

WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY, JR.
AIRBORNE



A Sentimental Journey

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For
Kathleen ("Bill") Taylor Finucane

"Bill F., bless her, undertook the provisioning. I honestly doubt anyone else could have done so marvelously what she has. She is always cheery, forever spending dollars for our food and never, never, never have I met a more determined or lovely lady." (From Danny's Journal).

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Stamford, Connecticut
June 1, 1976

W.F.B.



Cyrano's bowsprit, reflected in Danny's Elton John superreflecting red, white, and blue sunglasses.

PROLOGUE

It is one twenty-five in the morning. Moreover, it is one twenty-five *because I say it is one twenty-five*. I *could* have announced, after taking my noon sight, that we would all advance our watches by one hour; and so would it be, like an act of Congress establishing daylight saving time. Or—that we would put back our watches by one hour. I'd have said something slightly esoteric about the advantage just here, a few hundred miles from the Azores, of slipping back from daylight time. Naked Power. To be sure, in less than three days I had to produce the Azores. Bermuda had materialized just about when I said it would. And every day save one of the eight days since slipping out of Bermuda into a rough northwesterly, there had been sun. The fine-tuning in navigation comes when you are *very* near to land, which is not yet. Then you need more frequent sights, including star sights, and electronic help. We have no electronic help, except an anaemic old radio direction finder. Oh, sure, we have the equipment. But the two-year-old radar isn't working. The one-week-old loran isn't working. I am not in the least concerned.

Something else concerns me. I spoke sharply to my son when he and Danny relieved my watch. It is pitchy tonight, we are close-hauled, and the rule is that in such circumstances you reach for your lifebelt immediately on coming on deck. His wasn't on. I told him to fetch it, and he replied in his relax-dad-old-shoe-all-in-due-course tone of voice.

I let him have it. In the presence of Danny. I think back, try to remember. He is twenty-two. Have I spoken to him sharply three times in his life, or was it only twice? My father raised his voice

with me twice (his hand, never), and he might as well have loosed a bolt of lightning into my soul. Had I done that just now to Christopher? I wondered, anxious. I reach for my plastic glass of grapefruit juice and vodka, nestling securely in the chrome ring bracket adjacent to the wash basin, level with my head, which is propped up on two pillows. I sip, letting my hardback notebook lie on my stomach, and turn my head and look out through what I used to call a porthole, until learning that the little rectangular kind that do not open are called nose ports. I had six installed throughout the boat when I bought her seven years ago, to the dismay of the hovering naval architect who kept lecturing me about the integrity of the hull until, finally, I unleashed Reggie on him; Reggie, soft-spoken, imperturbable Reggie, who will let anyone get away with any asseveration in his presence, only provided (a) that no blot is left on his friends, and (b) that there is no inexactitude committed in respect of plastics, about which they taught him twenty-five years ago at MIT at the infancy of a science which he has made his own. Reggie prescribed a formula for a nose port you cannot drive an acetylene torch through—perhaps he used a more modest metaphor; and when on a run to Bermuda, after seven years' satisfaction, I bolted out of my cabin in the middle of the night and summoned him from his sleep, in the cockpit section above, to show him the jigger of water that had accumulated in the well between my nose and the nose port, wondering whether the whole plate might be insecure, ready to flap loose and out and sink the craft, he calmly applied a little putty—a 30-second round trip to the engine room—and the leak stopped. I complained while I was at it that the glass was getting a little milky, and asked had MIT come up with a solvent that would reprimstinate my nose port, so that I might gaze right through the waves to the moon and stars without any sense of looking through a veil? Reggie said that such a solvent exists and was on board: tooth paste. "Any tooth paste?" I struggled to regain my composure.

It worked, of course, and now I can see the moon's light skittering like those honor-guard dolphins that see you into port, along the extended waves, feisty, here and there responding to the fitful wind from the northeast. Our sails are strapped tight, but we can't make course. Danny and Christopher have put on a little power (that is the

rule: at night, when the speed under sail drops below seven knots), and the boat has steadied down on a light heel and only about a third of my nose port is under water at the moments of maximum heel, once or twice per minute.

