

IN THE BEGINNING: HASARD – OUR FIRST SAILBOAT

Floating on an old tire tube in a pond filled with cow shit can hardly be called boating, but to my five brothers, three sisters, and me, it was like an exotic vacation. The pond was no more than four feet deep, to farm kids like us after a day of hard work in a hay field, it could have been the Caribbean. I had never learned to swim. As a child, when I had to walk over a river bridge, I would scream hysterically.

Our farm, north of Buffalo and east of Niagara Falls, was near Love Canal, better known for its toxic waste than its pristine water.

Fast forward twenty-five years and who do I marry? A Danish sailor, a Viking. Gert had grown up in Sonderborg, Denmark and as a young man he learned to sail in the local yacht club. His family ran an apple farm but Gert knew early on he would never follow in their footsteps. There were times during our sailing adventures when I wished I had stayed on that farm.

What we had in common was a love for travel. We never discussed – or I claim we never discussed – sailing as a means of travel. Or, for that matter, making a boat our home. We chartered boats in the Caribbean when we were first married and

that had been fun. You hop on a plane, pick up a boat, and off you go. The boat would be equipped with everything, including the food and liquor. There'd be nothing to do but slather on the suntan lotion and drink champagne.

Living on Long Island as we did, to own a boat was almost mandatory. Our first was a twenty-eight foot Herreshoff, originally designed as a wooden ketch, but ours was configured as a sloop. In other words, one mast instead of two. Herreshoff designed boats are known for their sleek beauty and sailing ability. Her wooden hull was painted white. She was bare bones and needed work, as do all thirty-year old wooden boats, but we had nothing but time. Besides, she was only going to be a day sailer, I thought, so what did it matter if she didn't have a toilet or a place to cook? This was the reasoning of someone who had sailed the 'Great Tire Tube' in western New York.

We found her in City Island in the Bronx of all places. Abandoned by her previous owners, the boatyard wanted only to recover the storage fees that had accumulated over the last few years. City Island, with its shabby houses painted in pinks and shades of turquoise, is reminiscent of the Caribbean Islands – the perfect place to work on a boat.

All we had wanted was a little boat to sail around Long Island, but as we got stuck into the list of jobs, our imaginations went wild. We romanticized about sailing the world and bought sailing magazines filled with articles about living aboard. I was teaching art to junior high students in the local school and Gert had his own foreign car repair shop. His business was good, as people driving old foreign cars in the U.S. tend to want foreign born mechanics. Trained in Denmark, Gert had a natural instinct for how things went together, a skill that proved invaluable all through our sailing life. Later, living aboard a sailboat, I was to learn how useless my education was compared to his.

We spent weekends driving up to City Island with a carful of tools and paint supplies. The work – scraping and painting and

sanding – was backbreaking, but that was half the fun. At least, back then I looked on it as fun.

Gert wanted to repair some ribs in the boat; these were structural and had to be extra strong, he said. Did he know something I didn't? They looked okay to me; I mean, we were only talking day sailing in protected bays and sounds, weren't we? Young and in love, I probably missed the direction this boat thing was going.

In any case, at one point in our reconstruction project, we needed to find some oak for those ribs. There was none available near us but we heard of a lumber yard in Maine and contacted the owner. He had some fresh, long-grained oak and so off we zoomed in our 1973 MG convertible. I only point this out because most people do not haul lumber from Maine to Long Island in a sports car. Does this tell you something about us? We only needed a few pieces so we figured with the top down, they could fit between us and hang out the back of the car. Besides, it was fall in New England, so could there be a better time for a road trip? Adventures like these just made the plan more romantic in my eyes.

Back on Long Island I kept looking at this stack of lumber. How the hell were we going to bend such hard oak wood? I thought. I watched on as Gert dug a pit in our driveway and made a fire in it with logs we had scavenged from the woods. Then he put a metal chimney in a pail filled with water and sat the whole thing on a grill on top of the firewood. He explained to me how the steam from the bucket would soften the wood. He also mentioned that we would probably be up all night as the fire would need to be stoked to keep the steam going. Meanwhile he'd made a wooden form of the curve of the hull, a 'jig' he called it, and after the oak pieces had softened he fastened them to it. If it all worked according to plan the pieces would dry and become sturdy new ribs.

He was right, we did stay up all night, tending the fire and pouring water into the tank to keep the water steaming. As he

worked, I made sketches to pass the time. I could just imagine what the neighbors were thinking of these nocturnal activities.

