

## Crossing the Bar

By Ken Sieben

George Segel had heard the basic facts about Bob Urbanski's children during the fifteen years they had been neighbors and friends and the ten George had crewed for Bob at the Waterwitch Yacht Club Wednesday night sailing races. George knew that John had studied acting and film-making in college, never graduated, and moved to Hollywood to direct. He'd never had much success beyond a few TV shows and commercials. He'd been married and divorced twice and legally required to attend a series of alcohol and drug rehabilitation programs. His sister Jean, a year younger, had been kicked out of an exclusive high school, arrested for DWI twice that Bob knew of, turned one young man into a paraplegic, and supported a succession of unemployed musicians by waiting tables before losing touch with her family.

So George was quite surprised to be introduced to John at Bob's funeral in January 2000. Marie, Bob's widow, acted happy to see her son and insisted he'd someday take over the Cabot Point "cottage," an oversized, underheated riverfront maze of gables, porches, and dormers, she had inherited from her mother, who had inherited it from hers. But John just smiled and said, "I could never take Jersey weather after thirty years in southern California." George believed what he really meant was that he couldn't allow his mother to see what a mess he'd made of his life.

George had taken an immediate liking to Marie when Bob introduced them in 1997. Five months after he first bought his Island Watch condominium with money from the sale of his late ex-wife's family home in Upper Montclair, George met Bob at the Memorial Day picnic and learned that he had recently been dumped by his second wife. He later found out that Bob had left Marie for a much younger woman in 1983, then accepted Marie's invitation to come home when she was seventy-four and he, seventy-five. Though he had divorced her to marry Randy, Marie, a devout Catholic, considered herself still married to George. They managed two pleasant years together until Bob's second stroke put him in a nursing home. George, a year older, was usually his only visitor besides Marie, but Marie insisted he still come for a formal dinner every Saturday. Five years after Bob's death, George invited Marie to his condo for a seafood dinner one Wednesday night, and it soon became a second regular weekly date. By early summer they were spending every Wednesday and Saturday sailing on the boat George had finally bought the previous fall, then cooking each other delicious dinners.

When George and Marie married in August, Marie tried not to show her disappointment that John failed to attend. Instead, she made sure all the guests saw the lovely flowers he had sent. At least, George

thought, John had not forgotten his mother, as his sister, if she were still alive, apparently had. Lacking both will and energy to continue to care for her ancestral home, Marie moved into George's condo and agreed to let their realtor neighbor Darlene Kaye rent and manage the cottage for her, even though Darlene insisted she could sell it for three and a half million dollars at the time. But Marie insisted on keeping it—"for John's retirement."

George and Marie lived a happy life together until Marie's heart began to fail in June of 2010. He left two unanswered telephone messages every week for John and emailed him when Marie's doctor explained that she might not survive another night. John arrived in time for the Friday evening wake in the smallest room at the funeral parlor. As he knelt by the closed coffin and studied the portrait of his mother taken at her second wedding, George noticed that John was wearing the same clothes he had worn to his father's funeral. The old double-breasted dark blue suit was shinier now, hanging loosely from his narrow shoulders, and he needed suspenders to hold up his wrinkled baggy pants. George couldn't believe how much John had aged in ten years. He had just turned fifty-nine but looked almost as old and frail as George himself. His face was hollow and haggard, scored by deep, shaded arroyos in his cheeks.

"Sorry I didn't come sooner," he whispered in his raspy smoker's voice, after getting up and walking to where George stood to the left, "but I couldn't let my mother see me like this."

George was angry at such an excuse and said, "You could have called her."

"The one thing I learned from my father was not to make commitments I couldn't keep. If we had spoken on the phone, she would have willed herself to stay alive until we spoke in person."

"One of many things I learned from my father was to look at things from the perspective of the other people involved." Afraid he might lose his temper, George decided to maintain silence until some guests showed up. Darlene Kaye and Paul Parnell were the first to arrive. Darlene, who never forgets a face or a name, immediately walked up, hugged them both together, and said, "Marie was a wonderful woman. George and John, I'm very sorry for your loss."

