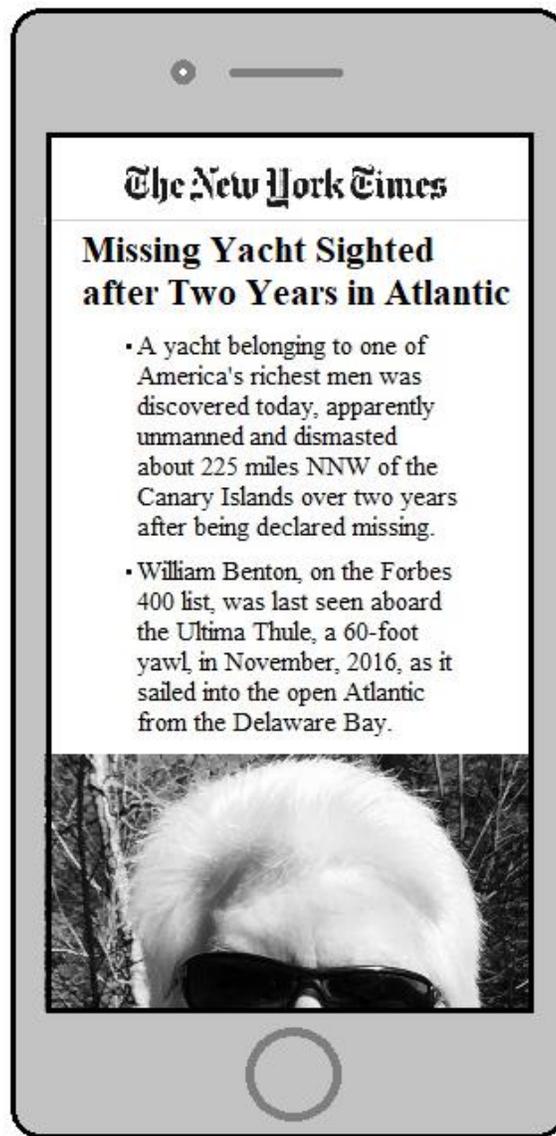


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24 Minutes

*Ultima Thule! Utmost Isle!
Here in thy harbors for a while
We lower our sails: a while we rest
From the unending endless quest.ⁱ*



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Prologue ...

from: William Benton <ultima.thule@gmail.com>
to: Rebecca Macey <beccam@msn.com>
date: **Fri, October 28, 2015** at 10:49 AM
subject: Catching Up

Dear Becca...

Thinking of you, as I regularly do, and as often happens, it leads me to bouts of whining introspection about how I might have done things differently and been more than a paternal asterisk to your full life. Still no answers to that one.

As you know, I've spent over sixty years on the water—a bit longer than you've been alive—in vessels huge and vessels insignificant, sometimes as crew, sometimes as skipper, but in the months since our revelatory reunion in NYC and your return to Port Townsend, I seem to prefer sitting landside, gazing. At the Atlantic. Ebbing, surging, never at rest. Like my soul.

Part of me yearns to be on that heaving universe; another part of me yearns to disappear into its depths where the emotional and physical pains that accrue to almost eight decades of living would end. Yet another part of me, the part of me that retains some authority over my will, knows the power to end life at my age is seductive, but for me, the seduction is much more daydream than reality.

It seems to me that all my life I've thought of myself as bold and courageous, but it has begun to occur to me—usually after a third dose of Jack Daniels—that the valiant man I assumed I was, has in fact been a boy desperately afraid of the deep abyss of whatever tomorrow will bring, a boy who has been guided by the erroneous belief that bold decisions keep vessels afloat, but I'm finding it ever more difficult to maintain that subterfuge. I'm beginning to understand that, for most of my life, my deepest fear has been not meeting the expectations of others. For all these years, I've been running away from those expectations, distracting myself from them by looking for and running after the next bold decision.

Perhaps I'm becoming wise, but I doubt it. I think I'm just becoming weary.

And because I'm weary, I get angry at stupid things, like old people (who may be younger than me!) spouting mindless dribble at checkout counters to cashiers who don't give a damn. I get angry at cable news anchors and have stopped watching newscasts because these men and women clearly delight in scaring the crap out of us 24/7. They are, without a doubt, the world's most effective terrorists. I don't need their damned bullshit because I have terror enough about dementia overtaking me and leaving me anchored to a bed, a victim of underpaid,

poorly trained, and uncaring caregivers who will tend to me like a Dickensian foundling as we all wait for my body to fail, day after monotonous day.

