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Sailor

by G.S. Payne

The breeze was twenty-five knots, gusting to thirty. Rain fell out of the gloomy sky in sheets of pelting drops pushed sideways by the cold November wind. The waves rolled under my thirteen-foot dinghy and I held tightly to her tiller as she rode from trough to crest, leaving a wake I'd never imagined possible from such a small boat. It was Long Island Sound, off King's Point, November 1980. If the Flying Junior that was the instrument of my humility that day is still in existence – borrowed for the intercollegiate regatta from the hosting U.S. Merchant Marine Academy – more than one midshipman has probably wondered at the finger-shaped grooves in the tiller, indentations worn into the wood from a grip born of fear and dread. Wonder no more; the offending fingers belonged to my unnerved hand. But I smiled at Todd, my first mate, nevertheless. You can't show fear, I remember thinking.

Two weeks prior, the scene was Stone Valley Recreation Area, a twenty-minute drive from the campus of Penn State University. There was a lake there in those days, since drained. Not much more than a pond, really, but it's all the Penn State Sailing Club had. It was warm and sunny that day and the lazy breeze caused occasional ripples to skip gently across the surface of the water.

There were Sunfish sailboats at Stone Valley, and Lasers, and the thirteen-foot Flying Juniors (FJs), all available for rent to the public, or for free to the club when it would make its every-other-week trip there. Three hours of sailing on a Sunday morning. Our competitors on Long Island Sound two weeks later were the boys from the Merchant Marine Academy, as well as from the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, and the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut. And sailors from various other non-land-locked schools up and down the coast that boasted not sailing clubs, but actual teams. They didn't get together at the local fishing hole every other Sunday morning. They met daily for racing practice, on salt water, in all conditions. But when someone mentioned a road trip to New York, I jumped at the chance. What's more fun than sailing?

Quickly I learned that Long Island Sound was not, as I had imagined it to be, simply a larger version of gentle Stone Valley. Sure, they were both bodies of water but this is where the resemblance ended. Long Island Sound, on that fall day, a day in which actual gale conditions prevailed, might as well have been, from my Stone Valley perspective, the infamous "roaring forties" of the ocean passage south of Cape Horn.

So there I was, beating to windward and allowing the mainsheet some slack, spilling wind in an attempt to keep from capsizing. Todd was handling the jib in a similar fashion. Jib? What the hell did we even need a jib for? We came about. We were tacking back and forth, waiting for the gun to be fired from the committee boat to indicate the start of

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the first race. I don't remember how many races were scheduled. Six maybe. It seemed like thirty at the time. Most of the schools had at least two boats entered. Probably there were sixteen or eighteen FJs, crisscrossing behind the starting line.

The winds picked up even more and I looked around at one point and saw three or four capsized boats, including the other boat from the Penn State team. Ron and Leslie were in the cold water, Leslie hanging on to the upright gunwale, Ron standing on the centerboard trying to right the FJ. Soaking wet, they were able to clamber back aboard, Ron grabbing the tiller and mainsheet again, as Leslie scooped a bucket through the standing water in the cockpit. She bailed furiously. That won't be us, I thought, and I let the main out just a little more.

Behind me I spied a competitor on my tack, cutting inside and gliding past me. A couple of Navy midshipmen. Their main was close-hauled. Their jib, too. The skipper and mate were hiking out in impossible positions, their bodies hovering perpendicular to the water. Their FJ was seemingly skipping across the crests of the windswept waves that I was slogging up and down through. When he passed us, the skipper glanced at us over his shoulder. "Good winds today, eh boys?" he grinned. For some reason, when I think back, I always imagine him saying it with a lit pipe clenched between his teeth.

More boats capsized. In the teeth of the gale, it was decided to postpone the start of the first race. Patrol boats were dispatched with bullhorns and we were told to make for the marina. I didn't need to hear the order twice. When I climbed out of the FJ and stood on the dock I said a silent prayer of gratitude for having been able to make it back to land. Solid, beautiful land. Surely, the regatta would have to be canceled. With the day free, we could drive into the city, Ron and Leslie and Todd and me. Bill would take us in. It was Bill, upperclassman and club vice president, who had driven us in his van to this freshman-sophomore regatta. Of course I would act disappointed. "We would have shown those Navy boys something," I would say, shaking my head in disgust at the damnable weather. But after an hour or so, the skies began to lighten slightly. The rain stopped. The winds died down to "only" twenty knots. The wave heights remained, but the gale had blown through. The races were back on. I swallowed hard and took my place at the tiller again.

