

Mike Broida

INTO IRONS

When I was a boy, my entire family would take the two-day-long drive from the cracked sidewalks and crowded city pools of Cleveland, Ohio, up to the adventurous, bucolic wilderness of southern Maine. John and Cookie, my mother's parents, only lived a few miles from the Maine coast, a short ways inland on the Arundel river, but despite this they still "summered" properly on the ocean, in the well-shingled summer town of Biddeford Pool, a strange, sleepy spit of land jutting out into one end of Saco Bay. Even as a boy, I felt a sense of peregrination that was unavoidable in the journey, that the seven-hour ride across upstate New York was a holy penance to cleanse myself of Midwestern honkytonk values: no more pop, no more tree lawns, no more putt-putt, no more big-drop coasters along the lakefront. Each mile was a prayer towards the promised land of white shorts and clay courts, evening gin and tonics and walks along the stony strands, the cyclopean flash of the lighthouse and, of course, the trimmed sails cutting across the waves.

Beyond tennis or golf or the long afternoon games of bridge (or hearts, for the young ones), sailing was everything along the coast: My grandparents' thirty-foot sloop, *Cygnet*, sat moored just off the shore, visible from the north-facing beach, a boat simple enough for an afternoon out on the water but capable of, on rare occasion, a two-day overnight journey. Before the family even decamped from the long drive, my grandmother had signed my siblings and me up for the next round of sailing lessons, which would start early the next morning. Like my grandfather and his father before him and his father before him, we were all to become sailors.

Biddeford Pool sits eight miles to the south of the old mill town of Biddeford, and the actual “pool” is a vast tidal pool hemmed in by the sandy tombolo known as Mile Stretch that, at low tide, empties out into a broad mudflat favored by amateur clammers. It made for an ideal spot to learn how to sail, sheltered by the broad rim of the pool, slowly tacking back and forth in two-person Turnabout boats, trying not to get caught up on the rocks during high tide. Early lessons covered the parts of the boat: bow and stern, mast and boom, port and starboard, tiller and rudder, mainsheet and jib, halyard and clew. Sailing is its own sort of language that sits parallel to English—the halyard is a portmanteau of “haul the yard” because it’s the line used to haul up the yards of fabric that make up the sail. “Starboard,” the right side of ship, comes from “steer board,” since Germans steered their early boats with paddles over the right side of the hull. While it was possible for me to step onto a boat and call a line a “rope” in minor sacrilege, to instead sit in the stern and tap into the language of the water, to call out “ready about” and wait for the response—“hard alee”—was to carry roughly on my lips the magic words that my family had been using for over a hundred years.

When I turned twelve, it became time to sail out onto the open ocean of Saco Bay, rigging our little boats and heading towards the infamous “Gut,” the narrow channel that separated the pool from the Atlantic, the water lapping up the sides of the fiberglass hull, foaming and sucking as it pulled the little boats to and fro, drenching us with waves caught broadside. The reward for harrowing the Gut was the wide-open ocean, filled with sandbars and lobster buoys and hidden jagged boulders looking to rip our Turnabouts in two. It didn’t take long for me to not like sailing anymore, and each time we went out for class, I thought this was surely the inevitable day that I would be swept out into the Atlantic, wreck my boat, and drown as it sank. I started begging my grandparents to let me stop sailing—I would play tennis or go to the beach or read books instead, just about anything to avoid the water, and by the time I reached high school they had finally

agreed: I wouldn't sail any longer. In the end, none of my siblings or cousins would, either.

Though I still went to Maine every summer, I didn't think about sailing again until eleven years later, while working at a high school in Boston. Most of that thinking came during my bike rides to and from work along a path next to the Charles River. Not long after I had stopped sailing, my grandparents stopped sailing, too—my grandfather had become ill from a mysterious neurological disease and could no longer go out on the water. They sold *Cygnets* and mostly just heard the tide from their porch, satisfied with the salt smell in the air. My grandfather eventually died when I was twenty-three, but it would take another two years before I thought of the water again. The best part of my twice-daily ride along the Charles was the river traffic: the crew sculls, the geese and their spring goslings, the kayakers and paddle boarders, and, of course, the little sailboats darting back and forth before the Harvard Bridge. They reminded me of how I had never managed to take to my grandfather's great love of the ocean. He had been a lifelong sailor, as had his older brother, Lee. It had been as much a tradition as anything else. When Lee died, my grandfather sang the US Navy hymn, "Eternal Father, Strong to Save," at the service. At John's funeral, Lee's son returned the tribute:

Eternal Father, strong to save.
Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,
Who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep
Oh hear us when we cry to Thee,
For those in peril on the sea!

In the afternoons along the bike path, I found myself watching these little Cape Cod *Mercuries* cutting along the Charles—the same boats you see when taking the T across the Longfellow Bridge—one of the most charming views in Boston. In November, after the boats had been pulled for the winter, I made a quiet resolution: Come spring, I would sail again.

First I learned the boat again, and remembered all the words. Next I learned the wing. The first few lessons on sailing are actually done on a chalkboard: When learning to sail, the world quickly reduces to a circle, divided like the face of a clock. These are the points of sail: at noon, always, is the head of the wind, blowing out at a 90° fan, the rest of the circle making up the different tacks and sail trims for your boat. Learning the wind is the most nuanced and difficult skill for a novice—if you read the wind wrong, the sail can violently gybe across the stern—you could capsize. Yet if you steer too close to the head of the wind, your boat will fall into irons. Irons means a mistake. It means you were too ambitious or circumstances suddenly changed and you aren't where you thought you were. Your boat somehow ends up pointing into the head of the wind, and it blows right on you, your sail shaking violently as the force that once powered your boat starts to push you backwards.

