

Excerpt: Wave and Whirlwind by Jeff Lee © 2019

When aboard a large yacht, blanketed by a cold black night and reaching in a steady wind at near hull speed, it feels as if one is flying through space and not floating upon a living sea. The illusion exhilarates, impassions and inspires. At such times, there is little said among shipmates, the bond of camaraderie being born without saying, and on such nights, a sailor may feel like a solitary and insignificant fleck of earthbound stardust beneath the infinite stars that fill the blue-black sky, which spreads from horizon to horizon.

The constant, yet ever unique, gurgling of waves parted by a racing hull assaults the ears; you see waves rushing by with the breathtaking but illusory speed alluded to; there are rattling whispers in the rigging and canvas caused by the wind. Rare sprinkles of light appear against the sky or the black silhouettes of mountains that ring sections of the horizon: red and green lighted buoys, and lights in windows from distant and sleeping towns. Even more rare are navigation lights on boats, large and small, a very few of which at this time of year are sharing the sea with the two comrades aboard Serenity.

Try as they might, lights and silhouettes and thoughts do not deter Bill's attention from locating the flashing green light at the southern end of the Salmon Bank, which flanks the course he will steer as he approaches the southern entrance to the San Juan Channel. If the tidal currents and direction of the wind, which has not slackened since the big yawl entered Admiralty Inlet, had cooperated, Bill knows the thirty nautical miles between Port Townsend and Friday Harbor would have been crossed by Serenity in as little as four hours.

Bill also knows it is nature's unanticipated obstinacy that presents the challenges sailors seek, the challenges he welcomes. The north-northwest wind on this evening has caused him to take a long tack due west into the Strait, which has added appreciable time to the sail. Now on port tack in what has been a steady, fifteen-knot breeze, Serenity, with the reef shaken out of the main, is moving a bit over ten knots, which should put her off the entrance to the San Juan Channel near to eleven o'clock.

He intends to crank up the diesel to travel through the half-mile gap between the San Juan and Lopez islands, where tidal currents can be significant and where winds can eddy and surprise. With a crew new to sailing, Bill knows he cannot rely upon her having an experienced sailor's instant understanding of what to do in response to what

he knows could be capricious winds, which are easily seen on the surface of the water in daylight but are difficult to detect at night. These thoughts had mingled with many others during the hours prior to leaving the Boat Haven, and hours later, he is certain that relying upon Serenity's diesel will be the prudent option.

His novice crew is nestled into the forward and starboard corner of the cockpit beneath Serenity's dodger with her knees hugged to her chest. Her calm demeanor has had a mollifying effect on him, he knows, and has allowed him to go about a skipper's business of worrying about the other she, the twenty-nine ton she, upon whom he and Bambi must depend.

For an interminable amount of time, Bambi has been staring into the night sky beyond where he sits on the helmsman's seat, but when he glances her way, he sees she is now staring at him. When their eyes meet, she smiles, her face framed by watch cap and hood but visible in the dim red glow of the binnacle light.

"You're not running away," she says. "You may think you are, but you're not."

"Pardon?"

"You're really running *to* this," she says with an open sweep of her gloved hands. "If I knew this was out here, I'd have been looking for the first excuse I could find to make this my world. My behind, and every other part of me, feels frozen, but it doesn't matter. I've never felt so...so...What's a good word, Billy? I'm not the only one on this boat who likes words."

Bill smiles in acknowledgement of her observation, along with a concurrent realization that it is unlikely there will be any more Thursday nights devoted to studying for Friday vocab tests.

"How about delusional?" he replies.

"Very funny. Come on smarty-pants, use that head for something other than a hat rack."

Bill smiles and stares at her. The word that arises did happen to be on a recent vocab list, but what is in his heart is not the definition. It is the feeling.

"Euphoric?" he offers in the same way he might have cast a possible response to a teacher's query.

"Euphoric," Bambi repeats. "I like it. Euphoric. It *is* how I feel."

"Not giddy?"

"Very funny."

“Not every night is like this,” Bill responds. “I’ve never been out at night in weather like I was in last week. If this night had weather like that, I think I’d be anything but euphoric.”

Again, she spreads her hands and says, “But you know this *exists*, that there are *going* to be nights like this. We can wake up every morning knowing that maybe that day will end with a night just like this one. God, this is amazing, don’t you think?”

