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Voyages?

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I awake early from a restless sleep and get out of bed to rush into the bathroom. As I go through the door, I hit the switch. The whir of a fan and the hum and then pop of fluorescent lights implode in my head, obliterating the toilet and all my movement toward it. I fall through the whirring hum and slam my head, shattering the light into pieces that go out in darkness. I come to almost instantly, surprised and fascinated by the cold, hard ceramic tiles of the floor and walls so close to my face. From my position wedged in the corner behind the toilet bowl, I think, with a logic that does not seem peculiar at the time, of Thoreau’s desire and deliberate effort “to drive life into a corner, reduce it to its lowest terms,” to learn whether it is mean or sublime. I do not question this automatic association with words from a book I have not thought of or read for years, nor do I acknowledge that it is not I who have driven life into a corner but life that has driven me. I simply accept that both my life and I have been reduced and that I, too, am about to learn something of meanness and sublimity.

But that brief second of location and recognition eludes me as once again the whirring hum of light dissolves my consciousness of the hard cold walls and floor, transforming the blue ceramic tiles into a shimmering sea, dampened by my own urine and sweat. Through some strenuous and grotesque adaptation of the survivor’s float, treading water, and the dog paddle, I make my way back to the bed and climb in. The sea does not subside; its motion increases with my efforts, bringing on feelings of nausea. But once in bed, I know where I am: I am both wedged in and afloat.

I am on another voyage.

As a child I pretended that my bed was a boat, and I can still recall hopping barefoot across a cold floor in a back bedroom of a two-family house in Jersey City, making sure my feet touched only scatter rugs, to get aboard and set off for more exotic ports of call. I could play at going down below by getting completely under the covers, but then my fantasy would become confused with land adventures demanding tents in jungles and on mountains.

When I was seven I was hospitalized with viral pneumonia, and then I did have a bed with a real tent, an oxygen tent. This gave me a boat with a cabin I could see out of, though the view of an older boy immobilized in a plaster cast was
seldom what I saw. My running fever took me and my boat through wild hallucinatory storms, leaving me dry and parched with cracked lips, like the Ancient Mariner, longing for water. Although I clung desperately to my bed, perhaps in this experience I began to sense that my body was a boat, too, a boat within a boat. When I lie in bed now, my legs crossed at the ankles, and raise my head slightly, I look down to the bow of a familiar craft. To me, this is a recognizable sensation from long ago.

The bed I lie in now is also a hospital bed. It is high off the floor, and it has controls that make parts of it go up and down, that turn lights on and off, that call for help. It also has bars on the sides, which make it like a crib, but also like a boat with stanchions and lifelines. This bed too is a familiar craft, and I have clung fiercely to those bars, holding on, as we say, for dear life, as waves of pain and drugs threatened to wash me away.

I am here now because the severe headaches, dizziness, nausea, and vomiting I have been experiencing are caused by fatally high blood pressure, which is itself only another symptom of a large and growing tumor constricting the artery to my right kidney. Two years ago a similar tumor and my left kidney were removed in an operation that almost killed me. The tumor was diagnosed as renal cell carcinoma; the recurrence, my doctor tells me, means that there is not much that can be done for me, but that they will treat my high blood pressure medically and ease my dying as much as possible.

APRIL 1977

During the operation the surgeon could not stop the bleeding. I received eight units of blood on the operating table, six more in the recovery room, and two more in the intensive care unit, where my “situation” was declared “dangerous.” I of course had no conscious knowledge of my critical condition, nor of my body’s struggle to remain alive. I was heavily sedated, first by anesthesia, then by painkillers and drugs called hypnotics because their effect is to make patients forget the pain they feel. But I can recall my general sensations and have a distinct memory from that time.

I feel enclosed in something—the bed perhaps—but more likely my own body, and I feel that I am afloat. I am bobbing up and down, as though in a rough sea, and I am being buffeted about, as though by strong winds. At first I am just trying to control, not really direct, whatever vessel I am in. It is dark and silent, so I cannot see the crests of the waves or hear the gusts of wind as they come at me; I can only react to them once they hit me, when it is just too late and I cannot quite force myself around into them. I feel that I am being knocked down and submerged. But then, again without my being able to see it, just feel it, my vessel straightens up and achieves a moment of equilibrium before being hit again. And again I struggle to make my boat come round into the oncoming forces of the storm. I feel so exhausted that I cannot bear even the moment of equilibrium because I immediately and vividly anticipate the next assault.

Finally and suddenly I go down and into the sea. Only at this point do I feel any sense of direction in my handling of the vessel, but I do not know where I am
headed, and although I wish to escape the storm, I am not myself directing my flight from it. In going into and then under the sea, I have the feeling of going from an open and wild place into a defined and tranquil one. My movement is so swift, sure, and effortless that I am no longer conscious of being in a boat as I go down and through the sea up into a place that is like a channel or a tunnel or a harbor, through which I travel up toward light, the first I have seen in my long, awful voyage. I have the distinct feeling of traveling up through the water toward the light on the surface, which becomes brighter and wider as I approach it.

