

## *The Island*

X

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#### Charon's Bark.

As the elements are compounded to devise stupor, or they are devised to compound our stupor, and so merit enterprise which excites public notice, clamor and disapprobation, and as their notoriety cannot escape the inclusion of the bad done in the name of the good, and as this must provide fodder for the fourth estate, and great disturbance amongst the inhabitants, and a lengthy disbursement of expletives from the author in residence, so must we deal with other matters of great import, that vital link between Heaven and Hades.

And to provide succor from these heady philosophical ambulations, I shall depart, as one is wont, from the beatitudes of Harmony Heaven to the other parts of the Universe, though, why one does often confounds me, since, that, for which one must brace, he is always inadequately prepared. I refer specifically to a thing, which miraculously resembles me, but whose behavior reveals unlike sympathies, and Oh!, there are so many as to create an 'omni'presence. These do not do as birds, flock to the tree, or as some other mammal, seek out a lair or burrow, but carve up all the visible world close at hand such as to leave the impression of something alien. Ah!, there 'tis, I have stumbled upon our secret; we, we are the invaders from outer space. We have brought something frightening with us; it is our construing and subduing impulse; we wish to see our likeness wherever we set foot; thus it is I feel the 'presence' about me; and am never adequately prepared for the shock of, holy of holies, the bristling three-headed dog of civilization.

But alas!, e'en before I must armor myself for that aforementioned contingency, it is given I must decide to leave this place to which I have come to mine navel contemplate, and die happily mysticisified. When one descends from his perch, he touches upon many realities, the first of which is his distance from that place to which he wishes to transfer his corpus, thereby accounting the impediments to that selfsame wish, the least of which is not to transport himself to the quay where doth, at punctual intervals, depart or arrive, the vital link, such as will float, and within its hold accommodate the likes of mine, and by means within its bowel, propel said hydrodynamic creation, so-called Ferry, to the further regions wherein doth reside the aforementioned alien beings.

Lest one have the means at his disposal to hire a private float plane, a water taxi, or be so fortunate to possess his own means of water transport, he depends upon the thus alluded ferry service.

Thus to continue with preparations one needs consult the marine weather person, who often as not is a 'weather woman' relaying the dire

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predictions developed in the inner sanctum of the Governmental Meteorology offices, who upon this very day assayed winds in the vicinity of 25 to 35 knots; the wind velocity on either side of the Ferry's route had measured 25 knots at 08:45, with five foot moderate seas. We had thus fairly decided not to go, expecting things would be much worse by the 13:00 departure time that afternoon, especially after a more prolonged blow with increasing winds. Well, this kind of decision is often made, and easily put out of mind, lest one have some pressing engagement, which proved to be so in this case. The Mrs. had tendered commitments to the larger world south of the border; Alas!, students, no less, would be awaiting her orations at some appointed hour, a last class for the term. Such deep obligation does one feel, he (or she) will imperil and expose their very being, and equilibrium to the rigors of *mal-de-mer*; oft one's dedication is misunderstood to be some species of foolishness.

We tuned ourselves many a time to an unvarying weather prediction, the last at 11:30, which only repeated the 08:45 measurements. Duty called, duty does not equivocate, the switch was thrown. The Mrs. downed her Bonine, packed her bags, and pronounced herself in a state of readiness. But, now it was not only a stormy day over the water but also over the land. The blustery, rainy, out-

of-doors presented a challenge to the old dilapidated pickup that was to serve as transport for the eight mile drive to the dockside. Having already alluded to what one may find in the way of vehicles upon the Island, such allusion might stand some clearer delineation. This particular one had been previously introduced as that ubiquitous machination serving as platform for butchering, and transport for bovine entrails. Now it must bear some revelation of its soul; a vehicle, no less, perpetually on its last legs (wheels as it were), with a nonchalance that lends false security to its driver with an eager start, following thereafter some constant persuasion to insecurity as its carburetion fails in all subtleties, requiring a constant attention to throttle. That it is raining leaves one with little recourse but to endure the lone feeble wiper blade that swats at the incessant downpour, as the absence of fan and heat does little to clear the fogged interior of the windshield, necessitating a regular passage of a rag to clear into a blurry effectuality, some vision beyond, in order to grasp a view of the pot-holed, washboarded, hilly, curvy dirt roadway. The vehicle, like many on the Island lacks any commodiousness; its seat all but rotted down to its hard underlayment beneath the springs; ones feet prevented from penetrating the flooring by a piece of scrap plywood. One's ears reverberated painfully to the muffler blown to smithereens years ago, with the o'er damped ignition producing droll, testy syncopation amongst the combustioning within the cylinders, verily a sputtering chariot. One holds his breath, waiting for the last firing, and one, needful of moving

