



Willful Blindness

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Chapter 2

Sailing to Ireland

Sophia's Log, June 1, 1992

We sailed with the tide slightly after 9:00 p.m., destination Kinsale, Ireland. At our average rate of speed between 8 and 10 knots, I expect our 2,000-mile trip to take around fourteen days, weather-dependent. Our weatherman predicts calm conditions for the first week. And since we will be speaking to him daily, we will know if any gales are heading our way.

I am not up for a wild wet ride, so here's to a mild weather passage. A friend of mine once said that sailing across the ocean was tedium upon boredom interspersed with moments of sheer terror. I want boredom for this trip. I expect this to be my voyage of self-discovery.

First night out, and I have the first watch: 10:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m. We have a rotating watch system that puts teams of two on deck at night from 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m., then a single person on deck for six hours each from 6:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m.

Brenton light is fading into the distance as my first watch ends. Eight hours of sleep before I am back on deck. All is calm. The stars are bright.

June 2, 1992, Day 2—Cape Cod Bay headed toward Nova Scotia.

We sailed through the Cape Cod Canal at daybreak. We were supposed to motor through the canal, because the wind was behind us, so we sailed with the engine in neutral.

Presently heading east-northeast along the great circle route, the shortest distance, to our destination. The breeze is a warm southerly as we head toward the Grand Banks followed by a pod of gray whales. Hopefully, I got a good photo of the tail as they dove.

We are settling into a rhythm. I awoke startled for my 4:00 a.m. watch. My old dream about Sean O'Neil has returned. It played like an endless loop in my mind for eight hours, so I don't feel very rested.

This is the dream I usually have when my life is crazy, or when I am depressed or sad. I have had it since I was seventeen. I can always see him clearly, a tall, handsome, black-haired Irishman with dark eyes. While I have known him since I was ten years old, I have not seen him for at least a decade. Today my childhood in California seems like a world away. However, the dream served to remind me that I have some serious thinking and decisions to make over the next couple of weeks. I promised myself I would begin enacting my reinvention plan when I land in Ireland.

During the day, everyone tried their hand at fishing, but only once did they catch anything—a large tuna that provided dinner and sushi for all on board. We even had soy sauce and wasabi on board, and I even knew where to find it.

Day 4—On watch heading toward Sable Island

Noon to 6:00 p.m. watch, coming up onto the Sable Bank, about fifteen miles to the south of the notorious shifting sands of Sable Island. We are approximately sixty miles from Halifax, Nova Scotia. Winds are light, seas are confused, and the fog is heavy. We received our first daily weather report this morning on the SSB. Bill Wren says the fog should lift by late afternoon. No news or word from home. Bill called Edward, but he didn't answer, so he left a message.

A pod of dolphins is following us, playing in our wake. They are so joyful. They always look like they are smiling. That must be why they are so comforting to have around.

But... my mind is not on the dolphins; it's on the damn dream.

The pea-soup fog finally broke around sunset. After my watch, I stayed on deck, watching the stars rise as the Sable Island lighthouse faded behind us into the night. We will not see another lighthouse until we reach the coast of Ireland, about ten days away. I hope all we will see for the next ten days are blue skies and indigo seas.

Day 5—Off the South Coast of Newfoundland in the Labrador Sea

It is time to worry about sighting icebergs, especially at night! Bill says we are well below the last known berg position. He is now checking in twice a day. The wind is about 15 knots, reaching along our course with the boat speed around 10 knots. Still no word from home. I would have thought Edward would have checked in at least once.

We keep trying to catch another fish, but after that first tuna, they have been

elusive. Davy, the engineer, is extremely frustrated, so the crew attached a can of tuna to the line yesterday. He took it in good stride when he pulled up the can.

Today was my first day cooking. On the menu: mushroom soup made with dried mushrooms and long-life milk for lunch, then a round of bread baking and beef stew for dinner. I made the soup in our pressure cooker. I have a love-hate relationship with this machine. I love the results but hate removing the lid after it has been under pressure. Bread was from a bread mix and baked in the oven. The entire crew has quickly gotten very good at making our daily bread. It is the end of the day, and I have climbed into my bunk, ready for six hours of sleep.

Cooking sideways is never easy.

Day 6—Cape Race, Newfoundland, North Atlantic

We still have clear skies and a moderate 15-knot breeze. Bill says it will last for days. Still watching for icebergs. I have the 6:00 p.m. till 10:00 p.m. watch tonight, which gave me a brilliant view of the northern lights. They look like fireworks in the sky. Damn, last night I dreamed about Sean again. I was back at my mother's funeral, and he was standing in the back of the church. He looked like a sea captain pacing the bridge of a ship. Sometimes I wonder if that image is really a mirage. We never spoke.