The reading light above my head is lit—it sits over a (narrow) double bed, all mine on this trip. I keep my reading glasses in the well, and my paperback; I'll read a bit before going to sleep, after finishing with the notebook. This is my long-sleep—I am not on duty again until eight. I stretch out in the fresh sheets Augustino the Argentinian steward laid on this morning. If I raise my head more than four inches, I come up against the porcelain-smooth white underside of the deck. If I move my toes up six inches, I come up against a large ledge that stretches right across the bunk, from the hull on my left to the hanging locker: I have there more books on the sea and on navigation than I'll read. It is hard to see, past the glare of my reading light, more than the outlines of the deep ledge that runs from the hull across the top of the hanging locker to the bulkhead that, with its sliding venetian door, gives me my privacy. But I know exactly what is on it: the sweater and pants for instant action, the cap for when it is very windy or stormy, the dark glasses, extra books, my sextant, my HP-65 computer and its paraphernalia, my wallet, an extra blanket. In the locker, a single blazer and grey-flannel city-pants (for use in Bermuda and, perhaps, the Azores—Pat, with her reliable ingenuity, will bring me an onshore wardrobe when we meet in Marbella); a terry-cloth dressing gown, for after swimming or showering; a half dozen Bermuda shorts and khaki pants; one corduroy, in case it gets cold; and a laundry bag for dirty clothes. Van Galbraith's city clothes are here too—the hanging locker in his forward cabin was already full with Christopher's, Danny's, and Reggie's gear when he boarded, and, good-natured as ever, he did not plead seniority, though he got off a nice crack or two about how Cyrano treats people who fly all the way from London. Under my bunk are two deep drawers—for underwear, shorts, socks, and the extensive medicine and toilet kit Pat has equipped me with—not, as she has several times told me, that she ever expects to see me again. (“If he comes through this thing alive,” she told a friend, “I’ll kill him.”) Much of the contents of the kit, twenty days out from Miami,

are permanently strewn on the ledge, with its rounded corners, above the wash basin; protected, like everything else movable in the cabin, from slipping out or springing out, at the caprice of the seas, by a resolute wooden lip, an inch high, that fences them in. And in one of the drawers what, on reading the early pages of Christopher's journal, I ever after referred to as "WFB's eighteen blue Lacoste sports shirts." Reduced now in number to five, not because I have consumed thirteen since leaving Bermuda, but because I have given Christopher two during the last two days, Christopher electing the mortification of drawing on a supply he had originally disdained as self-indulgent, over against the alternative of wearing dirty shirts, even if soaked in (prickly-itchy) salt water.

I emptied the glass, closed my notebook, and stared out into the silent running seas. There is practically no noise, the motor barely audible at 1200 rpm, the sails doing most of the work, pushing sixty thousand pounds of schooner and nine of us—the two youngest on watch, the rest asleep—almost noiselessly through the water, five miles up from the ocean floor: higher than the highest mountain. I look at my little pocket compass in the well. The boys (they do not like to be referred to as such, and the designation is no longer used within their earshot—Reggie, Pat's sister Bill Finucane, Van, and I quietly signed the protocol) are holding nicely, just south of east; at least the wind is not heading us—which is to say forcing us away from our objective, which lies north of east. I decide to skip the reading; I keep thinking about Christopher. Perhaps I'll make an excuse. Slide open the door, step into the saloon, lit at this time of night only by the picture lights that diffuse the oil colors of those splendid sea scenes by Richard Grosvenor; climb up the companion-way, into the dark, canvas-covered cockpit section—a huge part of Cyrano; out the side door, down the deck walk to the steering section, where the boys would be. Christopher sitting on top of the steering box, cross-legged, handling the wheel; Danny in one of the two deck chairs on either side, one leg perched against a locker or, if he is sitting to windward, up against the binnacle post in that posture of complete relaxation from which he can spring into action as nimbly as Nureyev. He has so arranged himself in every situation I have seen him in since Christopher brought him to the house at Stam-

ford as a playmate as a very little boy. Danny would look perfectly relaxed in an iron lung during the countdown before lurching down a ski chute. He is a year older than Christopher, just out of college, just married. Danny is the enthusiast, the quintessential American boy with red-blond straw hair, the quick smile, the high cheek, and just the hint of the Yankee trader. Christopher is introspective, but there are trip wires everywhere, which bring on the most infectious laughter in the house. Their common weapon against their elders has for years been a gentle sarcasm. Just enough sandpaper in it to keep the nerves tingling, and their victims alert. I take a modest pride in the years of tutoring in the art I have spent on both of them (Christopher once told me I have the faculty for "sometimes driving me crazy-mad at you"). Danny no doubt feels the same way, but although he has worked for me for seven summers and lived at our (rented) house in Switzerland (while going to school) for as long as two months, he has never expressed this exasperation—he is too resilient. On the other hand, I don't remember ever having talked sharply to him. Not even the night he called me at two in the morning in New York. He was eighteen, and his high-pitched voice was shaky. Something terrible has happened, he said. I asked in a whisper, not wanting to wake Pat, Was anybody hurt?