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toward his objective, is hesitant to move at a rate that cannot be halted sufficiently by the remaining two front wheel brakes, the rears having been pinched off eons ago, and, alas!, as though an infernal demon were at its post, the machine had the great determination to relentlessly steer itself to the right. Though mortal, the jalopy delivered us to the desired objective, whereof we were not the first, but in fact were one amongst many disgorging from all manner of conveyances. All eyes were cast beyond the bay into the Straits which were hidden in a hazy, rainy fog. What they might see in the distance, should the curtain be raised, would be a whitecapping sea.

That morning the wind readings had attained 25 knots, gusting higher, persisting throughout most of the morning, and early afternoon.

More than any other issuance or purposeful construction within the universe of man, the ferry to (and from - do people actually leave) Harmony Heaven serves as meeting place, and test of one's resolve. Most of the residents do not look forward with any relish a conquest of the elements, rather they dread a rough crossing, especially the non-aquanautical types. The ferry, in this case, is merely a passenger vessel, not capacious enough to carry as much as a single vehicle, at least not so constructed as to accommodate one (the more venturesome Captain's have managed with much less a vessel to transport such as one might find constructed upon four wheels). It perhaps is more than significant when one enters (Harmony) Heaven, he is obliged to leave something behind (this does not preclude an arrangement with Charon).

One of my infrequent crossings coincided with a particularly stormy day. As preface to this day it ought be mentioned, while the weather might leave one stranded upon the Big Island shore, forced to spend the night in a motel, because the scheduling of the ferry is such that it does not operate on two consecutive days of the week, during the winter one may have chosen the very day to travel as that incident with Mr. Beaufort, who had scheduled a good blow. One may have elected to board the last ferry before the two-day lay. Such was the case in this instance, when, if one had only taken the earlier ferry, he might have saved himself one degree of Mr. Beaufort's grief; whereas now, in order to return to Harmony Heaven, he (or she ) must descend into the very jaws of hell. Three nights in a motel seemed poor recompense for an avoidance of the tempest; thus it was these braved the whirlwind.

I know not how Mr. Beaufort might have held forth concerning the sea conditions upon this day. The Good Ship, bearing an unnautical appellation to do with the Roman Military, who were unlikely sailors as well, and its passengers, were indeed enduring a stormy passage. The operation of Charon's bark to Elysium was a decision remaindered to such Captain who happened to be the skipper on the occasion. He might

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limit himself to a nominal wind speed reported at the lighthouse, knowing from experience what sea conditions he would encounter, or he might test the waters; however it is seldom, once the water's have been reconnoitered, that a Captain will retreat. You may correctly deduce there have been times when the good bark ne'r departed the quay. This day might have been one of those; but as hinted there were many whose ambulations found them at dockside at the appointed time; the skipper was thus persuaded to do his Captaining. As the vessel departed, the crewman reassured everyone there were plenty of brown bags for those incommodiously inconvenienced by the anitics of Mr. Beaufort.

It had not been the first such occasion for me, because I allowed little flexibility in my scheduling, and tended to arrive at such time as coincided with my own imperatives, and mostly availing myself of transport to such as H.H. during the winter season.

In consulting the Nautical Almanac in order to discover Mr. Beaufort's meaning behind such expressions as Oh!, Ah!, Wow!, or Geezze!, I could not fit these, but by intensity, to such as found therein, "Seas heap up; white foam blown in streaks", not unlike one might occasionally glimpse as the spray momentarily drains from the windows, only to be once again smothered as though beneath a waterfall, obscuring any sensible delineation to the beast that heaves and thrashes the vessel about. Others remain silent, ashen; Mr. Beaufort attributes nothing to silence.

Although we were not on the ocean, the animal Mr. Beaufort had beneath his whip could mount quite a charge. However, because, contained within a shorter track, he could not reach the full gallop of the open seas; this restraint of bridle and harness (of the inland waterway) affected his gait the more he felt the sting of the whip; rudely and roughly did he thus buck, kick and snort, attempting to escape the tight rein and confining traces, as might we all if so imprisoned.

