

## Implicit Danger



*Obstruction Pass, Orcas Island. The San Juan Islands.*

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By Neil Thomas Proto

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“I made boats for movie stars, like Dick Powell,” Dave Baxter told us when we arrived. “Philip Marlowe?” I thought immediately, Powell’s role in Hollywood’s first take on Raymond Chandler’s hardboiled detective.

Dave’s forehead wrinkled when he spoke, his white beard ruggedly cropped, his

leathery face easily animated. Born in nineteen thirty-four, he said. He told us about Powell’s gentle manner, and about Fess Parker and June Allyson and other movie star legends of an era, what they did and said in his company, sailing in the Pacific, each episode told respectfully, like the accuracy of their memory mattered and he wanted to get it right.

He'd left that behind, carving out a life on this southeastern edge of Orcas Island with his wife Kittie - no cell phone connection, his hands still calloused and sinewy, his barrel-chested body stone rough, still capable of adventure, his agenda in life not yet complete.

I'd been to these islands once before, a seaplane dayhop from Lake Union to Friday Harbor in the impenetrable rain and wet fog of February. Like Roy Rodgers in a Burma monsoon, the pilot skipped along the dock and leaped onto the plane, its engine running with three of us on board, his knowledge and confidence in the single propeller's timely gallop gratefully accurate. I saw little that day from the low flying four-seater with paper thin doors except a spirited whale and a soaked, restless town of people whose place at the local diner seemed carved in their chairs or pictured on the walls. I bought an ancient post card of a clear, sunny day.

"The keys are in the cabin," Dave said matter-of-factly, like he trusted you and anyone else who made it to his outpost in the San Juans.

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### **The contradiction of isolation: Longer life amid risk and predictable uncertainty.**

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Lieber Haven. Three cabins on the inner shore of Obstruction Pass. The other two unoccupied. Each bedroom with baseboard heating, replacing the stone fireplace that once dominated the small cabins deftly crafted fixtures. He'd done all the work himself, preserving a way of life on the water he understood, declining

entreaties to change it, to modernize its creature comforts except in the most essential way.

The seventy-two foot schooner "Lieber Schwan" Dave had designed and built and now was renovating was pulled within feet of the cabins. Touchable. Craftsmanship that had captured Hollywood's imagination on display like an Oscar. Not just for its glorified past. He intended to take it to sea again.

He smiled comfortably as we worked through the arrangements; acting the host, the historian, the gatekeeper, bringing Steve Marzocco and me not just back to moments that enthralled a nation but into this culture, changing constantly on itself, remaining oblique and unsettling, fitting Dave's pull backward and forward. He could have been Ernest Hemingway's fishing companion aboard the *Pilar*, with no ship to shore radio, prepared for and wanting uncertainty with whoever joined them for the next marlin venture into the Gulf Stream. Or him and Hemingway alone. Heading for Cuba.

A dozen yellow and blue kayaks were lined along Lieber Haven's tart crusted sand, the sea still and black, the sailboat we'd rented attached to a buoy twenty yards from shore. The sky was large and dull gray and seemed never to lighten. The only sound was the resonant call of the sea gull. We were within America's uppermost corner had not Secretary William Seward extended our continental domain from its almost perfect rectangle into an oblong thrust with the purchase of Alaska.

It was early May 2012. We awaited our friend and master sailor on the next ferry from Anacortes, Anne Alberg.

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I was learning sailing as I do most things, by deliberative increments over time and through everything ancillary to its culture. Anne and Steve had contributed to my evolving knowledge and restless inquiries with patience and the expectation my actions onboard would contribute to fun and the need for quick coordinated action when the unexpected twist in weather or current might signal peril. It was my idea to sail in the San Juans, to find as primitively civilized a setting as we could. We did.

I'd purchased a military compass in Port Townsend made with copper from India,



*Skipper, Anne Alberg*

properly calibrated I was assured, its basics I understood, its potential uses including alongside sea charts still evolving, its use in a precarious setting a different test altogether and, hopefully, not likely today. I had inserted Dava Sobel's *Longitude* into my Georgetown course as an example of science used to conquer nature, to impose lines on it and tame its uncertainty and danger but I had

not appreciated the enormity of English clockmaker John Harrison's accomplishment to the adventure that lay ahead. Re-reading it with a new perspective awaited my return.

