A Night on the Bay

by

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There is a sweetwater sea bearing the Ontario moniker, sheltered at its downbound end by an eastward slanting land mass terminating in a long finger, and containing the vast Prince Edward Bay. This is a solemn place of history, where farmers - of necessity made seamen - once plied these waters in wooden sailing ships, ferrying their hay and produce to distant city markets, or running one last load of precious heating coal to Kingston perilously late in the season, in the hopes of making a premium to offset losses incurred in the gentler time of year. Now as ever when summer gives way to fall the lake is prone to fits of temper, oft flaring into sudden gales pushing mountainous seas onto the ubiquitous lee shore, the bane of hapless mariners caught out at such times.

About midnight the wind came up, and *Restless* began to gently rock and yaw on her rode, securely tethered to the weedy bottom in the Black River estuary. The wavelets now invading the anchorage resonated inside the hull where I lay upon a sleeping mat. Plip plip plip. I raised my head and peeked through the forward screen window, finding nothing amiss in my immediate surroundings. In the murk could be discerned the vague form of the bluff on the anchorage's opposite shore, deflecting the gusts blowing in from South Bay beyond the river's mouth admitting the din of agitated seas.

Earlier at midday I had set off from the marina at Waupoos on a lone week-end respite, emerging from the breakwater into a narrow strait sheltered by the small sheep farming island of the same name located in the northwest corner of the Bay, a happy soul under the golden luminosity of an August sun perched high in a clear blue sky. My vessel, a Sea Pearl 21 cat ketch, was under full sail and crabbing into a moderate southwesterly breeze with the tiller lashed and my person basking on the side deck, feeling no small measure of pride at the imagined admiration of any onlookers who might have noticed the swiftly moving little boat in full self-steering splendour. From seaward the low lying Prince Edward shoreline forms the threshold of a rolling countryside dotted with farm buildings and clusters of cottages, in some places interspersed with deciduous thickets, featuring a major indentation just south of Waupoos known as South Bay, being two miles in breadth and several more deep, and opening into the larger expanse of Prince Edward Bay. Perhaps the most remarkable natural feature in South Bay is the mesa-like McMahon Bluff dominating the north shore, at the eastern base of which emerges the Black River's languid flow. The Long Point coast forming the southern boundary of the greater Bay, a mere smudge on the horizon from the Waupoos vantage, displays a dramatically different character at close range, being almost entirely faced by limestone cliffs rising vertically from the water's edge.

My first afternoon on the Bay gave me a speedy passage on a close reach past South Bay to the far shore at the base of Long Point, a distance of about five miles from my

departure point, most of it covered with a lashed tiller while I shifted about the boat, enjoying her motion and imbibing the scenery from every possible position in my recently acquired vessel. Arriving at Halfmoon Bay, I made for the cobble beach which is part of the Little Bluff Conservation Area, and dropped anchor about fifty yards from shore. This small beach composed of a gradient of smooth stones, from coin-sized at the water's edge increasing to fist-size above the surf line, forms a pocket bounded on both sides by limestone cliffs and backed by a marsh. On this hot afternoon the place was host to a few swimmers. I stood on the aft cockpit seat peering over the side into a lucid matrix revealing the presence of huge boulders, perhaps 20 feet below, over which *Restless* was suspended like a tethered zeppelin. I dove into the water's cool embrace, striking out a short distance then turning to look back at my boat, beholding a fine waterline's perspective of her graceful form. After a delightful hour or so spent alternately diving and climbing back aboard, the sun's intensity began to wane and the shadows on shore grew decidedly longer, the near cliff faces now shadowed, hinting that the time had come to find an anchorage for the evening. There was no protection for my small vessel in these environs, so I set all sail and made a course for the mouth of the Black River, where I hoped to find a secluded spot along the bank.

With bows peeling rolls of water *Restless* fairly flew on a beam reach (for sailing in such a place is indeed an act of flight, the vessel propelled by lift over tangible depths reminiscent of the blue heights) across South Bay's gape, the sun evincing a silvery hue from the pocked surface of the wind-ruffled waters, and I continuing in a blissful state. Just outside the river's entrance I furled both sails and gently rowed her in, gliding over shallows revealing alternating weedy patches and sandy bottom, at length gaining a site behind a small hook of land projecting from the shore opposite the bluff providing ample protection from any weather the bay might convey. The near shore featured a couple of dwellings, but with no one in evidence all was still. Here I dropped anchor and paid out scope aplenty, then settled into an evening's routine of setting up the camper top, breaking out the galley box and preparing a meal of heated canned clam chowder. The wind soon died out altogether leaving an evening calm intensifying every shore sound, the chirping of birds and the distant hum of a lawnmower. Slumped low in the aft cockpit lapping up my supper, I watched in silent amusement as a canoe slipped by carrying a young man and woman. Landing at a rocky point on the opposite shore, and apparently failing to take notice of my relaxed figure onboard *Restless*, they stripped and enjoyed a carefree skinny dip in the sunset's orange glory. Shortly thereafter my fellows, ever innocent of my company, departed, and I went "below" (as it were) to read awhile in my sleeping bag, but was easily defeated by the slumber which comes so quickly in the water's gently swaying cradle.