What little there was of it, the general tenor of the passenger's nervous chatter did not reveal anything less than apprehension. 'Tis odd how once we pull the switch in our little brains, sitting at the kitchen table, or resting at our leisure in the parlor, having set upon a course of action, to what lengths we will go; once we have already gone so far. E'er so hard the decision to make, let's have done with it. The Islanders generally do not do things precipitously, but often they do allow their needs and wants to accrue, such that when they have decided, decisions involving the traumatic manipulations of an obdurate inertia, (their own) everso augmented in H.H.; well, does it all bear repeating? If it had been such that the bread, cheese, cigarettes, and beer were not so overpriced thereupon the Island, and if a laundry were available, and if there were a bank, and a hardware store, and a lumber store, none of this

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would be necessary, but when the spirit so moveth, it does bear repeating.

By all rights only the most needy ought to have been involved with Charon that day. The Captain guided his ship as best he could, but the short steep seas were more than challenge to his ingenuity and reflexes. In certain series of waves, each individual wave required its own approach. The Captain had chosen to ride the troughs rather than take the seas on the stern quarter which would have made a most uncomfortable ride (like a spinning pan lid precessing to a stop) and would have taken a good deal of water on the stern, as the quarter that settled in the trough, rose to meet each wave. Eventually he would turn away from the seas to take them directly on the stern, but first he needed to make the crossing. As he rode the troughs he nosed the forward starboard quarter into the larger waves, but some of the groupings would not permit an easy rise and fall, the steepness of the waves would suddenly find one slipping off one into a deeper trough only to have the ensuing rise thrust upward with a stomach-wrenching lunge, to hang suspended momentarily while the hull seemed to fall into the next, followed again by a breaking wave that cascaded water all along the starboard side. In the base of the trough if one dared look he could see the waves were as high as the ferry's topsides. Actually if one did watch carefully he would be able to anticipate the worst jolts, but it was a nerve-wrecking preoccupation. After a time one began to sense a rhythm to the oscillations and jolts, but in no way may he do anything but grip his seat, and plant his body rigidly between the floor and the backrest on his seat. This was a day when indeed little was said by the passengers. After the crossing the Straits proper, the Captain was able to steer the craft in a following sea as he navigated up the coast of the Island to the embayment where was located the docking terminus. Needless to say this was not a day to be ambitious with freight, for it was days like these that the groceries and bits of freightings tended to get wet, tossed about and bruised. All were relieved to have arrived; doubtlessly each had done some soul-searching. So frail are we, how gratefully do we approach the land after that violent, writhing presence; how good it feels to have survived; for one did feel vulnerable.

I seem to have left you standing upon the quay as the Mrs. was about depart on her dutiful journey to her students. Since it was anticipated there would be a rough crossing it was decided I should accompany her; it was a chivalrous thing to do. She had endured much rougher rides in our own boating adventures than what we anticipated,

and had survived better than I on many of them; so you see there was little I could add to her safety or feeling of well-being, not as much as Bonine; and should the ship go down I would only become a worry to her, since I am an abominable swimmer. Well, we often do things for

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appearances sake. What it entailed for me was two rough rides in one day, for I was obliged to return to my animal caretaking duties.

Well, indeed all lights were green once one had overcome his Island inertia; very little would deter him or her now; only a contrary decision by the Captain would produce the insurmountable barrier; it was time to descend into the monster's open jaws. Cast Off!. The journey within the bay was placid, pleasant, and reassuring, placing the passengers in a temporary state of disarmed ease; like the Last Supper, or last meal, or last cigarette, or last anything before the onslaught, or ultimate ordeal. Then it was one felt the pulse of the Straits as her surge rounded the point into the bay, accompanied by a brief hush from the throng.

Yes, the throng, the group of musicians who had performed the night before at the counterculture restaurant, the Mary Jane Inn, three older Island couples, the cripple and his wheelchair, two unaccompanied married Island ladies, and three who were unknown to me, plus the Captain and the lady deckhand. At the beginning of each trip the deckhand collects the fare from each passenger, and also collects so much for freight, so much for a dog, so much for a chain saw, so much for a flat tire, for stovepipe, and so on. One time the lady deckhand was attempting to collect a fare for a dog when its owner protested, "Since When?", to which she replied, "Since always; trouble with you people you're spoiled; anyway the only thing exempt is your personal stuff." The following rejoinder "But this is my personal dog." met with an unfriendly glower. "That's a dollar for the dog." The lady deckhand did not take kindly to men who attempted to push her around.