When I first took my own little Mercury out on the water, I thought back to that Navy hymn, and I still do, even now. It seemed like such a strange choice for an outfit whose sole intent is the mastery of the waves to then choose a hymn about drowning. The sailors in the song are caught in the heart of the storm, they've exhausted their mortal tools and, on the verge of sinking, have given themselves over to nature and the whims of a higher being:

Most Holy Spirit! Who didst brood
Upon the Chaos dark and rude,
And bid its angry tumult cease,
And give, for wild confusion peace,
Oh hear us when we cry to Thee,
For those in peril on the sea!

I told my friends that sailing was a fun, convenient thing to do during the summer, and I promised to take them all out once I passed my intermediate sailor's test. I didn't tell any of them about how the wind and water had built in me over time, how the song had lodged in my

chest when I heard my cousin sing it at the funeral, that I didn't know what I was missing until I saw the little boats on the Charles. In Boston, sailing the Charles is often considered the "training wheels" of boating—there are only so many times you can bob up and down the river before becoming bored, and once you get the hang of the Charles there are the alluringly broad horizons of Boston harbor and ocean sailing to consider.

Still, sailing the Charles was a far sight removed from the Gut or the high ridged waves of the Atlantic. The Charles is wide and deep enough to not have a noticeable current or many waves to speak of, and, in truth, it is the best view of the city, from the brownstones of Back Bay to the long, shadowy sliver of the Hancock and the Prudential Towers. After work, I would hustle down to the dock to head out onto the water for an hour or two. Even in its tamed, big-city environs, the river still had the faint allure of man against nature, tugging the wind into the pocket of your sail, corralling it to your bidding. Being alone with your thoughts out on the water has a certain capital-R Romantic beauty to it: Between the shores you feel the captain of not just your boat, but of your very immortal soul. After several weeks of cutting back and before between the two bridges, I was ready.

My first time taking the sailing test, I panicked: The boat felt like a cork bobbing in the water, tossed around by the wind. Oblivious kayakers and other testing boats crowded the buoys, and they felt precariously close to an outcropping of rocks. I sailed back and forth for half an hour, looking for an opening, before the teenager doing the examination pattered over in the launch and quietly told me that it was OK but I had failed.

Much of sailing, I came to learn, is highly intuitive while seemingly defying a land-dweller's logic. You have to overcome this logic and the person you are on land to sail a boat: push the tiller left and the boat goes right, when the boat heels—tipping dangerously to one side—you have to force yourself to sit on the far edge, right where it feels the most precarious, and when you find yourself stuck in irons, that is when you

must push everything away from you. Push the tiller out all the way and swing the boom as far it will go. Make no mistake, these are drastic steps, but eventually the wind will push on the back of the sail, catching on the reverse side and you will be sailing again. That, perhaps, is the most crucial lesson when learning to sail. It was something my 12-year-old self had never really understood about the entire endeavor: when stuck, the only way to get going again is to push.

The second time I took the test, the wind shifted and I was caught in irons. Sitting in irons is an automatic failure, but I was quick with the boom and the tiller, just wiggling out and through the buoys for a clear passing mark, according to the instructor. I called my sister to see if she wanted to go sailing with me that next weekend. When we were both quite young, our grandparents took us on *Cygnets* for an overnight sailing trip from Biddeford Pool to Cape Porpoise. At the time, being all of eight years old, I imagined *Cygnets* capable of crossing the Atlantic. The entire time, I was certain a squall would creep up the coast, catching us by surprise and tossing my grandparents into the tumultuous sea. Instead, my grandmother cooked dinner on an electric griddle and we watched the sun set over Cape Porpoise, sitting on the deck of *Cygnets*. This is how sailing gets into your bones.

The next time my sister and I went sailing, it was a picturesque day in Boston, with just enough of a breeze to keep us from stalling out as we floated up and down the Charles, in a sailboat together for the first time in perhaps fifteen years. We talked about our grandfather's favorite mantra, how it was "better to be lucky than good." As a teenager, I used to think this was just some cynical old-person adage, but in the few intervening years since his death I've come to believe it myself. There is certainly some bad luck out there. Sometimes you cross the street a second too early, sometimes someone you love is incurably ill, sometimes fear rears up too soon in your life, sometimes the wind changes, and sometimes you are stuck in irons.

My grandfather used to tell a story: Once, when coming into Cape Porpoise on *Cygnets*, a sudden fog blew in off the ocean and in a mat-

ter of minutes they were enveloped by a gray wall while heading into a minefield of rocks and other boats—hitting one would have caused tremendous damage or maybe even scuttled Cygnet.

“What did you do?” I asked. “What happened?”

“We didn’t hit a single damn thing,” he told me. “We got lucky. We sailed straight through.”

After he died, after I heard the song, and after I became a sailor, I heard his words differently. Faith, it turns out, is an intractable part of life. Sometimes that faith is for a god or a better future or simply for a good, strong wind to take you into port. *Sola Fide*, it seems, is in the water. It’s in the wind, too.