"As I am," Paul added, in that professorial voice unexpected from the proprietor of a hardware store. "John, I know you live on the other side of the country in a different world, but you should know that your mother and George were good for each other. They had a happy marriage. I hope that thought will comfort you a little. Six weeks ago, they were sailing together."

"Not many women anywhere near her age could say that," Darlene added.

"I remember her and my father winning most Lightning races when I was a kid. She was the one who taught me to sail because Dad worked such long hours. I still like to get out on the water whenever I have

the chance.”

*Bullshit!* George heard his conscience declare.

“Here come the Daltons,” said Darlene. “They’re another sailing couple. Paul and I will take our seats so George can introduce them.” Darlene and Paul quickly sat down in the back row so they could not eavesdrop as the young couple walked to the front of the room and knelt down by the coffin.

“John,” said George, when the couple had risen to join them, “I’d like you to meet my young friends, Victor and Jacqueline Dalton. They restored the classic boat I eventually bought from them. Vic and Jackie, this is John Urbanski, Marie’s son by her late first husband, Bob Urbanski.” They all shook hands as Vic and Jackie offered condolences. George added, “The Daltons have been sharing dinner with us every Saturday since we were married.”

“That’s after they take care of our three-and-a-half-year-old son and two-year-old daughter while we take their boat out for a sail,” Jackie answers. And, by the way, Mr. Urbanski, George did half the restoration work on *Zephyrus*. We never could have done it by ourselves.”

“Jackie, George is thirty years older than I am. If you can call him by his first name, then I’m John to you and Vic. Anyway, I can see my mother sailing at eighty-seven, but not baby-sitting.”

*Well*, thought George, *the man is trying to be friendly*. “The fact is,” he said out loud to all three, “Judy and Dave Driscoll always stop by to help. They’re still young enough to chase after the kids—barely into their sixties. Here they come now.”

The Daltons excused themselves to sit down with Darlene and Paul as the Driscolls waved to George. They shook hands and Judy kissed George on the cheek as George made the same introduction of John as Marie’s son by Bob Urbanski.

“Yes, we knew Bob quite well,” Dave said, “but we didn’t meet your mother until her and George’s wedding.”

“Since then, we’ve been good friends,” Judy added, thinking simultaneously that John was an alcoholic and of a friend who might be able to help him recover.

“Dinner every Saturday?” John asked, smiling, then added, “I just met the Daltons, who told me you’ve been helping to baby-sit for them.”

“Helped, yes, but your mother assumed the responsibility. Dave and I never had children, so what do we know?”

“So, my mother, in her mid to late eighties, still sailed and babysat. Did she continue to set the table with my great-grandmother’s china, silver, and crystal?”

“Absolutely!” said Dave. “She was a remarkable woman.”

“But I never thought of her as being older than I am,” added Judy. “Or George, either. They were just kindly neighbors. Sorry, George still *is* a kindly neighbor.”

###

John had taken a limo from the airport directly to the funeral parlor and arrived a few minutes before two carrying a large suitcase and a small briefcase. George wondered if his stepson expected to be put up for the night. Well, the man had flown across the country to attend his mother’s funeral, and he had been friendly with George and the guests. The funeral was scheduled for ten on Saturday morning at Holy Angels Church in Cabot Point, where Marie had attended Mass every Sunday and Holy Day of her entire life. George had partially lost his faith during his early island-hopping Seabee days of World War II, but he honored Marie’s request for a Solemn-High Mass followed by burial in a Catholic cemetery, and he genuinely hoped—even offered a prayer—that she would meet her eternal reward. George also assumed John would stay for the funeral and would need a place to stay that night. He did not look as if he could spare any money for a hotel. George’s condo had only a single bedroom and bathroom, but John would be welcome, he finally decided, to sleep on the sofa.

George also expected John to stay for the reading of the will by Marie’s attorney on Monday, though there should be no surprises. As Executor, George was to sign over the cottage and its three generations of furniture and furnishings to John. The rest of Marie’s considerable investments in stocks and other securities were to be divided among Holy Angels Church, the National Catholic Bishops’ Relief Fund, and a dozen local charities from the First Aid Squad to the Cabot Point Library. Though it had been twenty-three years since George drank himself to sleep every night, perhaps this night and John’s presence would serve as suitable excuses to do so again for the next three nights, but then back to a single shot of vodka before bed.

