

Race To Sandy Ground

They trolled over deep water with jigs attached to four stubby rods sticking out of rod holders in the gunwales. They'd caught two mackerel earlier, both about ten pounds, but not a challenge on the heavy rigs they were using. The wind picked up. The rollers had whitecaps now and the troughs between the waves grew deeper. With the sun getting higher, the chances for something big, a dolphin or marlin, were getting slim.

Ledger sat in the fighting chair looking out toward the horizon where isolated dark clouds formed with gray showers underneath. One of the storms that had a rainbow at the trailing edge moved with the wind in front of a craggy island to the south. The rain erased the island as it moved across, and the rainbow repainted it as it swept by.

When the sun went behind a cloud, Webb took off his long-billed cap with a cloth curtain sewn to the band on the back and sides to protect his neck and Ledger saw his sandy hair and freckled face for the first time. Webb dropped his sunglasses to dangle from the cord around his neck as he squinted out over the water looking for the birds that would signal a ball of mullet where the game fish would be. The disks around his eyes, the shape of his sunglasses, indicated the pink his face would be if not a fisherman. The pupils of his eyes were the blue of the ocean.

There were no birds. Their agreement was to fish for marlin until noon. There were two more hours of fishing to go, but they were wasting their time. Webb knew it also, but would never admit it to a paying customer.

Webb would only agree to a half day of fishing because he and his boat had to be at Sandy Ground at one o'clock for the start of the sailboat race. His role was to accompany the race boats during the competition in case there was an accident. In exchange for the remaining half day of fishing, Webb had offered to allow Ledger to go with him to watch the race.

“There should be plenty of wind for the race,” Ledger said.

Webb seemed startled when he turned, his usual smile gone. He passionately squawked something which Ledger did not understand at all. The language of Anguilla is English, but with a unique island dialect. Webb paused and reset his mind to speak a stilted version of the Queen’s English.

“Too much wind!” he restated. “Last year we had this much wind and we lost three boats.”

“They’re not good sailors then. They should be able to control a sailboat in this kind of wind.”

“No, no. They are good sailors. Some are my cousins. They have been sailing all their lives.”

“So why did they lose their boats?”

“The winner will be the one who takes the most chances, the one that pushes to the limit and gets away with it. When the wind is up and they are getting as much wind as they can, an unexpected gust will send them over. It can’t be helped.”

“It could if they allowed for the gusts.”

“Yes, but if they are cautious, they will lose. My father owned one of the boats that my cousin raced. When it went down in a race, my father did not hold it against him. However, if he had come in last, he and my father would have never spoken again. There would have been too much shame.”

“You people take racing seriously.”

“Yes, yes. It’s our tradition. For some islands it is soccer; for others, it is baseball; for Anguilla, it is sailboat racing. Today everyone on the island will either be watching from the cliff or, if they have to work, listening to it on radio.”

“Then let’s go now. We can watch the boats prepare for the race.”

“Yes, yes, you are right. That is the best part.”

Webb steered the boat in a wide arc to prevent the lines from crossing. His eyes brightened now that the talk had turned to racing.

“We’ll troll on the way to Sandy Ground and still be there in plenty of time.”

They motored up the north side of the island. The volcanic mountains of Saint Martin rose from behind low-lying Anguilla. From the perspective of the boat, the two islands looked like one, although they are twenty miles apart. Square sails flapped above as Ledger imagined himself as that first sailor trying to make sense of it all, sailing toward the edge of the world that could come at any moment.

The shoreline on this side of Anguilla is the ragged edge of a limestone plate thrust out of the ocean when the shell of the earth cracked millions of years ago. The six thousand foot deep gouge in the ocean floor underneath them, called the canyon, is the breach of this fault. To the right side of the boat stretched the infinity of blue sky and bluer ocean. In that direction, to the north, they could motor for weeks and never see anything except the ocean until they reached Iceland.

When they entered the bay at Sandy Ground, the cliff on the windward side moderated the wind, releasing them from the giant swells of the open ocean. The narrow entrance opened onto a wide ribbon of beach. The sailboats were equally spaced with their noses to shore; their naked masts erratically stirring the air as the boats tossed around in the surf. Webb headed to a pier to the right of the boats to pick up his cousins.