I knew little about navigating with the sextant or with celestial bodies - "The sea before time," Sobel called it - other than their use by those who'd sailed. Each inquiry yielded stories of misadventure or scientific accomplishment, even a story about how Noah planned his escape from the deluge. One story, actually a thread in one story has accompanied me like a lesson to be understood since I first learned it thoroughly a decade ago, it's meaning changing with each experience sailing or kayaking or even just listening to others. Sir Ernest Shackleton's rescue of the "Endurance" crew in the Antarctic; the final sea journey aboard the makeshift sail boat "James Caird" seeking the closet whaling station, the punishing physicality of it, where charts and instruments, mathematics and learned courage and discipline melded forcefully to preserve lives and the telling of the story. And that Shackleton had acknowledged he knew "nothing about boat sailing." I'd been intent on touching only one slender thread of what that story meant.



*Ernest Shackleton and his crew launching the "James Caird" for its last journey in the Antarctic's waters*

Anne walked immediately to the small office Ben Booth of "Orcas Island Sailing" maintained on the dock cluttered with instruments, equipment, life preservers, charts and paperwork pinned, nailed, and piled. Anne is an American Sailing Association certified instructor. She's sailed globally; her good judgment recognized on and off the sea. This will be our third sail together. Steve, in his respect for risk, was prepared: new life preservers, waterproof packets for food and cell phones, plenty of water, and elementary medical supplies. It's the same manner he operates in corporate settings: solid preparation accomplished, allowing his imagination and intellect the maximum freedom. He's experienced in the sea – with his lead, we've kayaked together in Port Gamble and sailed twice closer to Seattle.

Ben was gracious. We'd already cleared Anne's qualifications with him so we got right down to safety instructions, currents, weather, alternative route choices, and protecting the boat. Two characteristics in him emerged unvarnished. He cherishes his work and understood its joy in his life, his voice elevated and quickened and smile invigorated when he described it. And he knows these waters and their danger, conveying caution with solemnity, looking each of us in the eye, judging intuitively our seriousness and purpose – needing to be certain we appreciated the risks, acted responsibly, the unspoken prospect he'd witnessed before of misjudgment or even the exercise of the best judgment yielding harm to the boat or death to its crew. We'd be on the water for ten hours. Its temperature can be in the 40s. Thermal shock sets in within minutes. Psychological unease less than that.

Ben described the 26' sailboat we'd rented, his largest, like he'd nurtured it through life.

*"The boat... is a 1968 Pearson Commander. Its given name is 'Pilgrim.' When I purchased her all of my other boats had names of birds but I just couldn't bring myself to changing Pilgrim's name. The Commander was designed by Carl Alberg and shares the same hull and most of the cabin with the Pearson Ariel. It's been said that the Commander was Carl Alberg's favorite boat and in fact was the one he kept and sailed for himself. Commanders were built for only [three] years because the larger cabin of the Ariel was more popular."*

Carl Alberg lived to be eighty-six. He'd be gratified to know Ben ensured the Commander was still sea worthy and that, on this day, its fate was entrusted to Alberg's namesake, Anne.

We situated ourselves and gear carefully into the dingy that Steve promptly maneuvered alongside "Pilgrim." Under Anne's instructions we removed the sails' covering, checked the gages, radio, and the safety equipment, located all that was necessary if one of us fell in and renewed our knowledge of who'd do what if that happened. Stories of mishaps began - one about the weakening drag of cold, water-soaked blue jeans that laid bear the smartness of our dress - not as part of a ritual but to see if questions existed and that experience mattered, including someone else's. With the necessary agility Steve unmoored us and Anne started the engine and guided us out. I prepared to help in hoisting the sails. Steve took the helm.

