

The Umpteenth Crossing

- an elegy for Bill

The best advice that I can offer anyone is to let nature take its course. The happiest people I have known have done just that – lived life accepting and trusting that life unfolds, as it will. There is no need to break your back, trying to make something happen that won't.

Look at me. I am crossing the Pacific for the umpteenth time. People think that it is a fantastic feat, but the wind and sails do the work. I only do a little adjusting. The trick with sailing is to let it happen, just like life. Let the kids grow up, let the wife (or wives in my case) love you and leave you, let the money run out, let the body break down.

First the money, then the body. I can hardly believe that I declined into this disintegrated age. Diabetes is the curse that stripped my pride. I don't like meddling with medicines and thought that I could control my diet. I snort with laughter at the thought. It was madness to think that I could banish the tastes that I cherish. My appetite echoes an upbringing that tarnished my taste against the bland and small. My mother raised me indulgently, distorting my desires toward a lifestyle free from guilt. Where, if I followed my father's example, I would have toiled to reap the rewards. He worked and achieved. All the while, I yearned for the one priceless thing: his time. When I inherited millions, I wanted to vanish and let the tide bear me away from the blessing that would make me like him – responsible, worried, and able to own everything but my own time. It was only when the money ran out that I could see the blessing for what it was – a conduit for my sentient self to languish in deep blue seas under sun bright sails. I never thanked him.

There is a storm brewing. Dark clouds are on the horizon. The scene looks like a Turner painting, and it is my sacred duty to capture the sublimity of untamed nature on film. I move to retrieve my camera from the cabin. My left leg is amputated below the knee; I wear a wooden peg to balance my weight and am aware of the sound of my gait as I move across the deck. I like the feel of the camera in my hands. It fits like an old friend. Working quickly, I set the shutter speed and aperture. I hold up the camera to my eye, focus, and adjust the exposure level. I focus the camera again. There it is – a total work of art. I remember the German word for this: Gesamtkunstwerk.

I take several photos. Lowering the camera, I pause in awe. The winds are whipping, and the swells are growing. I should batten down the hatches. My boat, Darling, is unsteady. With my peg leg, it is hard for me to manoeuvre. It takes a while, but I tie everything down and go inside the cabin to lie down until this storm blows over. The wind whistles. It eddies around the boat and in my ears.

I take off my peg leg and lie down to take the surges as they come.

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