Lest we we lose the main theme, Pusillanimous said, "Shit!, you might know, godammit, I knew when I would ride this damned ferry it would be like this - a Quacking flat tire on the taxi!" When I asked if he would be coming back on the return trip he said, "No, I'll take some time to do some holiday shopping, you know, buying crucifixes and menorahs for all my friends."

Then one began to feel the Straits in earnest, a series of risings and fallings of the ferry, the rising to a certain elevation before the destined decline, sometimes with a leaping feeling, devolving into a falling feeling until one felt a thud, and a cessation of the downward movement, as the vessel became bathed in a cascade of spray. Each time the little ship would rise and begin to fall the Zodiac raft tied topsides would pound the aluminum cabin; however it could not keep pace with the lurch, which became a bucking, bouncing, hypalon balloon tied to a tether with a burr in its side. On this trip we were going into the weather, taking the waves on the forward port quarter. The waves were nearly as large as the previously described trip, but they were more even, and easier to negotiate, but the ride seemed rougher because of the constant up and down motion.

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Baxter began his soliloquy, a nervous chatter designed to mask his apprehension; he talked on about falling planes, round the world sailors, Cape Horn passages with 100 foot waves; then he dove into the state of the economy (wouldn't you; now there's a rough passage). He was speaking to us as right nice people who brought in foreign capital, however little; even a ferry fare was welcome.

Three ladies sat on a raised platform behind the designated seats with their backs braced against the bulkhead behind. Then from this vantage point they were better able to see the wave action; small comfort in such weather. The bottom of the windows were placed at eye level to the seated passenger, more or less cutting off his view of the water, until he suddenly found the vessel at the bottom of trough whereupon if he looked outward he would see the crest of the next wave startlingly higher than he. Whenever this happened Baxter would abandon all worldly concerns, concentrating on the business at hand.

Then one heard the inevitable tales of the previous intrepid skippers and their assorted barks. There was tell of many a Captain Inebriate who found his way with iron will compassed in a sea of alcohol, fearlessly giving over his senselessness to the good or ill of ship designers and builders, as he would crash the infamous Captain Vancouver into wave after wave, as the free-standing Chesterfields glided from port to starboard, occasionally venturing for'ard or aft caroming billiard-like from bulkhead to bulkhead; and as an unlucky passenger was periodically pitched into the hold, as though into a side-pocket, from the anchored seats located above that yawning abyss.

Again, one grew weary of the roller coaster effect of the surgings, one felt tense, one innards lurched around, not knowing whether to make an excrementitious exit, or come back up the way they went down. It was a tough job bracing oneself from the outside, and bracing oneself from the inside. The musicians were beginning to appear 'green about the gills'.

The Mrs. took to somnambulizing, by resting her head on my shoulder, and bracing herself against me, and her feet against the bulkhead. The Bonine was barely doing the job. Without the Bonine she would have 'Lost It'. The Mrs. had only to drive 500 miles to get home to her students. Once again all were relieved to reach the other side. I did not feel the return to Harmony Heaven would be too terrible; since the bark would be in following seas most of the way; departure time 40 minutes away. Those with reliable vehicles would make a quick trip to the store for staples and other badly neededs in between the coming and going of the ferry.

Lately the ferry had taken upon the character of a high degree of professionalism, its Captain and Crew appearing sober and regular, attired in black pants, shoes and tie, with a white shirt, generally creating an impression of circumspection with regard to their duties. In keeping with

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that impression they maintained a tight ship and reliable schedule. In the not too distant past, scheduling was apt to be random, depending upon the skipper's state of compass; often he would accommodate certain islanders by leaving earlier or later than the scheduled hour. In those ancient times, more often than a person would care to recount, the appointed departure or arrival time would find an empty dock or an empty wheelhouse, such were the humors of the various skippers. Yes!, until a sufficient number of new inhabitants, more rigorously connected to the outside world of Hades, demanded their convenience be served. Gone are the days of three sheets to the wind and the wildly intrepid ferryman.

Harmony Heaven admits and discharges sojourners by the knell of mean solar time at the meridian of Greenwich, as do Bankers the globe over.