After work the next day we drove back to City Island in the MG with the oak still in the jigs. The boatyard workers scratched their heads and looked on as if we were crazy. Thinking back, they might have been right. Gert removed the ribs from the jig and fastened them to the inside of the boat hull. He even doubled up on some of the ribs. When I asked why, he mumbled something that sounded like ‘rough seas’ and ‘pounding’. Surely I was hearing him wrong. Then he painted the undersides blue with the fungus prevention paint, so highly toxic it caught in his throat, but he didn’t seem to mind.

Our weekends, for half a year, were spent painting and cleaning to get that boat ready. I was still teaching, and our progress had become the Monday morning entertainment in the teachers’ lounge. But hard physical work has never bothered me; I guess that comes from growing up on a farm. Besides, at the end of the day we would always find some quaint seafood restaurant on City Island. Seafood and champagne are my basic food and drink needs.

The day finally came when, freshly painted white, the boat was ready to be launched. She was fitted with a one cylinder Volvo engine, rebuilt by Gert. There were times, going through ‘cuts’ in the Bahamas, when I thought my hair dryer had more power than that engine. We christened the boat *Hasard*, a Danish word that meant, loosely translated, betting with more than you had in your hand. In short, gambling. Gamble sounded about right to me as so much of what we had both done in our lives so far had been a tad risky. Someone once said he thought we “walked on the dark side of the moon”. Yes, *Hasard* was a good name.



Finally, after ten years on dry dock, *Hasard* was lowered – ever so

gently – into the water. At last she was floating, and she looked beautiful. We spent our first night on board watching her settle in, and noticing how her wood was soaking in the sea water. This was to be expected in a boat that had been on dry dock for so long and anyway, “That’s what bilge pumps are for,” Gert said. As I sat ankle deep in water I was convinced we were sinking, but Gert explained the wood just needed to swell. The next day, most of the water had gone – the bilge pump had done its job. The tide was high and off we sailed for our home port, Mount Sinai on the north shore of Long Island.

We had a great year; sailing in the Great South Bay on the south shore of Long Island. Summers are the best time of year there, with warm weather and almost always an afternoon breeze from the southwest to blow us homewards. We usually sailed to Fire Island from the south shore of Long Island where we would anchor out and walk across the dunes. The sandy beaches extended to the Atlantic Ocean, which on some days was as blue and warm as the Caribbean.

During the winter months, our imaginations started working overtime. Long Island can be colder than most think and the freezing snow and wet slush make driving anywhere miserable. All we could think about were warm, tropical islands. This is when we started seriously considering this living on a boat idea, “She’s a strong vessel,” Gert said. “We could rent our house and take off on *Hasard* and see where she takes us.”

Gert always said he wanted to sail around the world but I hadn’t taken him too seriously. My art projects of dying and painting on fabric were going at that time. I had even been commissioned to make cloth for an entire wedding party. Yes, I too had dreamed of traveling around the world but never really given much thought to how I would do this. It doesn’t hurt to dream.

But now we talked seriously. Renting out our home, we calculated, would give us enough money to live on while sailing. Gert would always find work as a mechanic, he could work on

anything, anywhere. I was still teaching but, impulsive as I am, I finished off the school year and then quit. My biggest regret came years later at pension time. Fifteen years of teaching and I was suddenly out of the system.

So – we had a plan. Kind of.



That summer, I took a job as a mate on a big motor yacht out of Montauk. The yachting community on the East End of Long Island draws the very wealthy; it is said that almost one third of the entertainment business lives or parties on the East End in the summer. My job paid well, as the owners were extremely wealthy. It was fascinating to see how the other half lives. The yacht was brand new and in reality, I had little to do but shop for exotic foods and serve cocktails. In the meantime, Gert closed his shop and worked out of our barn for a following of devoted car owners. That summer we saved to have enough money to take off for the Bahamas in the fall.

We lived on our boat that winter, as we continued preparing for our trip. *Hasard* needed a lot of equipping just to get off Long Island. I can only compare living on a day sailer boat to camping on water in a van. There was no refrigeration, no toilet, no stove, no running water, and no heat, not to mention instruments like depth sounders, self-steering gear and radios, which, I was later to learn, are quite important on a boat.