Later when I awoke to the wind's commotion, I found it difficult to reinstate sleep, and so lay there thinking about this place and its changeable character. So serene of a summer's afternoon yet in the next breath capable of adopting a tumultuous attitude, pushing great seas and rattling the hardiest of mariners - especially way out there, beyond Long Point, outside the Bay's protective bosom in a rising sou'wester. I reflected on the lake's moods I had known in earlier voyages on other boats, one time returning from Main Duck Island in twelve foot seas stirred up by twenty-five knot winds. My thoughts

drifted through the stories I had read of a much earlier generation of obligate mariners who plied these waters in wooden ships to make a hard living. I thought particularly of one young man's travails upon these waters...

On Hallowe'en night in1878, a dozen or so schooners loaded with coal and grain took refuge from a gale of wind playing out on the lake, lying at anchor in Long Point's protective lee. Among them was the *Julia*, with young Moses Dulmage from South Bay aboard. Seeking the company of friends on the nearby *Olivia* while waiting out the weather on this cold night, Moses asked his captain permission to use the yawl-boat, the elder consenting but warning, "be back early, for I am going to get out of here before daylight". It was a swift downwind drift to the *Olivia*. After spending two hours visiting, at about eleven, the *Olivia*'s captain informed the young man he had best be going, as the wind was intensifying. With no notion of danger, Moses cheerily took to the boat and got on his oars, valiantly trying to get her to windward, toward his warm berth. But the wind was too strong, the seas too big, and he could make no progress. Overwhelmed, he began an inexorable downwind drift, trying to steer with an oar, still entertaining the hope that he would yet fetch one of the outermost ships. He shouted into the raging darkness toward his would-be saviours, but none was able to launch a boat in this maelstrom. Men lined the rails, calling out and desperately tossing lines. He came tantalizingly close to rescue at several junctures, but somehow all chance evaded him, then finally, rapidly drifting past the very last ship whose outline could be dimly seen, he cried out frantically, "help! Help! *Ariadne*, help me!" But no help could they give, and into the storm-tossed gloom to leeward the young man disappeared, blown out onto the lake, all alone among those terrible seas.

Two days later, almost fifty miles across the lake, at a secluded spot on the New York shore near the Stony Point lighthouse, a small boat was found upright banging among some rocks and ice pans, a frozen figure slumped forward and lashed to the thwart. Moses had somehow managed to bring his small craft safely through that awful night, facing untold terrors of mountainous seas and biting cold, likely plying an oar to steer toward the lighthouse at whose base he finally expired from exposure - too weak even to undo the lashings with which he had secured himself to prepare for the fight as he drifted helplessly out onto that monstrous lake. The body was returned to his kindred several days later by a visiting mariner from the Prince Edward shore. Such are the people and their struggles who ennoble these waters.

On the second day of my own journey, morning broke blustery under a sunny sky, and I could see great white capped seas out on the bay. My erstwhile peaceful anchorage was becoming uncomfortable, *Restless* swaying in lively fashion to the invading refracted waves, and breakfast was consumed in haste to give way to the departure preparations. The weather station on the VHF radio announced a small craft wind warning for eastern Lake Ontario, with an outlook of possible thunder storms for the following day, prompting me to secure all gear and leaving the camper top in place to keep the centre hold as dry as possible. I considered whether to beat a retreat back to the marina, but deferred the decision until I was actually out in the thick of things to see how matters really lay before making up my mind. Since the wind would be on the nose exiting the

Black River, and *Restless* carries a small motor on a rudder-mounted bracket, I decided to dispose of the niceties of rowing and motored out of the anchorage. *Restless* made hard work of powering into the onslaught of lumpy seas, hobby-horsing and flinging spray aft, washing away the morning's grogginess lingering in my head. Gaining sufficient searoom to set sail, I unrolled a few turns of the mizzen and sheeted it tight to weathercock the boat, then crawled along the pitching side deck to the foremast, unfurling about a third of the main. At length the sails caught hold of the wind and the motor was extinguished. My mood was initially subdued, but with sails set *Restless*' motion steadied, and she soon found her rhythm among the swells, rising competently over each peak and sliding easily down their backs. My original plan for this day had been to cross Prince Edward Bay on a diagonal course, reaching the natural harbour located at the very tip of Long Point where I would spend the night. The prospect of venturing onto the Bay now seemed very daunting, with the Long point shore so distant on that jagged horizon. I decided instead to head toward the marina, and there perhaps beat back and forth in the small strait sheltered by Waupoos Island while getting the feel for conditions, or rather, my handling of them. And so I sped off with wind and waves on my beam, rolling and twisting through the staggered lumps, *Restless* occasionally tipping to the gusts, at length rounding a point of land and gaining the sought after shelter of the strait.