I never have the sensation of actually breaking the surface into the light; I seem to have come up through the water but I am still in it. All is calm and bright, and radiant within this light, coming toward me, is my uncle Tommy O’Rourke.

My uncle was married to my father’s sister, and he used to own the house we lived in in Jersey City; he and his family lived upstairs. At that time I used to see him a lot, but after both our families moved from that house into different suburbs, in 1950, I hardly saw him at all. We met only at family weddings and occasional Christmases at my grandmother’s. But I did come down from my job in upstate New York to his funeral, in 1967.

Now when I see him coming toward me, just as I remember him coming down Charles Street from the bus that let him off from his job in Hoboken, I am glad to see him, as I always used to be. He looks wonderful, a little slimmer, sprightlier, happy, and incongruously gotten up in a flowered shirt. It never occurs to me that he is dead. But relieved as I am to be out of the stormy sea, and happy as I am to see Uncle Tommy, when he comes up to me expectantly, before he can say anything, I say, “I can’t go with you. I’ve got to go back.” As in dreams and fairy tales, my saying so instantly makes it so, and once more I am fighting to force my boat back round into the dark, silent, awesome seas.

I STRUGGLED ON, alone, as best I could. I never again felt that I had come through into a protected and calm place. I remained at sea, in the dark. But I began to apprehend dim lights and low sounds, as though they reached me over a great distance through a dense medium, like fog. I could not make out clearly what they were, but their effect was to locate me distinctly in my boat and in my body. I became more and more aware of the surfaces I was on and in, rather than the seas and winds that beat against and washed over those surfaces. I felt a solid block, which turned out to be not just my bed but also my body, and within that block, barely contained by it and pulsing out from it, was pain. When I came to, I felt as though I had run aground onto something hard that rammed my boat, driving it up into me. The hard object and the pain it caused became one with each other and with me. I was wedged in and aboard, but afloat no more. I saw my wife’s face and felt her small, slender fingers in my hand. I did not know where I was, but I knew then why I could not go with Uncle Tommy. I knew I was back where I wanted to be. My trouble was that I could not manage to stay. The waves of pain that seemed to emanate from and drive me back into the center of myself broke up the lights in the sky and washed me off the rock, back out into the sea and the dark again.
I returned and found myself moored by lines to my nose and throat, arms and chest. I felt people pounding on my back, demanding that I make the pain cough. I was made to sit up and get out of bed and walk on solid land again, leaning and pushing on a stand with wheels that supported an IV with fluid to drip into my arm. But I was also blown out to sea again by mysterious fevers first discovered to be symptoms of pneumonia and finally of a pulmonary embolism, which was caused by all the bleeding. Because an embolism is so dangerous, the doctors took the risk of treating it with Heparin, an anticoagulant. The risk was that the anticoagulant would work not only on the embolism but also on all the vascularized tissue that had been cut through to remove the tumor. The embolism was monitored by daily chest X rays. When it was almost completely dissolved I suffered a massive hemorrhage, which brought me literally kicking and screaming back down to intensive care.

I cannot recall that pain. I cannot even say accurately that I was conscious of it at the time. I could not get outside of it to be conscious of it: there was no "I"; there was only pain. I could not answer the doctors' questions, I could not be moved, I could not be touched, and I lost consciousness repeatedly. I was given injections of Demerol and then morphine so that I could receive transfusions while the doctors tried to stop the internal bleeding and to counteract the effects of the Heparin. Although I had been in ICU before and knew its layout well from slowly and carefully shuffling around it hanging onto my IV dolly, for days I did not recognize the place. But even as the pain subsided I was not out cold; oddly, all the drugs did not put me to sleep. I was awake through most of the nights, and I would lie there in the dark, listening to the awful sounds of the machines—the respirators and heart monitors—the screams and moans, the squeaking of rubber soles on the linoleum floors, the forcing of a drainage tube up the nose and down the throat of a hysterical child, the hushed and brisk removal of the dead.

ICU is one large room, the bays for separate beds formed by white curtains suspended from tracks on the ceiling. At night the room is in darkness, with dim lights only over the nurses' station at one end. When patients cry out or need to be checked, the nurses go to them carrying flashlights. The light bobs along and bounces off the shiny floor, as though being dribbled like a basketball, until the nurse enters the bay of a patient. Then the light glows softly and richly inside the tent, illuminating the translucent curtain walls and the acoustic ceiling tiles with geometrically arranged little holes, but casting outsize, distended shadows that whisper and mutter and shriek over the hiss and thump of the respirators. Deluded by pain and drugs, I could not fix and organize these few restricted and definite sensations: I was not unconscious; I was not asleep; I was not dreaming.