No, he said.

Tell me, I said in normal tones—Pat was now awake, so there was no point in whispering; or in leaving the room to talk over another telephone.

He had been standing in for the skipper, who had the week off. After I and a dozen friends left the boat at midnight, after a dinner cruise up the Hudson, Danny consulted the cook and steward and asked whether they were willing to head back home to Stamford, a three-hour trip, rather than lay out at anchor off the 23rd Street pier and make the trip early in the morning. Sure, they said; so Danny took the wheel, fired up the engine, and started up the East River.

There is a critical fork in that river, up around 50th Street. Both the river channels corseting Welfare Island end you up at the same point, where the river turns east and slides under the Triboro Bridge. Danny took the right fork, not having read the chart closely. And halfway up the channel he suddenly realized that the stolid bridge

toward which he was heading was clearly lower than Cyrano's foremast, let alone mainmast. The current was carrying him toward that critical mass at four knots. He jammed the gear into reverse—stripping it into immobility (it had been misbehaving). In desperation he swung the wheel to the left, hoping to effect a U-turn in time—only to discern a tug in the darkness a few dozen yards away, into which, pursuing his turn, he would crash. By then there was no time left over to maneuver. With a roar, the two masts, the radar, the fourteen shrouds, crashed over the deck, making driftwood of the taffrail and cockpit, the thousand-pound wooden masts falling fifty feet, missing Danny and the cook by inches. The tug threw out a line, and now they were secured to a wharf in the Bronx, and Danny had trudged to the pay phone, a very frightened little boy. I told him never mind, these things happen, try to get some sleep, I'd be around in the morning. He would receive punishment enough. Even now, six years later, some of his friends call him Captain Crunch.

They would be talking—Danny loves to talk, is interested in everything and delights in recalling jointly shared experiences, pleasant and harrowing. Christopher is alternately laconic and talkative, but Danny doesn't mind; he will do all the talking, if necessary. Christopher will probably be drinking a Coca-Cola, Danny the same, though he might have a beer. They will be wearing dungarees and sweaters—and lifebelts around the waist. (They would know that the purpose of my visit was not to spy on them.) Danny would be splashing a flashlight's beam every now and then on the Kenyon to check the speed, and then up at the telltale on the shroud to spot any change in the wind direction. The heading is highly visible from the steering post and from the deck chairs. It shines out in red from the compass on the binnacle mount. If you are seated to one side, looking crosswise at the compass, you quickly get used to adding, or subtracting, 90° in order to calculate the heading. Every hour or two, one of them will check the bilges, read the taffrail log we stream out, which is the equivalent of a milometer on an automobile—except that you must not rely too heavily on it, because it is insensitive to the vicissitudes of current and overly sensitive to the vicissitudes of floating seaweed and the like, which distort the registrations. Every two hours they will record their estimated progress in the logbook

and make such other entries as they deem appropriate. At five in the morning they will wake the relief watch . . .

I decide, restlessly, that I must go up. I reach for the flashlight, wresting it from the bracket at the side of the door, and walk silently up the companionway, maintaining my balance easily after so many days at sea. Before walking aft and evaluating the necessity for diplomatic therapy, I think to check the logbook.

I had actually forgotten what I wrote in it after the episode with Christopher, only an hour and a half ago. I leaned over the navigating table, ran my flashlight over the open page. "0100 (I had written). DR plotted: Long 37-50, Lat 37-55. Shifty winds from front-line squall area. Took in Genoa and vanged main staysail and mainsail. Attempting course of 115 degrees with difficulty—averaged 125°, plotted same. Using 1200 rpm except when wind puffs up. Checked bilges. Relieved by Capt. Merritt and Lt. Buckley, whose lifebelts were, in due course, located."

I read on to the next line.

My heart leapt up with pleasure. I turned off the flashlight, peeked outside the canvas, and studied their silhouettes against the wind and stars, exactly as I had imagined, complete with Coca-Colas and animated gestures. I ducked noiselessly back, down the companionway, into my bunk, drawing the door silently shut, suppressing my impulse to wake Bill and Van and Reggie to share my delight with them.



Emerging from the cabin.

Everything was all right. The boys had evidently seen my entry. Their indignation was furious, but not internalized. They had made their own entry, using my pen for the purpose:

"My ass, Buckley—DTM." And from my son, *"Screw you—CTB."* Nowhere in the vast Atlantic that night was any skipper better pleased with the junior members of his crew, and just think of it, one of them my own flesh and blood.

AIRBORNE