

FREEBIRD

by

Stephen C. R. Lovejoy

Green water sluiced off the small straining headsail to hammer onto Freebird's fibreglass decking. The bow rose and fell as if some drunken Atlas carried my small sloop on his shoulders to stagger home after a rough night with the boys. Her lurching was random and unpredictable, wrenching my body at varying angles as I struggled to maintain balance. A wooden tiller vibrated under my palms, alternately straining against my direction then feeling slack and unresponsive as a swell swept past and the stern pointed skyward.

They call it a gale. In essence it is a storm that hasn't got enough manners to be an outright storm, so you leave some sail aloft and keep the bows pointed onwards. I once made the mistake of dating a woman named Gail, and the feeling she wrought in the pit of my stomach was not dissimilar to its present condition.

It was not so much the weather as the wine. The collar of my oil skin was snapped tight, but I had omitted to wrap a towel around my neck first. Consequently water ran quite freely into the expensive garment despite its braggadocio claiming it as the driest foul weather gear on the market. Damn the wine. I wasn't real big on drinking wine, but Tom and Karen had seen fit to carry aboard a paper bag bearing four litre-and-a-half bottles of Mateus.

Tom and Karen were ashore back in Tofino, hung-over and most likely opting for a night in a hotel before embarking on the west coast trail. We hadn't seen each other in years, so our visit took form as a leisurely three day upwind beat from Victoria to Tofino. There was no one but myself to blame, for I had told my Winnipegger friends about the magnificent hiking trail. They had come west to visit me and tackle the lengthy sea side path before the bulk of the year's tourists arrived to despoil it.

The wine jostled in my stomach again as a steep crossing wave slammed Freebird's hull and rained spray into the cockpit. This wasn't new for us. Freebird and I had been around; been into the deep and distant blue where land is forgotten and days pass without a soul to speak to. Still, today I was in no mood for the icy water trickling down my spine and squishing between my ass cheeks. It was as if a personal grudge had developed between myself and the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Six months earlier I had felt only disappointment on passing into the narrowing strait separating Vancouver Island from the Olympic Peninsula of Washington State. Back then it had meant my first offshore adventure was drawn to a close, and too early by my lights.

Something slammed below decks and I wondered if I dare release the tiller long enough for a look. Why not? Could the action really get much worse? I tied the long tiller in place and banged through the companionway quickly in the hopes of shipping as little water as possible. The cupboard door below the sink swung erratically and several cans of paint and cleaning products rolled to and fro on the floor. A can of Ajax left a fine blue-green trail in its wake. I cursed roundly, though in truth I knew it could have been a far worse mess than a little powder to sweep up.

Freebird staggered and I watched the barometer needle sway wildly clockwise before returning to pointing straight down. Not too many nautically minded people will have missed the fact that my barometer was acting as a clinometer. It was a quirk I had lived with since something in the fragile workings of the instrument gave up, allowing its pointer to swing free. The round brass face was vastly more attractive than those plasticky bubble job clinometers the chandleries want to fix you up with. The lack of a horizon to focus on wasn't helping my traitorous stomach in the least. I crashed back onto deck and slammed the hatch seconds before a sheet of water doused the cockpit. Pathetic! I couldn't

help but snort a laugh. When you're offshore there is nowhere to run to, so you screw your hat on tight and sit out a storm with grim determination. Here, with the shorelines on either side so tantalizingly close, all I thought of was where I could find a calm anchorage.

My destination was Victoria, and ultimately up-island to Crofton where I had a job interview awaiting me. I was pushing it already when I offered Tom and Karen the three day sailing trip to Tofino, and now the threat of being late for this job hung over me. I would have to tough it out and continue on to Victoria. It was more a matter of discomfort than safety. Both vessel and master had been tested more harshly.

I resumed my seat and freed the tiller with renewed determination. The wind was likely blowing a solid forty-five, though I had no anemometer to verify my guess. After a quick look at the compass I lolled my head back to watch the mast top slashing the sky. I could picture the tiny cupped masthead sending unit of an expensive digital wind vane spinning at prodigious speed. Perhaps its tall liquid crystal display would be off scale, displaying the words BAD and WORSE on the peak of an occasional gust. Allowing my mind to free wheel with the concept I pictured the whizzing propeller coming loose and helicoptering away in the wind. My head followed its imaginary trajectory to where the device disappeared in an insignificant splash amongst swells whose tops were being blown off to smash against the next wave ahead.