Diverting me from that fear is the spirit of you whispering into my ear. It has drawn me to the bench on which I sit, laboriously punching this email into my tablet on this chilly October day, high on the battered Great Dune at Herring Point a week after a strong Nor'easter.

I have begun going through notebooks analogous to ship's logs into which I have contributed entries during most of my life. Maybe the hours I spend revisiting episodes from my life will delay the specter of dementia. Maybe not. Maybe a massive stroke or heart attack will save me from the indifferent hands of caregivers, legacy be damned. Too many maybes.

I'm laughing at the thought of you reading this email, this leagues-long email, given your propensity to send me three-sentence versions, but you see I was always a letter-writer. I know you're old enough to remember letters even though you have the predilections of a much younger generation, but I don't think you ever had the opportunity to connect with someone prompted by longing and magnified by distances that letters shortened, long letters written in the dark of night on board a vessel plowing through the alien landscape of a rolling sea, as did I.

I wrote those letters to your mother, long, pithy, emotion-laden letters of love and regret, piled deep with philosophies that my isolation deluded me into believing touched the truths of eternity. How I would love to have those letters in hand, to reread them with the hope of discovering nuggets of truths I have forgotten. The distance of years has made a fantasy of my younger years, an idyllic world that draws me to it, that makes me want to share the content of the logs with you, which is compounded by the further delusion that somehow it will help you understand me better. I know that "understand" is code for forgive, and while I do know that you have, to a remarkable degree, forgiven me my dereliction of duty as a father, I think I'm hoping that going back over my life's voyage may, somehow, allow me to forgive myself.

As I have begun reading the logs, and informed by some of the reading I've done over the past twenty years, I've come to discover that my memories, when compared to what I had recorded contemporaneously, are often inaccurate, formed as they are by that part of the brain that processes dreams, which means that what I have recalled over the years as remembered fact is, in fact, artifact, "memories" that contain as much subconsciously-generated symbolism comingled with what actually happened. I am coming to think of memory as being analogous to the imagery created by an impressionist's adeptness, with comprehension based upon each person's unique interpretations of the artist's brush strokes.

If only your mother had not been a hoarder, my letters to her, unrecognized among piles and piles of paper, might have survived the

cleaning out of her house after she passed. But then, she might never have saved them, might have jettisoned them in a pique of resentment as did I jettison all evidence of her one silent, lonely night in the South Pacific. Had you those long letters in hand, hers and mine, you would have the better truth of your origins in our passion for each other, and not have to glean truths from my likely self-serving entries in the logs or from imperfect recollections I have shared and will likely continue to share with you.

While there is the delusion of hoped for understanding and forgiveness to motivate me, another appeal of this exercise of going through the logs has been to provide some better sense, perhaps, of why your life began as it did. I want to convey to you in as palatable a way as I can, the joy and pain, the love and hate, that propelled me through life. Maybe when I drop anchor on this unending, endless quest, I will finally understand whatever the hell it is that has been the point of it all. Maybe what I share with you will help you to do the same.

Love, Billy

Sent from my iPad

* * *

from: Rebecca Macey <beccam@msn.com>
to: William Benton <ultima.thule@gmail.com>
date: Sat, October 29, 2015 at 8:00 AM
subject: re: Catching Up

Billy, you've given new meaning to the word verbose!;>)
Love, Becca

Sent from my iPhone

* * *

from: Rebecca Macey <beccam@msn.com>
to: William Benton <ultima.thule@gmail.com>
date: Sat, October 29, 2015 at 8:44 AM
subject: re: Catching Up

I read your email again. Made me cry thinking of mom. After all these years, I still miss her more than you can ever imagine. I'm starting to miss you too, maybe even worry a little about you. Go figure. Don't know if I ever knew you well enough to have something to miss or worry about, but maybe I should. Come spend some time with me in PT. Love, Becca

Sent from my iPhone

* * *

from: William Benton <ultima.thule@gmail.com>
to: Rebecca Macey <beccam@msn.com>
date: Sat, October 29, 2015 at 8:59 AM
subject: re: re: Catching Up

Dear Becca...

I WILL come to see you! Haven't been in PT for a long, long time, but you know that. The new framing on my Lewes house is nearly complete and the decorating should be done by the end of March. How does April sound? And I have another idea. I have to get the boat to Southwest Harbor for a refit. I've hired crew to get her up there in June. If you can get away, we could spend a couple weeks in September and October in Maine, all on me, and then you and I could sail her back to Lewes...if we don't kill each other first! Although we did do okay in Manhattan this summer, didn't we? And most of that time was getting you up to speed on my financial affairs! I would absolutely love to spend as much quality, finance-free time with you as possible. Life is short. Let's fill the void before I'm a goner. What say ye oh daughter of mine?