As they were leaving the funeral parlor, George made his offer and wasn’t certain whether he felt relief or rejection by John’s response. “No, thanks, George. I wouldn’t think of getting in your way. Darlene and Paul have invited me for dinner and to spend tonight. We have to talk about the cottage, and they have an extra bedroom.”

“You really don’t intend to live in that nineteenth-century McMansion, do you?”

“No, but I’m planning to stay in the area, and Darlene says the present tenant might be interested in buying. Everything I own is in my suitcase or my briefcase.”

*I didn't see you two talking much at the wake. Did you choose to call her this past month to discuss your finances when you couldn't find the time to call your dying mother? Well, Mister, you're not welcome to sleep on my sofa, and I'll be damned if I'll share my vodka with you!*

George also felt a twinge of jealousy that he had not been invited for dinner. Darlene had offered him friendship when she'd sold him the condo next door to hers back in December of 1986 and offered him thrilling sex at least twice a month for the next twenty years. George never felt jealous of Darlene's other boyfriends and toyboys, not even Paul when she announced that he was moving in as her permanent full-time lover three years before. She had stopped inviting George into her bed after persuading him that he needed a regular wife, a lifetime companion. She had approved of Marie before he even realized he loved Marie with a passion he'd never felt for Darlene. Darlene was—is, and always will be—a great piece of ass, but Marie was the wife Estelle never had been and Darlene could never be. Darlene was a tigress in bed; Marie was warm and cuddly. They still managed sex once every month or two, as recently as Tuesday, the night before he woke up to find her dead in his arms.

Then George's jealousy dissolved as he realized Darlene and John *did* have legitimate financial matters to discuss. *Stop fretting, you old fool. Take life one day at a time. You might not even wake up tomorrow—if you're lucky.*

But George did wake up on Saturday at 5:45, wishing he'd taken an extra drink or two the previous night to make him sleep later. This was the fourth morning he had awakened alone and, once again, he reminded himself, *One day at a time.*

Darlene telephoned at eight-thirty to ask if George wanted to ride to the church and cemetery with her, Paul, and John, then return to her place for brunch. The Daltons and the Driscolls would also be joining them. Not wanting to spend the day alone, George agreed. It was three miles to Holy Angels via Ocean Boulevard, but Paul was afraid the beach traffic would be too heavy, so they took the inland route and allowed themselves forty-five minutes. George didn't know what kind of conversation to expect, so he was surprised when John began by announcing, "Darlene persuaded my tenant to make a decent enough offer on the cottage that I couldn't refuse. She hopes to close within a month."

"And," Darlene added, "Dave and Judy leave for a month in Germany on Monday and asked John to house-sit for them. He'll stay with them tonight and tomorrow, to learn where things are and what plants have to be watered. Then, as soon as he's sold the cottage, he can buy his own place."

"So, then," George said more than asked, "you'll really be staying in the area."

"Yes, George. I'd like to try some serious writing, which you can't do in Hollywood. I need to get back

to my roots.”

“I thought you couldn’t take Jersey weather.”

“Ten years ago, no. Now, I’m looking forward to seasons again. I want to swim in the Atlantic Ocean instead of a heated pool.”

“On Christmas Day, with the Polar Bear Club?” George found himself enjoying this conversation.

“Maybe I’ll just bundle up and watch them, at least this year.” John smiled at George for the first time. It made him look much better. Perhaps they could be friends.

And George did, over the next three weeks, become friendly with the man toward whom he had never quite felt step-fatherly. George admired John’s renewed will to stop his self-destructive drinking. George didn’t find out until the end of the third week of the Driscolls’ vacation that, the night before they left, Judy had introduced John to an old friend of hers from her own A.A. years during the 90s, a woman named Geraldine, who had drunk herself into a serious accident, a divorce, and loss of custody of her daughter. Gerry and John, the same age, had apparently been attracted to each other.

She was impressed with his plan to write fiction based on thirty-eight years of experience in the entertainment industry. His novels were to be serious character studies, not gossip reporting. He, in turn, admired her for building a new life, first as an LPN, then an RN, now a Nurse Supervisor. She had not had a drink since her daughter Angela, now a twenty-seven-year-old San Francisco attorney, was a year old, and mother and adult daughter had forged and maintained a good relationship. If she could re-gain control over herself and re-order her life, so, John insisted, could he. If he, she promised, stayed sober for six months and made a serious effort to write every day, they could seriously consider creating a life together.