Two white women in floral print bikinis, the older one stocky and the younger a willowy teen, waited in the surf. Webb threw an anchor off the bow and allowed the stern to wash around to the shore so they could climb up the ladder he hung off the back. He steadied the older one as she struggled to climb aboard.

“This is my Aunt Agnes,” he introduced. “And this is Cheri, her granddaughter, visiting from Guadeloupe. She wants to see the race too.” Webb threw a towel atop a cooler for Cheri and helped Agnes into the fighting chair. “Aunt Agnes is my spotter. We will pick up the crew if a boat flounders.”

Agnes and Webb discussed the boats in the local dialect, gesturing to the ones they knew. When Webb saw Ledger trying to understand their conversation, he gave an update in normal English.

“We think Lightning, three boats down, will be the winner. It has a good record this season. But we will be rooting for Scooby, the yellow one beside us. The skipper is our cousin.”

Ledger tried to pick out the skipper from the swarm of black bodies in and around the yellow boat—there were at least thirty. Children played in the surf between the boat and the beach. It appeared to be a party. There was no organization, no sense that a race was about to begin. Ledger had expected a more competitive atmosphere: men looking at watches, orders being shouted. In the midst of this commotion, lying quietly against the interior of the hull, a girl nursed a naked baby under her shirt.

“When does it start?” Ledger asked Webb.

“When it is time. A horn will go off when it is time.” Webb and Agnes continued discussing the boats in the dialect.

“But when will it go off?”

“When it is time.”

Cheri giggled. Both men looked at her, as she looked back and forth between them. Webb had not realize Ledger was confused until she giggled.

“It could be any time now. The Judge will wait until he thinks the wind is right for a clean getaway.” Webb chuckled back to Cheri, “We are on Island Time, aren’t we, little girl?”

Webb and Agnes continued their discussion and Cheri pretended to listen in. Ledger didn’t think she understood the Anguilla dialect either. Cheri was at that metamorphic point between cute girl and beautiful woman. Her budding breasts did not fill the halter top and her hips were just beginning to spread. She turned slowly and deliberately to face him when she felt herself being appraised. Her face was a scowl intended to make a dirty old man turn away, but he

didn't. He engaged her eyes, with an assuring smile creeping into the corners of his lips. You will molt like a butterfly, he wanted to say. She read this somehow and smiled back.

Finally the air horn blared and there was instant commotion. Many on Scooby leaped into the water while others hefted themselves from the water onto the gunwales and slithered aboard. The anchors that kept the boat tethered in place were well up the beach and Ledger expected crew members to be retrieving them back to the boat; but instead, the ropes were loosened from the boat and thrown overboard. Sturdy men wading chest deep pushed the bow around to face open water as the sails were being raised on board. The woman who had been nursing handed the baby across the gunwale to one of the men in the water just as the wind caught in the main sail. The heavy boom snapped just above her head. They were under sail in seconds. The sails of the other boats up the beach were filling also.

"This is the most dangerous part," Webb advised.

Without speed, the rudders were ineffective so the boats lurched menacingly at each other. Agnes pointed out boats darting on collision courses. At the last possible moment one of the boats would swerve and barely miss. The rules observed by gentlemen in their regattas elsewhere was meaningless here. It was bravado mixed with seamanship; a battle was underway and the only rule was to win.

Where seconds before Ledger watched the people on the boat, now he saw the boat as one whole. He could no longer take in the details of sinew and nerves of the charging animals. Where the yellow boat had been referred to as 'it' while it slumbered tied to the shore, Agnes and Webb now spoke its given name or respectful innuendo.

"Tighten the jib, Scooby!" they coaxed, "Stay the course, Babe! Keep your nerve, make Lightning turn!"

When the first boats reached the mouth of the harbor, Webb pulled anchor and began to follow. While securing the anchors, he missed the collision that would end Scooby's day. Agnes reported it to him from her perch on the fighting chair.

"Scooby's headed back. Bent the boom in a collision with Lightning. Nobody hurt, I don't think." Scooby could still sail with the bent boom but stood no chance of winning, she told Ledger. Better to quit now than risk being last. They waved to Scooby coming back in but nobody waved back. The jib was pulled in and the main lowered to half mast. As it approached the beach, it turned into the wind. The sail fluttered; life smothered out of it again.