I allowed a self-satisfied smile at the demise of the unaffordable Yuppie instrumentation. The smile froze on my face, 'Christ!'

I stood, desperately scanning the waves in Freebird's wake. The tiny boat was gone from my sight as quickly as it appeared. Had it been imagination? I shot a peek at the compass and went through the motions of heaving-to. Her forward motion arrested, Freebird bobbed comfortably like a corked empty bottle on the snapping seas. I struggled forward and stood beneath the spreaders clutching the shrouds. After a small eternity of being tossed like socks in a tumble dryer I saw it again.

A tiny white splotch of fibreglass, a dinghy broken loose from its davits or from the bad knot someone had tied in its tow line. Relief flooded over me. How many similar craft turned up in the Coast Guard Receiver of Wrecks notice in a given year? Still, something felt wrong. My stomach laid out a firm set of protestations against the course of action my head was suggesting. They were silenced by a rebuke from the little voice of conscience we all hear.

'There is someone aboard that little boat,' I picture my conscience as a white mouse with nervous twitching whiskers.

'It's impossible to say,' I fought back.

'There's one way to know for sure,' The long whiskers twitched in their annoying way.

I sighed. 'Prepare to tack,' I said aloud to no one at all.

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US AND THEM

The groaning of a nearby piling conspired with the heat of sun through the forward hatch to torture me from my sleeping bag. It was a vastly different day from the one before it and I felt as if somehow my life had taken an abrupt turn. The floor was almost dry in front of the stove as I put the pot of Sunny Boy cereal on to boil. No blood, no cast aside tennis shoe to haunt me. The night was blurred by the heat of the day, but it had all been real enough.

I washed the gritty, swollen seeds from the pot, which I had eaten from, and began monitoring the slow progress of my manual drip coffee maker. My stomach still didn't feel right this fine morning, but for a different set of reasons. They were children, probably twins, about ten years of age - a boy and a girl. Over an hour spanned my spotting them to getting them aboard the relative safety of my thirty-one foot sloop. Cold, limp, lifeless little things. Their skin had turned a flat, pallid grey and it seemed they weighed several hundred pounds each as my shaking knees carried the dead bodies in to lay them on the cabin floor. I tied their eight foot dinghy behind and set a course for Port Angeles. It seemed the

most reasonable target given the wind and the seas, although it was on the American side of the Juan de Fuca Strait. Any port in storm.

I had been asked, actually told, not to leave in any kind of a hurry. This was understandable considering the circumstances of my arrival, but I had a bit of a problem with the attitude displayed by the police officers who had ultimately been drummed up to deal with me. The fellows clearly watched too much television.

All this aside, after a long and heartfelt talk, I convinced them I should be allowed to depart the customs float for the town dock, and let to go ashore for diversion. I was exhausted after my battle with the wind and waves, and mostly in shock from hauling the lifeless bodies aboard my vessel. Still, I had enough righteous indignation left in me to protest being treated like a criminal.

Now I looked out the companionway to see a uniform cruising the docks in my direction. The uniform was accompanied by a bureaucratic looking suit who wore mirror shades against the bold spring time sun. Authority figures always make me feel like confessing to a host of crimes I've never had the pleasure of committing. They know this. With a groan I slumped down onto the companionway steps to avoid watching their approach. I suppose I was proving to them I was not wary - visa vis had nothing to hide. I finished filtering the pot of coffee and poured myself a very large cup. This wasn't going to be a normal day.

My two visitors stepped directly aboard without a knock or a 'by your leave'. This is the least charming of all landlubber traits and has on occasion evoked threats with a decisive looking cast iron frypan I keep just inside the companionway. I wasn't feeling feisty this morning, probably in some degree due to the larger than necessary side arm strapped to the uniform.

'We'd like to talk to you,' said the cop. Somehow I had been expecting a Texas drawl and an idle palm resting on the pistol grip. I was disappointed.