###

The morning after George called his lawyer to add a sentence to his will, he died as peacefully in his sleep as Marie had. Darlene, his executor, had his body cremated, then arranged with Vic and Jackie to sail her, Paul, and John out to the three-mile limit to scatter the ashes at sea and read them George’s will. She also arranged to leave Vic and Jackie’s kids with the Driscolls, who had just returned from Germany.

The group was underway by six-thirty on an overcast Saturday evening. The wind blew out of the west at ten to twelve knots. Within half an hour, they had rounded Sandy Hook and jibed to a due east course. With the wind behind them Jackie swung the big genoa jib out to the opposite side of the mast from the mainsail. “If I can hold us wing-on-wing, we should be three miles offshore in less than forty-five minutes,” Vic said.

Paul stretched his arms out, took a deep breath, and said, "I could get used to this pretty quickly. I'm seventy-one and this is the first time I've ever been on a boat."

"I think it's the first Saturday you've ever let someone else mind the store," added Darlene. "I'll bet you could get used to that, too."

"Indeed I could. I'll probably never retire completely, but maybe I *will* start taking Saturdays off."

They sailed in silence for a few minutes, enjoying the smooth ride, the gray clouds, the two-to-three-foot waves, until Darlene announced, "John, Vic, and Jackie, I have a copy of George's will to give to each of you, so I'm not going to bore you by reading all the legalese. Instead, I'll just sum up the provisions and try to answer any questions. John and Paul, I'd like you to go into the cabin so I can speak privately with the Daltons about matters that don't concern you. Then, I'll speak privately with John."

Paul said, "I'll pour us some coffee, okay?" and John agreed. They graciously entered the cabin and dropped the washboards behind them, and slid the hatch closed, leaving Darlene alone with Vic and Jackie in the cockpit. Vic was steering the boat while Jackie played the jibsheet in and out. "First of all," Darlene began, "this sixty-two-year-old sloop, *Zephyrus*, now belongs to you. When you had to sell it to prepare for the arrival of your first baby, George bought it. He had helped with the restoration and didn't want to see some stranger ruin all your work. But George never had children and has no living relatives, so he considered you two the logical inheritors. Dock rental is paid through December.

"We never expected it," said Vic. "George never said a word."

"And I'm pregnant again, so I don't know if we'll have the time to sail."

"Congratulations on the pregnancy. You're both wonderful parents. But the boat is yours. I've signed it over to you, so it's yours to keep, put into storage, or sell. George would understand because he always wanted to have children."

"We'll have to think about it very carefully," said Vic. "It's worth a lot of money to the right person."

"Maybe we'll try eBay," said Jackie.

"Okay, then," answered Darlene, "here's something else to consider. George also asked me to sell his condo and use part of the proceeds to set up a trust fund for your children's college educations. The wording allows you a lot of leeway to consider any kind of trade school, distance learning, whatever. If they get accepted at Princeton or MIT, their expenses will be paid by the trust fund. If they don't use the money by age twenty-five, it is to be divided up among the same charitable organizations as Marie left her money to."

"I don't know what to say," Vic said.

“George was always so generous with us,” Jackie added. “He gave us the down payment on our house when he learned I was pregnant the first time.”

“All I can say,” Darlene answered, “is that he truly admired you two as a model married couple. His first marriage was a disaster; yours seemed ideal to him. I’ve never wanted to marry, though I’m happy living with Paul, but I can also see you two as the ideal couple. George considered you his grandchildren. And I personally think each of you has always been the other’s best friend. George wasn’t certain about of an afterlife, but if it turns out there is, I’m certain he’ll be very happy for you.”

Jackie wiped a tear from her eye and said, “All four of our grandfathers died before we were old enough to remember them. I think I’ll always remember George in that role.”

“I think that’s wonderful,” said Darlene. “Now, I’m going into the cabin to speak with John. I’ll send Paul out to keep you company. Maybe you can teach him how to sail. I just love this boat!”