They followed the race in case other boats got in trouble, but the enthusiasm was gone. When the sailboats cleared the port mouth, the wind was steady at their sterns. The main sheets were deployed to one side of the boats and the jibs to the other to keep the sails from robbing wind from each other. Some deployed their colorful spinnakers although this overpowered them in the rough water. Lightning, painted black with a gold lighting bolt, moved in closer to shore for smoother water and used the spinnaker. Since they were running before the wind on parallel courses, the dangerous games of chicken were over.

Finally, Ledger had a chance to admire how the boats were made. There was no superstructure at all, only the open hull. The mast was mounted in a block midship; taut cables stabilized the mast to the sides. The rudder hinged behind the stern was attached to a long tiller handle held by the skipper. The boats were about the same size as the luxury yachts moored in the harbor but without the fluff and gadgetry of the yachting crowd. As they followed Lightning, the leader, close abeam, Ledger counted twelve total aboard. Only two were actively sailing the boat.

Ledger leaned to Webb so he wouldn't have to yell over the wind and motor noise. "Why such a large crew?"

Webb looked away a moment thinking how best to explain. “This class of boats evolved here on Anguilla to carry freight. They had to have shallow keels for these waters, but the cargo provided enough ballast to keep them upright. If the cargo was light, the skippers had to throw in rocks for extra ballast.”

Cheri shifted around on the cooler so she could lean in and listen. She had probably been wondering about the boats herself but didn’t want to ask a stupid question about what everybody else on the island already knew.

“When the tourist trade picked up in Saint Thomas and other islands, the boats started taking people along to work since there was no work here in Anguilla. They discovered if they took enough people at one time, they didn’t need cargo or extra ballast. The people could shift around in the boat to apply the weight where needed to make them faster. So that’s how the races got started. The skippers would convoy together for mutual safety anyway, so they started racing back and forth between the islands. The fastest boat had bragging rights for a year, until the next tourist season.”

The planned race course was to the end of Anguilla and then up the other side, between Anguilla and Saint Martin. But before the start, the Judge had called off the leg of the race on the far side of the island due to the high winds. This is where the three boats were lost last season. So the boats rounded a buoy at the tip of the island and headed back to Sandy Ground. The boats sailed against the wind now. As the boats tacked across their intended direction of travel, it was hard to judge who was in the lead.

“This is where the race will be won and lost,” Agnes yelled over her shoulder to Ledger who she knew was trying intently to understand the race. Webb took a direct course through the sailboats crisscrossing in front and behind them, but was careful to stay far enough away from their courses not to hinder their maneuvers. Agnes and Webb pointed whenever a boat reversed tack, sneering at each other if it was done poorly. They followed abeam but downwind

of Lightning when its starboard tack brought it close to them. The boat was tilted toward them so Ledger could observe everything going on inside.

The leeward gunwale, closest to them, was just inches above the water. On this side one man crouched in a pool of water feverishly bailing the tips of the waves that splashed over. On the far side, the windward side, the rest of the crew were crowded as far up the side as they could get. About half of them had their feet hooked under a rail across the ribs that allowed them to sit on the gunwale and lean their torsos out over the water. The rest huddled at their feet. All, except for the bailer, were rigidly still so the balance of their weight against the sails could be controlled by the skipper with the rudder.

Lightning hit a wave broadside causing it to shudder and leap. One of the outstretched bodies lost his perch and, with arms flailing, fell out of sight behind the boat. The leeward gunwale dipped allowing water to gush in. The skipper released the ropes for the sails just before it swamped. The bow swerved to face the wind and the boat righted itself. The skipper continued the boat around with the rudder and yelled for a port tack. The bodies flowed from one side of the boat to the other. When the wind caught in the main sheet, the boat lurched away in the opposite direction of only seconds before, but the unplanned maneuver had cost Lightning the lead. No one in Lightning even looked behind to see if they could spot the man that went overboard.

Webb maneuvered his stern to the man treading water and lowered the ladder. Cheri offered him the towel she had been sitting on when he tumbled in over the stern. He pulled the towel over his head and crouched in the corner of the transom. Humiliation dripped off him like the sea water. "Damn!" he spat from under the towel. Ledger could not tell if he was talking in dialect. 'Damn' was probably 'damn' in the dialect as well.

End