I am in my boat; and I am afloat in the darkness and the light, the silence and the sound, which are all dissolved and mixed together. I cannot concentrate and I cannot rest. I am tired and in pain, and this time I am afraid. Everything keeps changing in different ways so that I cannot even anticipate the forces to make an effort to resist them. It is no longer a matter of trying to bring the boat around into the wind and waves; the waves of light and sound, of antiseptic and putrid smell,
of constriction and pain, suddenly, from any direction, wash into the boat, into me, or I am just as unexpectedly washed overboard into them so that they become not only the whole world but me. The sea is out of control and so is my boat and so am I. I can’t make whatever is happening stop, and I can’t even be sure what it is, so I can’t make any sensible effort against it, to save myself.

Only the pain brings me to myself. As the four-hour interval runs down and the pain-killing effects of the morphine wear off, I feel the deep-down stolid thumping of pain rising to the lines of my incision, from my chest to my groin. It becomes a keel pounding through but centering, balancing, holding me in this sea. It joins with a sharper, searing pain in my right arm, where cold plasma enters my veins with the contradictory sensation of numbing the same area it is hurting so sharply. With that arm I hold on to my boat, to my pain, to myself, for as long as I can manage. But just before I feel any relief or joy at coming back to myself from the terrible dissolution, I realize that I am unable to stand the pain any longer, and I hear my own voice groan plaintively, independent of my conscious control. The newly reconstituted “I” can only desperately plead for the morphine that will bring back the sea of chaos from which I have just emerged.

Before this time I had never actually sailed a boat in my life.

SUMMER 1978

I slowly recovered, hampered by acute and then chronic, persistent hepatitis from all the blood transfusions. I was weak, thin, tired, and it seemed, permanently curled around my incision, which stood out in a thick red welt. The following summer a colleague who was going to Japan for a year asked us if we would store his little sailboat in our barn and offered us the use of it in return. We agreed. My wife was enthusiastic about the arrangement, for she had grown up sailing and racing sailboats on Skaneateles Lake, in upstate New York, and she looked forward to returning to an activity that had once given her great pleasure. Never having sailed before, I was not excited about the idea of the boat, just pleased that such a simple arrangement could work out for a friend and for Susie. The boat was actually a tender, a rowboat 10 feet long, with a mast and a single sail, designed originally to provide yachtsmen with a way of getting from the shore or dockside to the mooring where their seagoing boat was tied up. The tender could be either rowed or sailed; as I came to learn, it was a better rowboat than a sailboat.

When we put the boat in the lake near our home in Maine, Susie encouraged me to try sailing it and gave me one or two lessons. Although I had never enjoyed being in the water, I soon found that I liked being on it, and the challenge of learning to sail the boat appealed to me in a way I never expected, or completely understood. I was bent on getting well again, on putting all my hospital experiences behind me, on going ahead with my life; only in dreams, my nightmares, would I recall what had happened, but as I improved and my conscious anxiety about my health diminished, so too did my dream memories. I wanted to be again in the daytime, sunlit world, and sailing became my way of reentry.
When I first began to sail I did not try to go anywhere; I tried only to make the
boat go and then to control it as it went. At first the challenge was simply to
balance the boat and the forces it worked in and through, just to keep it moving.
Only later did the desire to achieve perfection itself take over.

On any point of sail the object is to adjust the trim of the sails, the position of
the centerboard and the rudder, and my weight in the boat so that they are all in
harmony with one another and the boat makes the best time over the greatest
distance. These adjustments are made not only in response to, but also in
anticipation of, shifts in the wind’s direction and velocity. The wind can be seen
moving the little bits of wool tied to the shrouds (I did not have a wind indicator
at the top of the mast) and moving the surface of the water.

But although the wind can be seen, it is also felt, especially on my back and
the back of my neck. This kinetic experience is completed by a sense of the boat
moving in and through the water, registered literally through the seat of my pants
as I sit on the rail of the little boat, for since it is just a rowboat it has no decks.
The mainsheet for the sail is held and controlled by one hand, the other hand
works the tiller, so that the two are always moved together, reciprocally. When
the centerboard needs to be adjusted in turn, I hold the mainsheet and tiller in one
hand and raise or lower the board with the other. I also shift my body weight from
one side to the other for port and starboard tacks, and backward and forward
along the boat’s length to bring it further into or off the wind, and in toward the
center of the boat or out on the rail to control the boat’s angle of heel.

Thought about or stated, certainly read as instructions, each of these appears
a separate and deliberate move, and at first this is what each awkwardly is. But
through the doing and worrying about each of these things and its relation to the
others, I become able to do them automatically and unconsciously, so that instead
of anxiously thinking about discrete and sequential actions I am liberated to
experience moments of balance and poise in the boat, in the water, in the wind—
moments of perfection. At these moments the boat is balanced perfectly on its
point of sail, moving at its maximum speed, at the optimal angle of heel, so that
it seems to take off and to sail itself. I have the feeling of not really doing
anything, certainly not forcing the boat to do anything, just lightly holding it to
this specific and eternal point. Any change in the wind, any small movement of
my body or any of the boat’s components will upset the balance—it is that
precarious, that precious—but at the same time the feeling is that it could go on
forever, especially when the sun is bright and warm, the wind strong and
consistent, and the water active. All the movement, all the separate forces,
combine and unite in a visionary moment of well-being, harmony, and joy.