After about an hour of reaching to and fro, a growing sense of confidence augmented by a quickening spirit of adventure emboldened me to make an attempt on the Bay. The wind seemed at times to flare more powerfully, the seas giving immediate response, but both boat and skipper stood up to it well and gradually the separation from Waupoos Island astern increased. Steadily we beat across South Bay's maw, alone on a foam-streaked expanse over which the far shore seemed much more distant than the previous day. Our upwind progress was decidedly less than efficient with the full brunt of the waves beating against the bows (producing the nautical equivalent of mountain biking on a spongy surface, where forward motion cannot have its way) but at length we reached the southwest corner of the Bay at Long Point's base. We continued to be buffeted by violent gusts (though without the complication of thumping into steep crests because of the proximity of a weather shore) these being met with a quick hand on the mainsheet. Turning up the coast of the point *Restless* now sped on a close reach along a semi-pristine landscape of wooded bluffs showing only occasional signs of settled humanity. By degrees the wind began subsiding to a more manageable tendency as the afternoon wore on, transforming this venture into a relaxed sailing experience. The eastern extremity of the point is a designated bird sanctuary, and as such remains undeveloped, the character of the place being left to its own wild inclination. This shore featuring layered limestone outcrops was all the more enticing by virtue of its remoteness. In the distance could be seen the Red Onion, the name given to the squat white-washed red-topped lighthouse guarding the narrow entrance into Long Point Harbour. Nigh upon one mile off the point's tip, opposite the narrow harbour entrance lay a pair of islands, the heavily wooded Timber and ominously bare False Ducks, with its skeletal light tower warning ships away from nearby shoals. In schooner days many ships foundered here in the autumn gales, often drawn through the area on a heading for Kingston in the mistaken belief that these

islands were the Ducks, actually located ten miles further east. The False Ducks tower serves as the unintended monument to this marine graveyard.

Leaving the two islands astern I made for the barely discernible gap between two gravel mounds on the mainland shore, evidence of past attempts to keep the harbour entrance clear. Coming in under oars I noted the nearness of the bottom, which constantly silts from the churning action of the waves, thankful for *Restless*' shoal draft which opens so many possibilities for exploration. Once serving as the base for a lifesaving station as well as an active fishing community - indeed, currently the home of the only remnant of commercial fishery on the lake - this harbour has fallen into a forlorn state, with a raggle-taggle assortment of shacks on one shore of the pond-like enclosure and a derelict government wharf jutting out from the opposite bank. Making fast to a dormant steel trawler occupying most of the wharf I climbed onto the rusting deck and stepped ashore. I walked along the dirt road leading to the far side of the harbour, examining the shacks (which appeared to be inhabited) and their attendant fishing paraphernalia, such as the large wooden racks used to wind the nets. Reaching the small abandoned lighthouse at the end of the road, I was saddened to behold decaying soffits and clapboards with peeling paint, harbingers of this historic structure's rapidly approaching demise. Returning to the other side of the harbour I took further exercise on the pebbly strand at the base of the low bluffs along which I had sailed to reach this locale. The outlook on azure waters offered by this perspective provided an uplifting contrast to the more solemn cast of history. With the looming forecast of deteriorating weather, I decided against spending the night here, opting instead to make my way back across Prince Edward Bay to Waupoos while conditions remained fine. Departing the harbour under full sail, I undertook the long crossing on a broad reach in a dying breeze, basking in the mellow glow of the setting sun as I regained the Waupoos Island strait.

Alongside a meandering County road lies the rustic South Bay cemetery, with its perimeter of trees shading huddles of white marble monuments, some fallen and others tilted at odd angles to the undulating ground. I searched the timeworn inscriptions bearing testimony to those farmer-sailors who passed before, seeking the final resting place of one who had known a terrible night alone on these waters. Finding it at last, I contemplated the lichen-flecked inscription (here reproduced as it appears on the grave marker):

"MOSES
SON OF
PHILIP & ELIZA
DULMAGE
DIED
NOV$^{\underline{r.}}$ 1, 1878
AGED 21 YRS. 7 MS.

We cannot tell who next may fall
Beneath thy chastening rod;
One must be first O may we all
Prepare to meet our God."

I held out a hand, touching the marker (or rather, it touched me) and sighed a melancholy wish that when my hour comes I should be found like young Moses Dulmage, holding fast my oars 'til the last exhalation.

Let not the reader think this conclusion unduly morose, for it is a truth we all must bear, that the time approaches when we shall breathe our last, when the only power remaining will be our demeanour in facing this departure, which doubtless will be influenced by our experiences while yet we drew a hearty breath. Let us therefore venture upon great waters in our small craft, meeting the beauty and adversity we shall find there with equal passion to inform wisdom, and from their lessons find the elements with which to compose our ultimate characters.

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