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We sailed southwest through Upright Channel and toward Friday Harbor tacking, catching the wind and current, Steve often at the tiller judging with an experienced hand how to fill the sails with tensile firmness and keep them that way. Anne provided guidance, constantly measuring her skill and taxing mine, often confined to manning whichever direction we needed to move, pulling the sheet hard and fast until the sail was taut, using the winch to get whatever perfection Anne insisted was essential.



*Steve Marzocco holding steady*

I was seeing topography that had remained largely the same since first explored. Lummi Indians in cedar canoes seeking food and shelter, communicating with each other and their gods of nature. The British and Spanish explorers in ocean weathered sailing ships anointing inlets and bays, mountains and passageways with names of friends and shipmates and places back home with grandiose parochialism. Bootleggers, pirates, and smugglers - the Canadian border lurked beneath the sea only a few treacherous miles away - engaged in rank illegalities and quick getaways by whatever speedy rigs they could. All done when risks were uncharted and daring was of high value.

Our conversations were necessarily tightly woven within actions taken and checked, head and body movements watching for signals of risk and sharing them immediately so they could be double-checked. We talked about family, Anne's growing work sailing and teaching, Steve's business ventures, health care, elections, national and local, my writing and what awaited me back in DC, until risk was noted and the conversation aborted in mid-sentence.

As the sun rose but not confidently, Anne detected distant rain and I yelled out a sudden increase in velocity and decrease in depth. It was plain the variables in tides and wind, current and weather retained their ill-defined meanness if miscalculated. The boom still able to swing unexpectedly into your head and the boat, gliding at top speed of five knots, still leaning precariously on its leeward side as the black water swirls and foams and whips by you, a hundred feet or more of it below, still able to swallow you in moments.

Rugged dark green hills sloped downward on Blakely Island into churning, white-capped black water that from a distance and with the sun's erratically glimmering sheen melded into hills from more distant Decatur so that partially hidden inlets seemed like easy passages, and inviting bays were really rock-strewn invitations to precarious sight-seeing. Classical metaphors about choices and values and false hopes abound but only later, as I write. Here, Anne's skill and experience with tides and currents, winds and mapping mattered; her knowing and seeing and reading the markers placed there by others because of boats lost and lives endangered. Her

duty, which we all shared, was to avoid the known risks. I always sat by her side, compass in hand, when the navigational chart came out. She noted the hazards and with a scan above and around asked for depth and knot readings and detected and directed the avoidance of risks she felt coming intuitively, those unknown that hopefully would remain so. Steve took the tiller. Anne and I headed for the sheets. The sails rippled angrily in discontent. It lasted only a moment but at our peril. The “pop” sought and accomplished.

We all watched for other vessels, mostly small sailing or motorboats or the flat boats with mobile tankers of propane aboard essential to warm and feed islands of people with no natural fuel except timber. It was the tankers that began to tell the story of isolation; that in this stunning beauty was a stark dependence, communal if there were more people but not here, not in the isolated pockets of homes where survival from the simplest of accidents warranted virtually exquisite preparation and flat-out good luck.

“Large numbers of the people who live here are among the oldest in America,” Ben had said with understandable pride.

“Lack of stress?” I asked.

“Must be,” he replied, knowing first hand, his evenly expressed upbeat tone and fit appearance revealing his own contentment.

“Not if you’re single,” Anne posited later to me, knowing friends who had a different perspective.

The ease of proximity to nature has its virtues. I’d learned from the past decade

of making regular visits to Seattle and now in my third year of prolonged stays in Winslow on Bainbridge Island that the distance from Washington, DC markedly diminished stress. The stock market already opened when you awakened, its trend largely set. Cataclysmic events already reported and absorbed elsewhere, the president not needing your commiseration to resolve them. The long list of emails accumulating, responded to when the east coast’s workday was over. The purchase of the *New York Times* at Town and Country market put off until the mid afternoon run and work-out, sometimes put aside for review late in the evening or the next day so that the depth not the timeliness of the articles was important; and the comfort among friends or those I’d overheard on the ferry to meet the next day to kayak or hike or ski or getting on the ferry at 6 am on Saturday and seeing men and women dressed for adventure on the water or in the mountains. You could get used to it. When combined with withholding daily mail service and my growing predilection even in DC of rarely watching the daily news, I did. Ben’s implicit allusion to the benefits of a way of life resonated.