Of course I did experience moments of frustration and fear. One day I took the
boat out in winds I should have known were too strong for it; there were strong
and choppy waves on the lake, and the foam would occasionally blow off the top
of them. I had trouble stepping the mast, raising the sail, and setting the rudder
(getting the pintles in the gudgeons, the curmudgeonly gudgeons) because the
wind and the waves were so strong. As soon as I left shore I knew that I had made
a mistake and that I would have a rough time getting out of the trouble I had

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brought on myself by setting out.

The tender had what is called a gunter rig; the boom slides down the mast and is affixed to it by a device resembling a stirrup. The boom was held down only by the mainsheet; it was not controlled, as it sometimes is, by an additional device called a boom vang. I could not sufficiently hold the boom down on any point of sail; the mainsheet cut into my hand so fiercely it burst the skin, causing blood to spurt straight up into the air. The wind blew so hard through the sail as to collapse it repeatedly back on itself, raising the boom vertically toward the mast, like an umbrella blown back and up in a severe rainstorm. Every time this happened the boat would swing abeam into the wind and be hit violently by the wind and the waves, so that I could barely keep it from tipping over with my weight. There was so much pressure on the rudder that I felt as though I would break the tiller trying to force the boat round to get the bow into the wind and waves.

I tried desperately to get back to the point on the shore I had just left, but it was at the end of one of the channels made by an island offshore, and the wind roared through there as though it were a tunnel. I could not run before the wind because it would collapse the boom up to the mast or blow out the sail, and I could not hold the boat into the wind because I was constantly being blown abeam, verging on a capsize. So I was actually going around in an incoherent circle, the boat lurching wildly on every point of its circumference and taking on water at every turn. I tried everything I knew while struggling to keep my balance in the boat, but I could not control the boat under sail in that wind, and with the gunter rig I could not just let the sail go. Not knowing what else to do, I frantically continued doing what I had been doing, trying by sheer physical exertion and desperate willful determination to make the absurd circles I was forming take me over into the wind tunnel toward shore. This was only a frenetic adaptation of just hanging on.

Not at that moment, and certainly not immediately afterward, did I specifically recall my hospital voyaging. But in my desire to be alive in the world again, to achieve that feeling of well-being and control, the moment of perfection that sailing offered, I had managed to recreate in actual experience the hallucinatory image of my nightmarish struggle to survive. Although I did not completely realize it at the time, I felt the pull back through the spasm of my incised abdominal muscles, fatigued by my new efforts to remain afloat, but before it reached my consciousness I realized in a flash of insight what I must do. I lunged forward, grabbed the halyard, furiously ripped it off the cleat, and dropped the sail. Despite my fear and my lack of experience and skill, I had saved myself, and somehow I understood and accepted that I had done so to sail again.

SUMMER 1979

The following season I bought a used O'Day Widgeon, a 12 1/2-foot sailboat that was designed especially to sail and race, and that came equipped with everything. It had a jib and a spinnaker, a boom vang, hiking straps, and a tiller extension. It was also very clean, and it introduced me to the compelling idea of
the sailboat itself as a perfectible world. Living in a large, old wooden house that requires constant maintenance to continue in a perpetual state of shabby disrepair, I derived an aesthetic and sensuous pleasure from the smooth, clean, shiny white surfaces of the little sailboat’s hull and the bright stainless-steel rigging.

Because this boat was bigger than the 10-foot tender and had a jib, I hoped to do more sailing with my family, to share with them my involvement in sailing. The boat was easier and more fun to sail with another person, and Susie and I did often sail together. But it was not adequate for the four of us; we were so crammed in that the children could not move, and they remained disgruntled and alternately frightened or bored. So, despite my hopes, most of the time I sailed by myself.

I quickly learned to handle the boat alone, working the jib and mainsail with my left hand and the centerboard and tiller with my right; the light hull was sensitive to, but not overwhelmed by, my body weight, and we made a good team. In addition to the delight in the boat itself and the more sophisticated and efficient sailing allowed by its design and equipment, I was able to increase greatly the range of my sailing. From my mooring on the lake I could sail in a few hours to either end and back; depending on the direction of the wind I would beat up or down the lake and run back. So, to the satisfaction of sailing the boat well, I could add the sense of accomplishment that comes from sailing the boat to a destination.

At the end of that summer began the severe headaches, dizziness, and nausea that brought me to my local hospital, wedged in the corner of one of its bathrooms, and to the prospect of my own imminent death. Once my extreme and debilitating symptoms were controlled by massive doses of blood pressure medication, Susie and I determined not to accept the prognosis made by the local doctors, and we persuaded them to help us seek other opinions. The director of the hospital made arrangements for me to go to the Sidney Farber Cancer Institute, in Boston, but I had to wait to be admitted.

