an instant decision.

‘Fine,’ I said. ‘I could do with a break myself. Let’s stop now, have a swim, cool down and have a bite. All right?’

No sooner had the engine stopped than we realised how loud it had been. Not that my Volvo engine, with its underwater exhaust, is particularly noisy; but the reason I sail is to get away from machinery. The silence was now blissfully restful, yet so perfect as to be almost oppressive. We revelled in it, drifting slowly at the centre of our own happy, circular, self-contained universe. Even the VHF radio had stopped crackling. For a while, we observed how the brutal assault of the vertical sunrays was repelled by the water’s minute undulations, which playfully, almost mockingly, reflected light and heat back to outer space, turning the surface into a dazzling mirror. Strange, how the sea manages to keep its privacy inviolate and yield none of its mysteries even in extreme sunlight. This made me realise that the object of my own fears wasn’t some possible creature of the deep, but the opposite. I wasn’t, never had been, afraid of something in the sea. But what if there was nothing under that shimmering surface? Now, that is a spooky thought. Just imagine: what if the immeasurable depths under my keel

are in fact a bottomless void, a trapdoor to hell – worse, a shortcut to oblivion?

‘Well?’ I asked Lucy. ‘Are you ready to jump in?’

Without taking her thumb out of her mouth, she nodded with a beguiling smile.

‘Wait a minute,’ Cathy interjected. ‘She hasn’t got her armbands on.’

While Cathy kitted our daughter out, I lowered the ladder from the swimming platform into the water. In reality, Lucy could more or less swim by herself, but neither Cathy nor I were keen to discard her rubber rings. I stayed on board while my two beautiful girls swam in slow circles around *Miss Lucy*, keeping a watchful eye on them as well as scanning the horizon in case any shipping suddenly pricked the circumference of our hazy bubble. I secured the lifebuoy to a mooring cleat on the port quarter and sat down next to it, ready to throw the ring should Cathy develop a cramp – which she was prone to – or show any sign of distress.

I dipped in after Cathy and Lucy had climbed back on board, taking the opportunity to check the stern gear and the engine raw-water inlet in case we’d picked up any ropes or debris. Cathy often wonders what sort of debris one could possibly pick up in the clean, unpolluted waters of the open sea. She seems to forget that these open waters are Italian, which, I am sorry to say, means that they contain a fair amount of plastic bags, bottles, old fishing nets, polypropylene ropes and other indestructible flotsam that can easily block your raw-water inlets or foul your propeller.