We left Long Island late in the season. The weather, we knew, would be unpredictable as the hurricane season was far from over. The night before we left, our friends from my work and Gert's garage came down to the dock to say goodbye. There was a lot of drinking and toasting; everyone was in a celebratory mood but few could believe we really planned to sail this boat to Florida. Years later a friend confessed that her husband had advised her to, "Say a final goodbye as you'll probably never see them alive again."



We sailed the next day and within an hour were engulfed in fog. To me there is nothing more dangerous or scary on the water than poor visibility. We took down the sails and Gert started the motor. Moving along at about three knots I figured it would take days at this rate to reach the East River in Manhattan. I stood on the foredeck peering through the fog, straining my ears to hear other boats. All was eerily quiet but for fog horns.

This was crazy. We were sailing in fog down the middle of the shipping lane of the Long Island Sound where barges and tankers were coming and going between the Atlantic and the East River. Thank God I knew so little about sailing and its dangers. We spent the entire day motoring, slowly and nervously, until later in the afternoon I heard what sounded like an aircraft coming straight for us. I ducked and started screaming to Gert, convinced we would be hit. Suddenly, out of the fog, a motorboat appeared heading directly for us. I screamed louder but at the last minute, just as I was about to jump overboard, the fog lifted and the motorboat swerved. We were still alive.

And then – what could have been more fitting in that fearful afternoon? – there in front of us was the Execution Rocks Lighthouse. It stands on jagged rocks, which rise up in the middle of Long Island Sound between New Rochelle and Sands Point, an infamous serial killer burial ground. I began to wonder. There had been warnings all the way on this trip, but was I reading too much into these signs? Wide eyed, I glanced at Gert but he only laughed. We were at the Nancy Drew mystery part of the story where you say, *Turn around! There's something bad out there!* But, just like Nancy Drew, we shrugged and turned our attention back to sailing.

We anchored for the night in Port Washington. The East River has a strong current and with a boat as small as ours, (with our hair dryer strength engine), we had to wait for the tide to

turn or be pushed backwards. We had completed the first leg of our journey and I was happy just to stop moving. I hadn't once asked myself if I had done the right thing; leaving a stable job, giving up our house. This was an adventure, and adventures are not necessarily easy, but I heard the voice of Gert's late father, "Better to get going and have an accident than never to get going at all." A wonderful way to approach life.

Time for dinner. For cooking we had a propane cylinder and a burner that screwed on to the top – a one-burner cooker. I chopped up a bunch of vegetables and tossed them in my new pressure cooker. I had read somewhere in those cruising magazines that this is what you did. I felt nervous. I had never used one before but heard plenty of pressure cooker explosion stories – my own Mom had blown up a few while canning. But my first attempt was a success. I made a soup of sorts that we ended up calling gruel as it looked like something from a Viking story, rough and primitive, all the vegetables kind of smashed together. This dish was to become our staple meal throughout the trip.

That night, huddled in our warm down bedrolls, we laughed about the day. Gert was satisfied with our progress and I, well honestly, I was happy to be alive. I tend to be dramatic, dividing everything into life and death scenarios; if Gert and I ever fought I would look at him and ask, "Well? Are we getting divorced?" Our arguments were never divorce material. We poured two shots of Danish firewater, Aquavit forty-five percent alcohol and ninety percent proof, the obligatory Danish celebration drink, and toasted our 'good health' as we always did. "The rest will be a piece of cake," Gert assured me.



We took off next morning into the bright October sunshine with light wind from the east, headed for Hell's Gate and New York Harbor. If you've ever taken a boat through this area you

will know what a thrill it is to see New York City from this perspective. It's also a little terrifying as the East River is strong. Passing Rikers Island Penitentiary I wondered what was in the inmates' minds as they watched our little sailboat pass by. It might have been the first time they'd felt safer behind bars.

Sailing down the East River and passing by Manhattan is a sight I will never forget. But the greatest thrill is entering New York Harbor. I'm not particularly patriotic but I imagine how my grandparents must have felt, having left their families in a war-torn Europe, a bittersweet taste in their mouths and a heaviness in their hearts, entering this harbor and seeing the Statue of Liberty and the Manhattan skyline. To this day, no matter how many times I return to New York City, I feel a freedom I never experience anywhere else in the world.

THE ATLANTIC OCEAN IS BIG – OUR
BOAT IS SMALL – AND I MUST BE
CRAZY

My heart raced as we left New York Harbor. The day was crisp and an onshore breeze caught our sails. I looked into the deep dark water. Memories of driving over bridges when I was little were flooding back, but I pushed them away. I needed to concentrate. *Hasard* was entering the wide and scary Atlantic Ocean and I was in charge of watching out for big ships. This was not the cow pond.