As soon as I was discharged from the local hospital, on a day in late September, I went sailing. I expected to go down to Boston any day; in the meantime I took a medical leave of absence from work, did the fall chores around the house, and sailed whenever I could. The lake was empty of other boats now, Susie was at work, the children at school, and I sailed the Widgeon alone up and down the lake and watched the brilliant fall colors peak, thin, and brown out.

When we could all be together, we went to look at boats. What we thought we were doing at the time, I am no longer sure. Looking at boats is relaxing; the contemplation of different designs is pleasing and educational. Susie and I enjoyed it, and it provided a distraction from our anxious waiting, which was prolonged, finally, for more than three weeks. We attended a fall in-the-water boat show, and soon we were considering buying a used Rhodes 19. The boat had been used as a rental at one of the marinas on the coast of Maine, and now at the end of the season it was being sold off. Designed by the well-known Philip
Rhodes, the boat was seaworthy enough to sail at the coast, and being a centerboard model, it could still be launched and sailed on the lake. It was big enough to accommodate us all and ever had a little cuddy for the children to get under, out of the weather.

The boat was still in the water, and one day in October, two weeks after I was discharged, Susie and I took it out and sailed it. Built by O'Day, it was rigged just like the Widgeon, so we felt immediately at home with it. Sailing along the coast of Maine was beautiful; most of all, I now think, I responded to this great expansion of possibilities, if only in sailing, at a time when my life was being so contracted. The space to sail in, the places to sail to, the greater consistency of the wind—all were a great relief from the frantic nature of lake sailing and of our lives at this moment. Coastal sailing in Maine, with all its hazards of rocks and extreme tides, and its freezing cold water, can be dangerous; I knew that, but in that fall of my life they seemed romantic and creative challenges, far preferable to the challenges that lay ahead of me: I was anticipating radical surgery again, and all my memories of the past operation and the nights in intensive care returned with increased vividness as premonitions of the future; there might even be chemotherapy, that literal dissolution I feared so intensely.

I do not think at the time that I ever considered sailing a 19-foot boat on the coast a preparation for or an analogue to what I feared I was to confront in Boston. But I now think it must have been. Although with my wife's encouragement I had challenged the prognosis of my doctor of 10 years, I still took seriously his opinion—and mostly his tone—that I would die soon; and deep within myself I wondered, fearfully, whether I could actually survive another operation such as the one I had experienced two years ago. If I was going to die, I did not want to spend what little money I had buying another boat; if I were to die, Susie and Jamie and Annie surely could use that money more than they could a used sailboat. To me the sailboat was for life and living, not death and dying; it was for expansion and movement and harmony and joy, not for the constricted, confined, degrading, and painful suffering of the cancer ward. But without my knowing it, that was just why I needed it, and why we bought the sailboat, and why I took it with me as an image, an idea, an ideal, to the Sidney Farber Cancer Institute.

When I arrived, my whole "case" was re-evaluated; all the existing evidence and the diagnosis were reviewed, old tests were repeated and new tests administered. I had blood tests, urine tests, X rays, upper and lower GI series, tomograms, ultrasound, liver and spleen scans, brain scans, bone scans. I have distinct and discrete memories of all that happened during the 10 days of preliminary testing, but the one that contains them all is of me sitting by the window of my room. The basic rectangular shape of the room was cut out for a bathroom so that the room itself was in the form of an L, with the long part being near the door. The window was at the opposite side, at the end of the short part, between the wall to the bathroom and the wall separating my room from the one next to it. Under the window were the built-in heating and air conditioning unit and vents, forming a
ledge to sit on. As I waited for each test, and after I came back and waited to hear the results and wondered what next, and when I could not sleep at night, I would get up on the heating unit and sit.

I thought then that I was interested in seeing the city, especially the construction of the new Brigham and Women's Hospital next door during the day and the lights of the city at night. But of course I could not really interest myself in those things; I was too preoccupied with all the tests and what they might mean.

Now when I remember myself sitting there, I see myself sitting with my back against the bathroom wall, my knees up, my feet against the wall of the next room; I look out over my body, just as I do in the cockpit of my sailboat, and I rock, gently, in that position, as I do when sailing, and I try to get a better feel of the forces that challenge it and that it will have to move through on the next passage. I remember the pleasures of sailing the pretty Widgeon and the excitement of first feeling the Rhodes take off, and I anticipate a time in the future when my family and I will make passages in Penobscot Bay in the Rhodes, when I will set and adjust the sails. I can see and feel myself doing it, and at the same time I can see the shapely and handsome vessel, proudly under sail in bright sun and sparkling waves. But all the time I am preparing for the other voyage, the one I do not want but must remember: the night sea voyage in terrible storms, in an overloaded craft that I must ceaselessly struggle to bring under control, alone.