Inside the cabin alone with John, Darlene poured herself a cup of coffee and said, “George added a new proviso to his will the night before he died. It involves you, and it’s very personal and private. I know about it because he asked me to be his executor many years ago, but it’s really none of my business. I’m not going to presume to offer any advice, and I don’t know you well enough to make any kind of judgment about you. May I proceed with that understanding?”

“Yes, please do.”

“You mentioned to Paul and me, and to George, at dinner on Monday that you found yourself attracted to Geraldine Turner, Judy Driscoll’s friend from A.A.”

“Yes, I *am* very fond of her.”

“You also said you thought the attraction was mutual and that she offered to consider an affair or a long-term relationship—you were a little vague about that, but, again, it’s not for me to judge—if you stayed sober for six months.”

“That’s right. Frankly, I’d like to marry her.”

“Well, George apparently decided marriage to the right woman would be good for you. He left you a wedding present of \$100,000 if you and Gerry marry within a year of his death. If you don’t, the money goes to your mother’s charities. Personally, I don’t believe he meant it as a bribe, but rather as a good-will offering.”

“Then that’s the way I’ll accept it. I’ve been sober for three weeks, thanks mostly to Gerry. If I can make it another twenty-three weeks, which I fully intend to do, I’ll tell her about the will. If she chooses to just live together, I’ll be a happy man. If she agrees to marry me, we’ll be better off financially.”

“Well, John, I’ve done my duty by you, and I wish you well. I won’t discuss it with anyone, but Vic and Jackie will get a copy of the will and might wonder about it. I think you’d be wise to discuss it with them privately. The only other thing I have to say is that George’s condo is for sale, and I’m obligated to get the highest price I can for it. I’ve assessed it for \$685,000, so it’s yours today if you offer that. If I put it on the open market, I might get more—or less. I’ll even throw in the furniture. You can move in tonight, or spend a few nights with Paul and me while we clean the place out. I know you’ll have the cash when we close on your cottage on Monday.”

“Can I let you know when we get back tonight?”

“Sure. You need time to think.” Darlene looked at her watch and added, “It’s almost sunset. Let’s join the others on deck and get ready to fulfill the rest of the terms of George’s will.”

“Why is sunset important.”

“Be patient. I only want to explain it once.”

Back in the cockpit with the others, Darlene asked Vic, “Are we three miles offshore yet?”

“A little beyond.”

“Paul, will you take the wheel so Vic and Jackie can handle the ashes? We’ve decided they are his spiritual grandchildren. And, John, you *were* George’s stepson, so I’m going to ask you to read a poem written in 1889 by Alfred Tennyson called “Crossing the Bar.” It was George’s favorite—yes, he was an engineer, but he was also widely read in history and literature—and he asked specifically that it be read at sunset as his ashes were being spread at sea. The sun is just starting to set over Staten Island.”

Darlene handed John a copy of the poem, then added, “The phrase ‘moaning of the bar’ referred to the sound made as ships were driven across the sandbars that blocked most inlets before dredging technology was developed. Captains had to wait for a spring high tide or a strong enough offshore wind to blow their ships across the sandbars. From what I’ve read, the screeching sound frightened captains, crews, and owners equally.”

As John began to read, Vic and Jackie turned the box of ashes upside down over the port stern rail and shook them adrift.

“Sunset and evening star,  
And one clear call for me!  
And may there be no moaning of the bar,  
When I put out to sea,

“But such a tide as moving seems asleep,  
Too full for sound and foam,  
When that which drew from out this boundless deep  
Turns again home.

“Twilight and evening bell  
And after that the dark,  
And may there be no sadness of farewell,  
When I embark;

“For tho’ from out our bourne of Time and Place  
The flood may bear me far.  
I hope to see my pilot face to face  
When I have crost the bar.”

As Vic re-takes the wheel from Paul, he calls to Jackie, “Ready to come about?”

“Ready!” she answers.

“Hard alee!” Vic hauls the main in close, swings the wheel around, ducks as the boom passes over his head, while Jackie pulls in the jib sheet, then winches it tight. They are now sailing close-hauled on a northwest tack heading for home and the rest of their lives.

© 2011, Ken Sieben