'Coffee?' I asked genially.

'Thanks, I've already had several,' it was the uniform again, 'how 'bout you Frank?'

'Shore.' Ah. So it was the suit who had the accent. I Should have guessed... A grown up uniform. I handed Frank a cup which he eyed dolefully, probably casting aspersions on my dish washing ability.

'Got any milk?' Frank asks. I felt mollified, and squeezed into the icebox for a Tupperware container. I also proffered a glass sealer jar of sugar cubes that was greeted with genuine relief.

'Frank here is with the Agency,' the Cop said almost conspiratorially.

'Ah.' I hoped this would be taken to convey implicit understanding, 'And you are?'

'Oh, sorry. Sam Parker, state highway patrol - Washington State Police.' Hands were shaken all around. Sam's was Okay, firm but friendly. Frank wants to be a politician. He definitely watches too much TV.

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Twenty minutes later I was feeling pretty animated, telling the story to these fellows who now had at least some measure of my confidence. Standing at the shrouds I gesticulated madly to portions of the rig where the sail would have been during the operation of craning the drifting boat up to deck level. 'You see if you let the mainsail halyard go, the wind pushes the sail to the side and it takes on a shape like the swaddling cloth used by the stork in his deliveries.' I had read about this technique and put it to use boarding my macabre guests. With awkward frozen movements I eventually got the dinghy in place for the lift. Using a halyard winch, I hauled up on the burdened sail, beginning a long series of frustrated attempts to get the bodies aboard.

Frank stepped in to ask why I didn't just leave the kids in their own boat and tow it in. I paused a good ten seconds before admitting, 'It didn't actually occur to me at the time. But I suppose they might have been washed overboard before I got them here safe.' A sardonic silence followed my inappropriate choice of words.

'... So eventually I got them aboard and below on the floor. Then I tied on their dinghy and reset the sails.' I finished my monologue feeling subdued.

'Why not motor in?' It was Sam this time. I scrutinized his face trying to find a reason for the tone of

voice I couldn't quite put a finger on. It seemed he was earnestly interested.

'Well, first off I'd be going a lot slower.' Sam's eyebrows rose in obvious surprise at this revelation, or maybe at the anger in my tone. 'But worse, you bob around like a Goddamn cork without the wind to steady you.'

Sam offered a disarming half-smile, 'Sorry Ben. Never been sailing you see.'

'I know I sound frazzled,' I allowed, 'Let's just get through this, Okay? ...So I made for Port Angeles and got in about six fifteen last night. I called from the phone at the customs dock and a fellow got here pronto. It seemed as if the coroner arrived with him to take the bodies away.'

I stopped. These guys were not as subtle as say, waltzing rhinoceros, and the look that passed between them was arresting.

'Is there a problem?'

'No, no ... Go on please Mr. Dahl.'

There was a problem alright, 'Well you know it better than I from there on. The coroner and the customs did a fast fade after asking me to stick around. When the police showed up they acted like they never heard of a Customs agent before and asked a lot of stupid questions. When they got bored with me they petered off and I motored over to this slip. I haven't budged since, as those guys up there can tell you.'

This was a hunch. Because I was not supposed to take off before the officials had done with me, I presumed I was under surveillance. Frank 'the suit' blanched. Sam eyed him curiously. If there was someone ashore keeping an eye on me, they weren't attached to Sam's unit.

Frank cleared his throat, 'Well, we need you to walk over, .. at your convenience of course,' he added in his slow drawl - as if recalling that I was not a citizen and should consequently be afforded this courtesy, 'to identify the life raft officially.'

'Sure. But I wouldn't call it a life raft; It's really just a fibreglass dinghy.'

Frank was not happy about being corrected, but smiled tersely and moved to depart. Over his shoulder he instructed, 'Sam, perhaps you would stay with Mr. Dahl 'til he gets his coat then take him over to the Coast Guard yard.' This was definitely an order to both of us. Sam obviously didn't like it much either, so I winked at him and dipped below for the coffee pot. It was cold, but it was an excuse not to hop at old Frank's request immediately.

Sam grinned and said, 'If you put on a fresh pot I'll have a splash too.' I put on a fresh pot.