The operation took about eight hours. This time I was cut up and through my chest so that my entire right side could be laid completely open. The tumor was removed from my kidney and from around arteries and veins. After surgery I was sent directly to the Bartlett Unit for intensive care. When I came to from my long sedation I was already off the respirator, but I was still receiving oxygen through a mask. The hateful endotracheal tube was hurting and choking down my throat, and once again I was moored by drains in my chest and side, the Foley catheter, and IVs in both arms.

I was groggy, cold, parched, and in pain. I lapsed out on the next shot of morphine without accurately having taken my bearings, so I did not know where I was. The acute similarities of the pain, the drugs, the tubes, combined with my expectation that this time would be like the last time, made me confused, and I felt I was still back on my previous sea journey. As I overcame the effects of the anesthesia, I was driven to get up out of bed and to get myself moving. I knew that if I could force myself to be active I could greatly reduce the chances of pneumonia and pulmonary embolism. But I was driven also by a more immediate and less logical association.

The Bartlett Unit, I learned later, is constructed like a clock. An enclosed island in the center contains the nurses' station, and behind it is a supply room; then around it, off a corridor, are the rooms of the patients requiring intensive care. These are single rooms, except for the one I was in, directly in front of the station. This is a double room divided only by curtains, and the raised nurses' station looks directly into it through big windows. Shortly after my arrival a young girl who was injured by a shotgun blast to her stomach during an argument at a party was brought in from the emergency room; some large, leather-jacketed
men smelling of tobacco smoke and liquor barged in to see her and had to be evicted by security guards. She, too, was soon removed for further surgery.

By now I was becoming more conscious of my surroundings, and at this time the staff began making preparations for another patient from the Farber, named Dorothy. Dorothy was suffering from mycosis fungoides, "a chronic progressive disease possibly related to leukemia and marked by the development of reddish tumors especially upon the scalp, face and chest." She had undergone experimental, radical chemotherapy that had thrown her kidneys into shock, thereby causing her to become overhydrated. She was also deaf, and in her misery she uttered no clearly identifiable words. She had a small, high-pitched, but soft voice that moaned piteously. When she arrived she was surrounded by doctors who would shout at her: "Dorothy, Dorothy! Can you hear me?" They would poke and jab her and shout "Dorothy, Dorothy! Can you feel that?" Dorothy's moans would turn to shrieks.

Although I understood intellectually that the doctors were doing what they had to in this desperate situation, I resented their treatment of Dorothy and all my imaginative sympathy was with her in her utterly helpless state. Yet, at the same time, I was repelled by her condition; she was big, bloated, marked by tumors, bald from chemotherapy, and to me worst of all, she was literally drowning within herself. Her deafness and inarticulateness increased her isolation. I knew that inside she was alone in a sea of destructive chemicals and her own body fluids. She was the embodiment of what I had been and of what I feared becoming again.

When I had hemorrhaged after my first operation I too had gone into renal shock and was overhydrated. That was when I was given Demerol and morphine and when I felt everything dissolve. Dorothy was my other self, and I felt the identification deep within me. After the doctors had started IVs to counteract the effects of Dorothy's overhydration, they left, the nurses returned to their station, and Dorothy and I were alone together in this double room. Dorothy had been sedated, but she still suffered on; and she made noises in her small voice—distant little moans, screams, and yelps—separated by what sounded like gulps for air. Every time she murmured I felt it was I who was going under and who tried and failed to speak, or failed to be heard, to communicate. I had this feeling in my own incision; my severed muscles were contracting as they did when I breathed deeply or attempted to speak. I lay in my bed seeing Dorothy and seeing myself in Dorothy and imagining again, in an intensified way, the terrible loneliness, the darkness, the silence of the huge seas of her rough passage. Again I could not rest, and I could not sleep; I could not avoid consciousness of what she suffered, of what I had suffered, of what she suffered for me and I for her. I was confused and frantic with the contractions of my incision in response to her sounds, and I clutched a folded and taped blanket to my side until, in the sharp local pain it caused, I knew what I must do.

I called out for the nurses and asked them to help me up. Trembling with tension, weakness, pain, and rising dizziness, I did not exactly will myself up, but I got myself to a point from which there was no going back, a point where I finally
could let my body go, in its own way, with its own momentum and the nurses’ help. Shaking on my feet, my knees occasionally buckling, I pulled in on my blanket with my right arm and reached up to hold on to my IV dolly with my left. Helped by a nurse at my right elbow, I set off for the door. I was off now, and now I would go on, setting my own course. I continued out and started around the circular corridor of the Barlett Unit, disregarding warnings that I not overexert myself. Of course, the place is not really very big, but I slowly made my way round, actually steering myself with my blanket and leading my way with the IV pole before me like a mast. When I came back around, the charge nurse greeted me with the comment, “You’ve circumnavigated the whole place. You must be ready to move on to other things.”

But then I went back to bed and both Dorothy and I slept. When my wife came to visit later that day, I got up again to go around with her, and when my doctors came in they agreed to move me to a step-down unit later that night. I continued to be haunted by Dorothy, and visions of the night sea journey, and I walked compulsively all the time I remained in the hospital, fearing that if I stopped, or even let up, I would be lost again. But gradually, as the pain decreased, the medications were cut down, and my strength returned. I began to think again of sailing in a real boat.