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The vessel that astonished and displaced conversation immediately or placed in doubt our seemingly settled course was the ferry. Not big and cumbersome in their turning like the ones in Puget Sound that followed a marked course with danger further held at bay by rigorous crews and proximity to Seattle, Winslow, and Bremerton. Here they were agile, fast, rising from the horizon quickly or emerging evocatively from behind a protective alcove like a pirate ship on a



*Ferry sited.*

disquieting mission, posing its own risk to the best of boaters in the small space of the passage it chose to take. A world seemed to exist among them, not just an informed code of safety but in their queuing at a busy dock like a new Stutz Bearcat parallel parking, engine running, turning quickly like a NASCAR driver from port dock to port dock, from Lopez to Shaw to Orcas, backing up with the “quick-quick” of the Texas two-step, and striking perfectly with the full surge of their engine’s reversal like the sweet curve ball into the mooring’s protective glove. They acted with earned vanity, looking grand and capturing their preeminent stature in the wild as the largest man-made object to survive with an essential respect for certain destruction and death if cockiness took hold.

Steve and I saw one earlier in the morning. The sun glistened behind the gleaming white and green ferry framed by the daylight’s permanently translucent gray sheet, moving south west from Rosario Strait not on any route laid out on the maps we had, heading toward Obstruction Pass and quickly reaching us standing near the dock wondering how it would maneuver between Obstruction Island across the way and the submerged

rocks we were warned about. This behemoth, swift, perfectly situated in the channel, skilled, confident, unnatural and daring, exactly what this setting was about cleared the channel with the precise slice of a Bowie knife through lard and disappeared around another island.

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### **Peril on the water endures. It makes no difference which century.**

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During the day Anne recognized the ferries immediately, their speed and course and what it meant for “Pilgrim.” “Stay away and stay steady on course,” she said firmly each time it happened. You may have preference in maritime rules but the wake’s upheaval if caught with an abrupt change in current or wind velocity can render that a mere and final nicety. A distant, warmly executed wave and signaling predictable control of the boat was Anne’s admonition and we adhered to it.

One enduring challenge to me was tying knots. Not only because they were complicated despite Anne’s effort to show me (with smooth, repetitively executed hand movements that translated into an algorithm when I tried them) and through easy analogues (“just like macramé,” that, with admiration and uncharacteristic passivity I’d watched my sister and mother do and now realized I’d missed a critical lesson in sailing) but because of the awkward position I’d find myself, leaning backward against the settee after each tack, securing the sheet and not budging until I got the double cross knot

right as the wind flushed and transformed the emaciated sails into soaring wings. Anne and Steve correctly sat securely on the opposite side of the boat and I remained inches away from the cold black unforgiving fast moving one hundred foot deep sea looking backward to get Anne's approval when, on few occasions, I got it right.

No doubt I'd have to work harder to touch and understand a singular thread of the dauntless skill of the "Endurance" crew. But my fate in failure would have been the same, a sensation in risk I did feel with certainty twice – when moving at what seemed like eight or maybe ten knots, I walked along the starboard holding the rigging to unfurl a caught jib, the wind pummeling my body, the chill from spraying water streaming across my face, my flank exposed to cold, rushing sea, and then later, when, following a far more confident Steve, I secured my knees against I can't remember what and peed off the stern.

We agreed not to lose a moment of sailing by docking for lunch, no subdued moments allowed as we munched sparingly on roasted turkey, chunks of Helvetia cheese, cold fresh green pea pods, and sliced watermelon. Dinner, we



*Rosario.*

agreed, would be different, closer to the notion of civility and the choice was made without calculating velocity or looking at the chart. Rosario.

We had the benefit of the wind on our return, a still unpredictable variable requiring tacking and skill and channeling the rush of adrenalin into collaboratively executing Anne's directives with growing efficiency. We decided to explore the East Sound, the deep bay in Orcas Island's middle, deep enough and bridled with its own mountains and cutting slopes to make its own at times raucous weather. Looming big and white along its western tree-flushed hillsides was the Northwest's answer to the Vanderbilt's summer cottage in Newport and our dinner destination once safety was ensured.

Fifty-four rooms built by Robert Moran for his family in 1904, named in honor of the nearby passageway, with its own harbor and buoys, its porches and patios encircling each floor, its manner solid, cedar, with clean, crisp lines and inviting warmth. It was sold in 1936 and now awaits new plans. Moran was a shipbuilder, a pioneer from New York, successful, civic minded, the Mayor of Seattle for two terms before being diagnosed with an incurable ailment that would take his life in a year. He chose to come to Orcas Island and build and live. Apocryphal perhaps and part of Ben Booth's statistical data: Moran lived another thirty-eight years.

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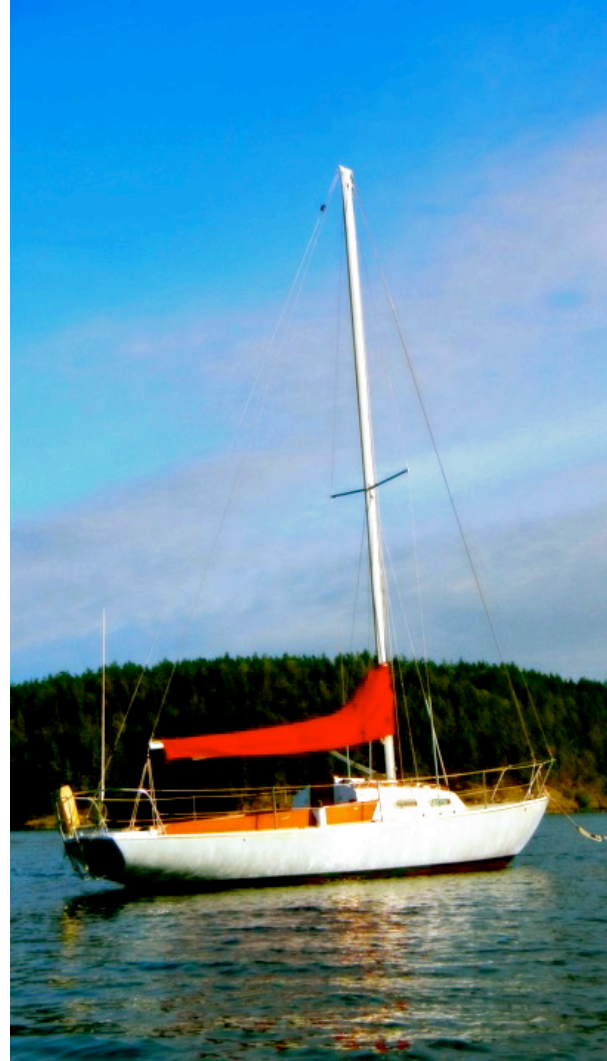
Once back in Obstruction Pass we moored the boat, meticulously enclosed its sails, left Anne to check with finality that everything was clean, packed and safe for the next voyager, and carefully



boarded the dingy. Ben Booth was off doing something nautical, his confidence in our acting responsibly with “Pilgrim” assured ten hours earlier.

Rosario awaited. We decided on shell filled oysters and clams cascading in succulent light cream sauce seasoned slightly with garlic and tarragon, with tender, locally grown mushrooms at base and served with crispy-grained bread. Moran family photographs lined the walls and a grand piano stood available in the vestibule that Steve later engaged skillfully. The interior’s Arts and Crafts motif - wood framed doors and windows, subtle colors, and cedar floors – provided a settled backdrop for our earned view out the restaurant’s sweeping window of melting red and blue chipped sunlight spreading onto the cold sound and into the horizon.

First the toast. Glasses rose. The wine was a red-grape blend from Washington State that Anne ordered especially. In our weariness we sipped it slowly knowing we’d done what we planned without mishap, our friendship defined further in adventure, and, with reflection, we had stories to tell.



*Pilgrim awaiting*