What had I got myself into? I waivered somewhere between excited and terrified. There was no turning back: our house was rented and I had quit my job but – most importantly for me – how humiliating would it be to return to Long Island and admit I'd been afraid?

You never knew what to expect from October weather. The wind seemed quite strong to me and again there was that damn fog settling in. This was only day three of our cruising life and I was already having doubts. I looked at Gert at the helm. As always, he wore that grin on his face which set me thinking of those weird sailing stories about psychotic captains and their crew. Gert often said there is only one captain on a boat. I thought it was just another male macho thing. But now, with

the choppy, deep blue ocean around us, I was happy to admit he was right. I'd have no stomach to be the captain.

Huge ships were sailing in and out of the New York Harbor, but no other small sailboat as far as I could see. With no radio, no depth sounder and no GPS, I was glad of the charts of the East Coast. I was supposed to figure out where we were using compasses and rulers and this other weird triangular tool. Me, who'd failed geometry. That year I had sat through a navigation course, but it's one thing to read how to do something and another to do it! I just looked up at Gert from inside the cabin and pointed south; at least I knew where that was.

My job was to look out for shipping lane markers. These were metal and plastic floats out in the water with numbers on them. I was supposed to note the numbers then locate them on the chart. The problem was that these markers bounced around on the waves and, viewed through my wet glasses, the numbers blurred.

Gert decided we would travel along the side of the lanes; we were small enough and didn't draw much water so there was no danger of going aground. To me, however, this water looked dangerously deep. If I fell overboard, I realized, I would never survive. I hurried down to put on a lifejacket.

Gert glanced at me. "You're going to wear that all the way to Florida?" He laughed.

"I can't swim," I whimpered. "You know that."

"Don't worry. Swimming wouldn't save you anyway, we're too far from land."

My romantic dreams were fading fast. Those idyllic islands with the warm blue water seemed far away. But we were underway, and turning back was not a thought I could contemplate. I wasn't in Kansas anymore, to quote Dorothy from 'The Wizard of Oz'. But when the wind picked up as it always does in the afternoon and the fog crept back in, doubts returned: *Why hadn't I stayed on the farm?*

I stood on the forward deck peering into the fog. "Let's get

closer to shore,” I urged Gert. “I can’t figure out where we are.” The names of the towns were painted in big letters on the water towers along the coast – if we got near enough I could read the signs and then locate our position on the chart. He listened to me – I couldn’t believe it – and steered the boat right towards the New Jersey coast.

All of a sudden, we heard a voice yelling. “Get back, get back! You’re headed for the beach!”

The voice, I realized, was coming from a jetty. *A jetty? We were supposed to be in the ocean!* The fog was so dense we hadn’t realized we were rapidly approaching the shore, which couldn’t have been more than two hundred feet ahead. I screamed; my usual reaction.

“Get down, get down!” Gert yelled. “We’re going to jibe.” He turned *Hasard* around, back into deeper water, and the boom whipped dangerously across the deck, barely missing my head.

I sat in the cockpit, shaking. Years later Gert confessed he’d been sure we would crash on that beach and that would be *it*. He admitted to making a mental note to grab his wallet, figuring that we’d at least have money to get home.

In spite of our jitters we sailed on along the coast, unsure of our exact location all afternoon. Suddenly, a large fishing boat loomed out of the fog, crossing in front of us. We decided to follow him – maybe he was heading for an inlet?

Then, miraculously, the fog lifted. Somebody must have been watching over us. The fishing boat ahead of us was heading towards an inlet – and a bridge. We knew *Hasard’s* thirty-seven foot mast was too tall to pass under that bridge.

Most boats call ahead and ask the bridge tender to open up, hence the importance of a radio. There were no cell phones back then – all we had was an air horn, which is acceptable if somewhat primitive. You’re supposed to blow the horn a certain number of times indicating you want the bridge to open. I just couldn’t remember how many times, and I wasn’t about to

search for the rule book. I laid on that horn and started waving my arms like a madwoman. The bridge man couldn't mistake the message.

The Atlantic waves were pushing us. Gert was grappling to maintain control of the boat as she flew towards the bridge. This was not an easy maneuver and people on both sides of the inlet looked on with expressions of shock. When the bridge opened just in time, their horror changed to cheering.

We had arrived at Shark River, New Jersey.