JUNE 1982
I am sailing off the coast of Maine, between Halfway Rock Light and Sequin Island Light; it is 2 a.m. I do not know this boat, and I do not know the man who is with me and who has gone below to sleep. I have never sailed at night before.

I am sailing by a lighted compass, and I force myself to concentrate on it. I can feel the boat moving through the water, but I take the flashlight and shine it up on the big Genoa to check the configuration of the sail to be sure it is forming the proper slot with the mainsail to draw us along. As I put the light out, I stay on the lee side of the cockpit, aware again of how the lime-green starboard running light illuminates the big sail, which reflects the light back onto the water that slaps and thumps the hull and gurgles, chuckles, and hisses alongside it in brilliant biophosphorescence. The dark gray clouds shift in the sky overhead, revealing the khaki light of the moon as it backlights the sails. The movement of the clouds and the light brings me back to the sails and the movement of the boat and then to the compass, which I have neglected in this look about me. I turn to the compass and put the boat back on course. Having checked everything, I still feel anxious and reassure myself that I have just checked everything and that everything is all right: the sails are properly set and drawing, the angle of heel is comfortable, and the boat is on course. I look again at the diffuse yellow-green in the sail and down the phosphorescent wake trailing back to Halfway Rock Light, which I can still see, and then up again at the clouds moving across the moon, and finally at the compass again. This is sailing, I say to myself, repeating the title of a book I read four years ago when I was first learning how to sail. But I still do not relax; instead I ask myself, Why am I doing this? and think about the last few months and weeks to get another fix on my position in this boat, here and now.
ALTHOUGH IT IS TRUE that Jamie and Annie never took to sailing in the Rhodes, that they were disappointed at not really having a place to go in it and frightened at feeling so exposed, their dissatisfaction is not all that moved me to buy this old boat. Rather, it is my own feeling, which has grown stronger over the last two years since my second operation, that I want to do this, that in some inexplicable way I have to do this. I have sailed on the lake every chance I have had, every chance I could make. I have tried to learn all I could, and I have enjoyed it, but it was more than pleasure to me.

I've worked hard at sailing. There is a compulsive fascination to it, and I feel irresistibly drawn to sail on the coast, on salt water. I am afraid, too. I have never liked the water, and I am not a good swimmer. Experienced sailors often say that they do not fear the sea; they respect it. The distinction is not so clear-cut for me: I respect it but I also fear it. The fear is part of the fascination, but I am not a thrill seeker, nor am I foolish. There is simply something in confronting the forces of wind and water and not just surviving them but literally working through them that has powerfully drawn me to sailing at this time of my life. As gradually as my body recovered, over months and years, I have come to sense that my overwhelming desire to sail on the sea in my own boat, actually to make passages, was a critical part of my recovery, of my continuance.

THE BOAT I DECIDED to buy was 20 years old; it was designed by Carl Alberg and manufactured by Pearson Yachts as one of the first mass-produced boats in fiberglass. Its age made it affordable, and its traditional lines and full keel made it appealing and seaworthy. Its surfaces were not smooth and shiny, and it did not suggest a perfectible world; everything was worn, stained, dirty, and somewhat jury-rigged. But the surveyors deemed the boat and rigging sound, and somehow its used and weathered look appealed to me.

The broker who sold me the boat was a man I had talked to about boats for the last four years; I liked him, learned a lot from him, trusted him, and I was glad when he offered to sail the boat with me from Yarmouth to Belfast, Maine, a distance of about 90 miles by sea. I expectantly began the long process of preparing the boat for the water, and then Merrill told me that he might not be able to go with me because his wife was going into the hospital to have a tumor removed from her abdomen and a biopsy done on a lump in her breast. This news greatly altered my attitude toward the trip; the joyful and expectant sense of fulfillment changed to apprehension and frustration. I did not know Merrill’s wife, but I understood what they both must be going through and I sympathized with them both; I thought of the anxious waiting, the tests, the apprehension. Then things began to go wrong in my final preparations of the boat; there was trouble with the electrical system, and the head, and the radio, and in my ignorance I was inefficient and impatient in dealing with these matters. Then the weather was bad, cold and rainy, as one storm system after another wound over the country and up the eastern seaboard. Every day I thought we might go but we didn’t, and my disappointment, frustration, and anger grew. I was anxious, unable to eat or sleep. Finally Merrill got someone else to go with me; I spoke
to the man on the phone and then met him at the boat. He would go, but he had
to get right back; we’d have to push it. Even as we motored down the Royal River
to Casco Bay I did not really believe that this was it, that we were actually going,
or that we would make it.

**WE DO NOT PLAN** to sail all night; we intend to go to Jewel Island by dark and then
sleep until first light. But when we get to Jewel, we cannot sleep and the wind
comes up and the night seems dry, though cold, and partially illuminated by the
moon. So, knowing we have a long way to go, we decide to take advantage of the
conditions even though we are both unfamiliar with the boat and I have never
sailed at night. Layered in all our clothes and foul-weather gear, by flashlight we
struggle with halyards twisted on the masthead light and Genoa sheets caught in
the forward hatch; on this strange boat the simplest deck work is an effort in the
dark. When the sails are raised we set a course out to sea from Jewel; the wind
is fresh but uncertain in direction and for a time we are on a run. We cannot keep
the Genoa out on either side of the boat, so I go below to get the old mahogany
whisker pole. I pole the Genoa out to the port side and set the clip over the bail
on the mast, where it belongs. Just as I get back to the cockpit the wind slackens,
and the Genoa, empty of wind, flaps in toward the mast, then filled suddenly by
a puff blows out again, then violently blows back and catapults the whisker pole
across the deck into the now black sea. We both see it go, but we hear no sound.
I grab the flashlight and turn it on. For one brief moment, frozen in the beam of
light, the pole appears once more, gleaming, as it continues out of the beam’s arc.

We come about and search with two flashlights, but we never see the whisker
pole again. We both know that moving as we are now, in the cold sea off the coast
of Maine, in this dark, the difficulty of rescuing a man overboard is almost
insurmountable. At this moment my mixed excitement and wonder at actually
being under way changes radically, though also silently. I am trembling with
exertion and tension, and I can feel the lines of my incisions where they come up
to, and on my right side in and through, my ribs. Exertion and strain often produce
this sensation, but tonight, coming as it does on the isolated vision of the whisker
pole disappearing from the light, forever, it is a recognition.

Shortly afterward we are headed for Halfway Rock on a port tack in a
freshening offshore wind. I cannot sleep so Carl goes below. I am alone in the
cockpit, trying to take in the experience of sailing at night. But I am anxiously
focusing on the compass, checking the set of the sails, watching for gusts and
puffs, and worrying about accidentally jibing with the big Genoa. I busy myself
and do not let go into my first real night sail because now I am at the edge of
knowing what it is like, of knowing what the anxious waiting about this trip really
meant. So I am not completely surprised when I begin to notice the increased
pressure necessary to hold the tiller against the force of the wind and the increase
in the boat’s angle of heel. But even if I am not surprised, and these sensations
are familiar, now I truly pay attention to the feel of the boat and respond to it. I
am not thinking about night sailing now; I am not trying to take it all in. It is as
if I had ventured a little way into it by coming this far, and now it is coming to
meet me and take me the rest of the way.

The boat is moving swiftly and powerfully through the water now, and I sit across the cockpit, with my knees bent and my feet on the seat opposite, the tiller no longer crooked under my right arm but held across my legs with both hands. The pressures on the sail and the tiller are getting stronger; I know the boat is heeling over too far to sail efficiently, and now I see and hear foamy water rushing along and over the rail. I worry about something giving way. Will a turnbuckle strip or a halyard let go? I am holding on too tightly, I am trying too hard to control the boat; I am trying to will it upright and into the wind, so it will not be blown down, blown over, so it too, we too, will not disappear in an instant, a flash, into the dark night and black sea.

Rigid in the tension of forces on the boat, in the exertion of trying to control it, in my own concentration, in the cold, I do go down, down into myself, into my past. For the first time, fully and consciously, I remember and connect my sailing in intensive care and all the daytime, sunlight sailing of the years in between. Like the rush of water over the lee rail, images of the Bartlett Unit, of Dorothy, of the night of my hemorrhage, of being awash, of the first operation and of sailing alone in the dark, silent storm, of being washed overboard, rush into my mind. I seem to see also, and at the same time, Merrill’s wife setting out on her voyage, and myself now on this real night in this real boat. I remember all the work and worry for this trip and for all the others, and seeing all these images at once, as one, and still feeling the boat moving through the water on this night, now I understand that all these years I have been deliberately seeking, working, to realize a metaphor that not only parallels or illuminates but also contains and embodies all my recent experience and any future I might have. This moment of vision, apprehended in the movement of the boat in the wind and the water, of darkness and light reflected in the sky and the sails and the sea, so clear and unified and luminous, so unlike anything I have ever experienced in my life, seems like a benediction. It allows me to hope, for the first time in five years, that I might be both cured and healed.

Carl’s flashlight, which he had taken below with him and set on a shelf to the right of the companionway, topples over, bounces off the bottom step, and hits the floor. He awakes and immediately comes on deck; he looks around and says so matter-of-factly that for a moment I suspect sarcasm: “Let’s reef the main. It’s always better to do things sooner rather than later.” We reef the main without trouble, and Carl takes the helm. I still cannot settle down to sleep and do not want to be below deck, so I huddle against the cabin, and watch the moon come out from behind the clouds again, and try to sight back down our wake to just that point where its light disappears into darkness, a darkness itself delineated by the straight line of moonlight and the arc of Halfway Rock Light.