“There’s something else pretty amazing out here,” he says as he looks into her eyes.

“Billy B, are you making love to me?”

Bambi laughs when she sees that her question has stifled him.

“How much longer, Billy?”

“Come here,” he replies with a pat on the seat next to him.

Bambi navigates the heeling cockpit floor, sits to windward of him behind the wheel, hooks her right arm around his waist, and pulls him close.

“Look dead ahead,” he says. “Look for a blinking green light.”

“There,” she says when a light flashes on the horizon.

“There,” he confirms. “We’re headed for that light.”

“Because?”

“Because that marks a bank near the entrance to the San Juan Channel.”

“Which we need to find,” Bambi says.

“If we’re going to spend tonight in Friday Harbor.”

“There it goes again,” she says.

“Every four seconds.”

Bambi counts to herself—one-thousand-one, one-thousand-two, one-thousand-three, one-thousand-four—and is rewarded by a green flash.

“You got that off the chart,” she says.

“I did,” Bill replies. “In a few minutes, I’m going to turn on the motor and turn the helm over to you so I can drop the sails.”

“Are we that close?”

“Pretty near, but we’ll want to take our time once we get into the channel. I’ve done this before, twice at night, so I know where I’m going, but somebody else was at the helm both times.”

“George.”

“George,” Bill confirms.

“Poor George,” Bambi says with sincerity.

“He’d be proud of us, you and me, bringing his lady into port, two kids who he’d say were still wet behind the ears.”

“Adults underestimate us all the time,” she says.

“Time for you, Brittany Alistair Macey, to exceed their expectations; time to take the helm.”

“You like my name, don’t you?”

“Don’t you?” he asks.

Bambi laughs, takes the wheel, and says, “Stay on the beacon, right?”

“Aye, aye skipper, but don’t hit it,” Bill chuckles. “Here goes,” he says as he flips on the engine compartment blower.

Bill lets the fan work for a time before he pushes the glow plug button, which he holds for a minute and then continues to hold it as he turns a key, which he holds for a few seconds as the engine cranks. A heartening rumble tells him the engine has started on the first try, a good omen, he thinks, as he releases the key. The oil pressure light goes out. Check one, he thinks. He verifies that the voltmeter is reading thirteen volts. Check two.

After the motor has been running for a few minutes, he asks, “You doing okay?”

“Perfect,” is the response.

“Good. I’m going to engage the prop,” which he does. “Take her straight into the wind and keep her there, okay?”

“Got it.”

“Just give it enough throttle to keep us into the wind.”

“Done,” Bambi says, and the thunder of luffing sails confirms when it is done.

Bambi had told him she knew her way around boats, and the past hours have proven it to his satisfaction. There have been several times in the early part of the evening’s cruise when she encountered novel things related to sail handling because her prior experience had been on the Albatross and smaller power boats, but each time she was unsure of something, she had asked a question, each one a good question, Bill concedes. And she has responded to what she has needed to do with enthusiasm and proficiency.

Bill admits to himself that he had doubts about her competence as he contemplated what, until now, he had thought of as their escape, but as he lowers and secures the sails, his recurring thoughts focus not on doubts but on the revelation that

this crew, this partner, will be able to pull her share of the load when circumstances demand she do so.

Is this an escape or is it a commencement, he wonders? Has some part of him known that this is the life he is destined to lead, a life traveling the seas, a life at odds with the expectations of a mother who wants him to go to college and become a doctor, at odds with the expectations of a town still rejoicing at his return from Seattle because they believe he will lift their teams and give each citizen a reason to be proud? As he flakes the mizzen sail, the last of the three to be lowered, he is awakening to the possibility that living on this boat and discovering a greater world subject to the whims of wind and current is his destiny.

“Time will tell,” Bill whispers to himself as he finishes securing the mizzen sail to the boom.

He looks forward to the center cockpit where a stalwart helmsman holds the Serenity into the wind.

“You done?” Bambi shouts over her shoulder.

“Done,” is his response.

“Head for the beacon?” she asks.

“The beacon,” he replies with a smile. “Keep it well to port.”

“Will do,” Bambi says as Serenity begins to swing toward the north.

There is something else to which he is awakening, the possibility that he wants his life’s voyage to be accompanied by the brave, beautiful, and competent person who is steering Serenity toward the San Juan Channel.