More tacking behind the starting line. More crisscrossing of boats. More close-hauled midshipmen skipping by and grinning. The gun went off. The fleet of boats turned in unison. It's beautiful, the start of a sailboat race. From chaos comes sudden order. Boats all going different ways form into a unified assembly of hulls pointed in a single direction, sails at identical angles. But then comes the divergence, not in angle, but in position, as the assemblage begins to spread itself thinner and thinner. There's no way to hide one's lack of talent or experience on the water. Or guts. The wind and the waves and the standard set by the leaders of the race lay a sailor bare. There are the leaders, there are the middling,

there are the stragglers.

And then there was boat number 17, an FJ so far behind the pack that I imagined a witness from shore would have been unable to tell we were competing in the same race. When you're out of your element, you're out of your element. I say this without apology. There might have been a hundred places I could have been on that cold, gray November day – places I belonged, places the universe would have welcomed me. Long Island Sound was not one of those places. I was a party crasher, a trespasser. I had no right to be skippering a thirteen-foot dinghy in rough seas in near-gale conditions. Maybe nobody had, but you sure couldn't tell the other racers that. They were swept up into the speed and the excitement of the frenzied competition. The more wind the better.

As we eventually rounded the final buoy and took our downwind tack for the finish line, the boat seemed to fly. We were wing and wing – the mainsail out to starboard, the jib out to port, both in perfect billowy arcs – and all twenty knots of wind were pushing us from behind and the rolling waves were sweeping us forward and our wake was a rush of rapids behind us. And I remember thinking, *wow*. Never had I felt so at one with the elements. The sea suddenly seemed to possess a majesty that had gone unnoticed until then, and for a moment, I forgot I was in a race. I forgot I was on a prescribed course. I was *sailing*. Above, the sun managed to slip through a tiny rift in the clouds and it streamed down in those diaphanous rays you see on inspirational greeting cards. I wondered briefly, as the clouds closed over the rift, if the other sailors had seen it, too – had seen the sun poking through the gray. But the other sailors were well ahead of us and the moment of majesty was lost as I realized they'd all finished the race. I could see the sails in the distance, every boat tacking around, waiting impatiently for the start of the second race. Waiting for boat number 17 to finish the first race.

The second race ended the same way, with us trailing the pack by what seemed like miles. The third race was worse. I hadn't even rounded the final buoy when a patrol boat motored out to tell me, in bull-horned euphemistic words that haunt me to this day, that there would be no need: *Boat number 17: You may go in. Your position has been established.*

There was a break after the third race and we came into the marina and we tied up our boat to the dock and Bill marched over to me with a concerned look on his face. "The Commodore wants to see you," he said.

"The Commodore? Wants to see *me*? Why?"

"I dunno. C'mon." Bill and I walked over to a square, clapboard, two-story building that sat on the edge of the seawall. Exterior steps led up to a room with floor-to-ceiling windows on the side facing the sound. It was an observation room where the Commodore – a Merchant Marine Academy professor and the administrator of the regatta – had been,

with a few assistants, watching the races with oversized binoculars. Bill and I tentatively entered the room and the Commodore stood. He was tall and gray with steely eyes and a weather-beaten face and a blue, brimmed captain's hat that sat on his head as though it had been permanently stitched there. For some reason I thought of Captain Ahab and I actually glanced down at his legs to see if one of them might have been a wooden peg.

He eyed me up and down. "You're not a very good sailor, are you, son?" he said at last. I felt anger. I wanted to punch Captain Ahab. Maybe I was a little out of my element, but was there justification for insult?

"What the Commodore means," explained an assistant, sensing my umbrage, "is that, well, you're kind of holding up the pace of the races."

"That's not what the Commodore said."

"Well, nevertheless."

I looked over at the Commodore who stood with his head leaning back, eyeing me down his long, gaunt, Captain Ahab nose. Apparently he'd said everything to me he had wanted to say.

"We understand," Bill chimed in. "We'll get things straightened out. It'll be okay."

"Thank you," said the assistant. "We'd hate to see you have to forfeit."

"Of course. Thank you."

I continued to glare at the Commodore as Bill ushered me by the elbow towards the door. I wanted to say something brash and insulting, but all I could come up with was an aside to Bill that I'm not even sure the Commodore heard: "Do we play these guys in football?"

Back on the dock it was decided that Todd and I would switch roles. He would be the skipper. I would be the first mate. It was at once a degradation and a relief. Mostly the latter. Let Todd navigate the angry sea, I thought, its majesty gone now in the stinging words of the Commodore. But Todd fared little better. I remember we finished next-to-last in one of the later races, but we were still dead last in the others, albeit not as far to the rear as where I had put us. Not far enough back to affect, to any egregious degree, the pace of the races. Ron and Leslie had managed to finish consistently about midway for most of the races, their best being a sixth-place finish.

At last, the day mercifully ended and that night the five of us Penn State sailors found a small Italian restaurant where, warm and dry and blessedly motionless, I ate a plate of spaghetti and meatballs that tasted better than anything I had ever eaten. The mood was light and

we all related our tales of the day's adventures and somehow I managed to laugh at myself.

I ran into Todd a few weeks after that weekend. I was strolling along the campus mall, daydreaming, on my way to the library when he briskly walked past me from the other direction. We threw each other a quick wave but there really wasn't much that I guessed we had to talk about. Once laughed about, shared, humbling experiences do not make for good conversation.

I never returned to the collegiate regattas. I quit the club. It was nothing decisive. That weekend represented the end of the sailing season and I just never bothered to make it to Stone Valley the following year. The sailing club actually did well the next season, from what I'd heard. A couple of the upperclassmen took home a trophy from a regatta at New Haven.

I've raced since, in calmer waters and on bigger boats, but my aversion to competitive racing, stoked on those waters off King's Point, ultimately leaves me cold to the sport. I thought of King's Point last week. I was walking through Vinoy Park in St. Petersburg, Florida, close to my home, when I spied a fleet of boats beyond the St. Petersburg Municipal Marina, out in the bay, crisscrossing back and forth and then suddenly falling into line at the sound of a horn. I stepped closer to the seawall and squinted and I could make out "FJ" lettered on the sails. It was a fleet of Flying Juniors and maybe a collegiate regatta and it looked exciting and spirited and wildly competitive and I was glad I was not a part of it.

But if the experience in Long Island Sound chased me from racing, it never chased me from sailing. These days I piddle around in a twenty-three-foot sloop with a cabin. She's ten feet longer than an FJ and her keel alone weighs more than that whole damn dinghy. She has a name, not a number (*Pilar*, the name Hemingway gave his fishing boat) and sometimes my son and I take her on overnight trips. We'll sail the sunny, warm waters of Tampa Bay to an anchorage where I'll fire up the stove and cook up some bratwursts. We'll take along a bottle of Pusser's rum and make grog the way the British sailors used to. We'll watch the sunset and smoke cigars and listen to Jimmy Buffet songs. In the morning, I'll make us coffee and we'll head back home, taking whatever course we feel like taking, whatever course the wind allows. *Pilar* moves along well, but we're never in a particular hurry.

You know, looking back now, I think the Commodore was dead wrong. Not a very good sailor? Maybe the Commodore meant racer. Yes, that must have been it. Okay, I'm not a very good racer. But, man, you ought to see me sail.

nonfiction, memoir, and prescriptive business books. His clients have included captains of industry, athletes, and people whose lives nobody would believe, had he not been there to document them. When not toiling in relative (and welcome) anonymity with his clients' work, he does, indeed, spend his time on his sailboat *Pilar*. One day he imagines he will screw his courage up enough to sail the three-hundred-plus nautical miles from his home port in St. Petersburg to Key West, where he will pay homage to his hero Ernest Hemingway by drinking in the same Key West bars in which Papa himself drank.

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