One other thing: I wouldn't be honest if I said I missed your mom because by the time she passed, we had been apart for too long and too much muddy water had passed under our particular bridge, but I have never stopped missing the magic we had in those early years. We were both so in love with each other, with you, and with life and adventure. Shit happens, as she used to say, and in our case there came a time when there was a lot more of it than there was good stuff. But I want you to know there is no mistaking that the memories I have of her in those first years are the memories of someone who was then and remains the love of my life. It was that love that brought you aboard. I can only imagine how much you must miss her.

Love, Billy

Sent from my iPad

* * *

from: William Benton <ultima.thule@gmail.com>
to: Rebecca Macey <beccam@msn.com>
date: Tue, November 1, 2015 at 8:59 AM
subject: Re: Re: Catching Up

You still there?

Sent from my iPhone

* * *

from: Rebecca Macey <beccam@msn.com>
to: William Benton <ultima.thule@gmail.com>
date: Sat, November 5, 2015 at 10:13 AM
subject: Sorry

Hi Billy. Sitting with my laptop and a cup of coffee at Sunrise Coffee Co and feeling guilty about not responding sooner. Nothing personal. Well, not exactly true. I guess your invite to Maine et al was a bit overwhelming. It's a lot of days of just you and me after a lot of years of just me, and at first, thinking about spending all that time with you, I think I was feeling a little disloyal to mom. But I talked it over with Ellie and a couple of other friends, drank some good wine, and finally told my inner child to cut me some slack. Truth is, I think I'm beginning to like the fact that you're my father, and I think I'd like to get to know you better. Like you said, life is short (unlike your emails, although this is getting long for me!:>). Let's play it by ear. Come out for a few weeks in April, stay at the B&B, and let's see how we get along. If all goes well, then I'm in. If not, we're grownups, right? We'll figure out what kind of relationship the two of us will have, Maine or no Maine, okay? Love, Becca.

Sent from my iPad

* * *

9,324 Minutes ...

It is midafternoon at the mouth of the Delaware Bay, six days before the 2016 Presidential Election, which is beginning to appear as though its outcome is no longer a foregone conclusion. Far removed at many levels from that—to me—unpleasant possibility, the *Ultima Thule*, my sixty-foot-long, steel-hulled yacht, is gliding across a very flat sea on which an eight-knot southeasterly breeze has raised millions of wavelets that disappear in the near distance of the deep, white fog that engulfs us. The yawl's three sails are painted with tens of thousands of beads of moisture from the fog, beads that join to form rivulets, which travel down the computer-cut and stitched Dacron sail panels to the foot of each sail, from which a few dozen tiny streams of water pour onto the teak deck: some have poured onto my head. What is happening on the sails is also happening on the surface of my orange foul weather gear, but not on the gear my daughter, Becca, is wearing because she is sitting under the dodger in the starboard forward corner of the center cockpit.

I look at the newly-installed and large radar screen mounted next to the companionway hatch and see several targets or blips glow when the sweep passes their locations. Three of them do not change location during the interval of the sweep: these are likely ships in the anchorage area west of Brown Shoal waiting for room to offload further up the Delaware. The locations of other targets are changing with each sweep: two of these blips are no doubt Cape May/Lewes ferries that will pass each other in mid-bay; another blip is a tanker or freighter moving down bay about two miles northwest of us—she will be up to us soon enough. Yet another target approaching from the southeast is likely another cargo ship about two miles from the imaginary boundary between the Bay and the Atlantic, and a final blip is something moving into the Atlantic at high speed near the Harbor of Refuge lighthouse.

“Pilot boat,” I mutter to myself.

“What’s that, Billy?” my solitary crew asks.

I raise my voice and repeat, “Pilot boat,” punctuated by a nod toward the radar screen.

“Okay,” she says, her inexperience allowing her to be unperturbed about being in the middle of a busy waterway being crisscrossed by massive vessels that neither she nor any of the skippers can see with their naked eyes.