Day 7—South of Greenland

Today was the saddest day I have ever spent on the ocean. Around dawn, we came across

a pod, maybe thirty sperm whales slowly making their way northeast.

At first, we were amazed and a little frightened that they let us sail so very close without diving. Then, as we sailed in among them, we discovered why.

A small group of four whales was trying to swim, sometimes dive, but were completely entangled in ghost gear. Old fishing lines and ropes were wrapped around the bodies of the two large whales in the center, while the two outer whales were connected by a rope around their dorsal fins.

We followed them for over three hours, trying to discern a way to release them. They wouldn't let us come close enough to touch the line. Our inflatable dinghy and outboard engine was stowed below, so we had no way to get close enough to help free them from the line. The crew discussed swimming, but without wet suits and the proper flotation gear, the water temperature would not have allowed us enough time to free the lines. The two outer calves were almost as large as our boat, and one flick of their tail would have rendered a swimmer unconscious. I vetoed the swimming idea quickly.

Sometimes one of the big center calves would start to sink into the water, and the outer ones would float it up. Then they would try to dive, pulling the others down with them and getting them all more tangled in the process.

We knew that our lack of ability to cut the lines had doomed the whales to eventual death—that in the end they would run out of energy, being unable to eat, and finally, maybe months from now, would drown. Just thinking about it made me cry.

Slowly, over about an hour's time, the rest of the pod turned their injured mates so

they were all heading off to the north and away from us. Their plaintive cries echoed across the water for hours. Simply heartbreaking.

No news from home today. I wonder why Edward has not called Bill even once since we left Newport. It has been an entire week.

Day 8 —North Atlantic

A little cold and dreary today. Nothing significant to report. I guess Edward is too busy with his female clients to call and check in. And what does that tell you, Sophia?

Day 9—Life at Sea

Today the wind and seas kicked in—20 knots on the beam and ten-foot waves. Everyone needed to hand-steer; the seas were a bit much for Auto von Helm. It was exhilarating. We are surfing down waves at 12 knots and are still on course for Ireland. Bill says this system will die out soon, but we may have even bigger weather coming in a few days. He has left several messages for Edward but has no word from home yet.

I have managed to break my glasses. They are marginally held together with duct tape. Looks pretty goofy and not great for my consistently poor vision.

Day 10—Eastern North Atlantic

Last night the dream returned. Only this time, we were in Ireland. I felt as if some unexplainable force had been pulling me toward him again. It was a silly dream, really.

He had become a duke with a big run-down house. We married, and I became a duchess. Basically, this version was a princess story straight from the pages of a Danielle Steel novel. Maybe it was because I just finished reading Five Days in Paris. This dream really has become an obsession.

Bill is predicting a big gale within twelve hours. Time to shorten sail and get ready for forty-eight hours of a rough sail.

Still no news from home.

Day 11—The Gale

Tonight was the first time at sea I truly believed I would die. In hindsight I am certain death was closer than any of us realized.

We were three days out from Ireland, I was on the mid-watch—midnight to four—and my little yacht was crawling and crashing upwind in the predicted force 8 gale. I was tethered to the boat, wearing a full flotation suit, when I heard and felt a loud rumble over the noise of the wind. Looking forward, I saw a flash of something silver, but it was gone too quickly for me to see what it was.

Yelling for all hands, I crash-tacked the boat. Everyone raced on deck just in time to see a white shipping container sliding down along our port side. The logo on the side was clear: Aratex Shipping.

The rumble I heard and the vibration I felt could only have come from the propeller of a ship rotating out of the water. It couldn't have been ours because our

engine was off, and the fact that I could hear it over the screaming wind meant it was far too close. If any container ship was close enough for me to hear it, a collision was imminent.

I continued to focus on the now difficult job of steering the yacht safely through the waves. The rest of the evening, we all stayed up to keep a lookout at the mast, dressed in full flotation suits and life vests.

As the wind abated and other crew took the helm, I finally had time to think about the container. That container could have sunk us. It was floating high in the water, so it had yet to fill with water. It must have only recently fallen from the ship that was carrying it. Considering the proximity of the container, coupled with that awful rumble, we had very narrowly avoided catastrophe.

Now it is the next day. With everyone's emotions running high, the gale has abated, and the sun finally has broken through a blanket of gray clouds. Time to get to shore.

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