As have I, Becca has removed her watch cap and opened up her jacket because the air temperature is unexpectedly warm for this time of year and moisture-laden, which explains the fog over the much cooler water. With our long white hair blowing slightly in the light breeze, our ice-blue eyes, and the bib trousers we are wearing over navy-blue fisherman turtlenecks, we are something of a matched set. Of course, there are some obvious differences between us—my goatee, her much longer hair, our ages and genders—but we have become something of an odd couple over the past weeks, which is something that fills these old bones with pride. I keep that to myself, like I have begun to do with a lot of thoughts that float into my consciousness. Becca has made it clear—early on during our time in Manhattan the previous summer—that I could

dispense with the running commentary I had not realized was spewing from my mouth without end.

“Jesus, Billy. I don’t need to know every fucking thing that pops into your cortex,” she had declared after I had shared one thing too many. “It’s like whatever’s in your mind just drops onto your tongue and *bluck*, out it comes!”

I had laughed, but her words hurt. And I stayed hurt for a little while until that aforementioned cortex of mine had sufficient time to reflect. I remembered that I did have a filter once upon a time, something that drove Becca’s mother to someone else, someone who knew how to be open and honest about his feelings, but for years, having been without a regular companion prior to meeting up with Becca in NYC, I guess I had gotten into the habit, when I was by myself and feeling lonely, of commenting out loud, telling the vapors about what I liked, what pissed me off, what I needed to remember.

Being with Becca—who seemed to enjoy my company in NYC and who seems to still enjoy it—juiced me up and got my gray matter roiling. Problem was, in Manhattan, no less than now, thoughts were flying around inside my head, thoughts trivial and some not, and just like Becca had said, every one of those thoughts seemed to be flying out of my mouth.

Anyone who has spent long periods of time at sea knows there are few phenomena more torturous than a non-stop talker within the confines of a boat. It isn’t long before he’s told you everything he knows twice, and the third and following iterations get old really fast. And there I was, knowing what I knew about blathering, being called out for being a goddamned talker.

I came to look at being chastised by Becca as a gift and soon settled into, and have maintained, what I think has been a healthy reticence. I do not hold back when there is something that needs to be said. I am just more judicious about what is important and what is not. It has proved easy enough to do because that had been my *modus operandi* when I was a younger man and held positions of appreciable power and authority. In those years, I learned that the less one said, the better. I am not sure how or why I had forgotten this. Surely such forgetfulness is a consequence of aging.

Becca is like her mother, I have learned, with the maddening capacity to peer through the veneer of “me” and into my soul. And she has her mother’s ability to be silent when the world is silent—peaceful moments like now as we glide through a blanket of white stillness—and the discipline to resist what seems to be the human penchant to fill silence with the, to some, comforting but meaningless chatter typical of the primates we are.

I think about how many times I have ghosted through fog in my life, literally and figuratively, including way too many times coming back from Maine this fall. I could have waited for this particular fog to lift—the lonely Coast Guard Commander who bought me a bourbon at The Lobster House the previous night in Cape May said he expected we would only be socked in for another day—but I was itching to get back to the place my soul has learned to call home: good old Lewes. Or perhaps I want to show off my navigational skills for my daughter.

I suspect she is looking at me and glance at her. My eyes lock into hers and she smiles.

“You love this don’t you?” she asks.

“Love what?”

“Being in the middle of this white mess and guessing where in the hell you are.”

“I know exactly where I am.”

“So you say, but I’ll never get comfortable with you relying on that radar. What happens if it goes on the fritz?”

“I’ll shit my pants,” I answer, and we both laugh. “You know I’ve done this a lot in my long life, girlfriend, although I gotta say, it wasn’t easy back before I had radar installed. Lotta guesswork and a lotta luck in those days.”

A shape looms out of the fog about three-quarters of a mile away, and it is proceeding at a good clip. I nod toward the loom and Becca follows my gaze.

“Jesus. She’s really moving, isn’t she?” she asks.

“They usually do.”

Becca and I watch as the loom becomes a ship over seven-hundred-feet-long, piled high with hundreds of containers. It disappears back into the white in what feels like seconds, although I know the duration was closer to five minutes, which was more than a sufficient interval to read **PINGTADA** painted in massive white letters on the ship’s dark blue hull.

Becca turns to me with almost childlike enthusiasm and declares, “That’s one of *yours*, Billy!”

“It is,” I confirm.

“That is too *cool*!”

“It’ll be one of yours someday,” I say in a matter-of-fact way as I check the compass and the trim of the sails.

I glance at Becca who is watching the ship disappear into the fog, and I wonder how she feels about stepping into the shoes of the majority shareholder and founder of Pinctada Holdings, Inc., which holds the majority of shares in Pinctada Shipping International, but now does not feel like a good time to ask. I need to concentrate on what I am doing as helmsman.

...

ⁱ From *Ultima Thule* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow