



Beating Toward Monterey

We were on a starboard tack, the water was kicking up over the bow pretty bad, and I was fretting about whether we would make it into port or have to continue bucking the waves all night. It had been rough ever since we had come out of the Panama Canal into the Pacific Ocean. We'd been combating the coastal winds several days now. John and Robert were sleeping and I was at the helm. It was about three in the morning and the moon had poked its nose through a mass of clouds and lighted one broad acre of round, flat ocean like a white pancake. I had pulled past it about thirty minutes ago off to starboard. My compass heading was short about ten degrees of magnetic north and I reckoned that Big Sur lay off to starboard too.

Bob was snoring. John slept quietly. I thought about Robbie and wondered how she was doing three thousand miles away in Florida. And Kathleen, wherever she was, how she was doing; and what it would be like when my sleepers and I finally sailed into Monterey Bay and anchored out for a week to enjoy the town. To port, about thirty

degrees off north, a bit forward, about a fifth of the way up into the sky, was a big, bright star blinking. I wondered if it was a satellite.

Aft and starboard, a couple of hundred yards off the Big Sur coast, I heard the sea lions barking from rocks where they were resting. Then they got quiet. It was very quiet out on the ocean except for the splash of the water. The wind was about twenty knots in our face, which is a pretty good blow. Port swells were coming in every ten to twelve seconds, and as we crashed into them the salt water split over the bow, came down across the deck, some ran out the scuppers, and a good chunk made its way into the cockpit with me. I had on my foul weather gear, including a wool stocking cap and my knee length boots. I was dry and warm and comfortable.

It was good being alone in the boat, with Bob and John sleeping, to be able to think about Robbie and Kathleen three thousand miles off. I wondered if I had the chance to do it over again would I have the sense to do it right. I had first seen Robbie when I was holding a trombone in junior high school. She had walked into the band room in a tight red, white, and blue knit, sleeveless sweater and my heart had dropped into my pants. I shouldn't say it that way; it wasn't sexual. It was just that she looked so good and lean and she had such pretty high, taut breasts; and that perky, lean nose and that sharply outlined mouth, she had too. No doubt about it. She was the first love of my life. Now, sitting in the sloop in the Pacific Ocean, beating north against a twenty-knot wind, it was clear she was the last love of my life. Which I guess is to say the only love of my life, but the first one I blew bad, really bad. The worst thing I ever did.

And Kathleen, she was the daughter we had a year after being married. It was bad the way I did that. We were drunk one night. We'd been to a party at her English professor's house near the fort where I was in infantry boot camp, and I didn't use any caution; neither did she. It was three months after we'd been married, and it was two months after I'd taken the airline stewardess, who'd served us on our flight to Kansas City on our honeymoon, out into the park and made love to her on the grass under the swings. I tried to figure out for a long time why it went that way. I even spent eighteen months in the Veteran Administration's psychological counseling program looking for an answer, and the best they could come up with was I hated my father because he was a

mean son of a bitch, and so I slept with other women to show him I was independent; and that hurt Robbie, and it hurt Kathleen, and it hurt me, and I guess sometimes that's just the way things are and it's too late to do anything about it now but accept it.

The moon picked up another spot off to starboard. This one was also about an acre or two in size, flat and calm. Strange how the ocean works that way at night. There can be swells coming in, but someplace, for some reason, there'll be a flat piece of water that catches the moon and comes up into your eyes like it had some kind of meaning to it. The stars are that way too. Clouds aren't. They're just there, white and milky, with no meaning. But the stars, the sharp stars coming out of millions of miles and light years out in the heavens down to you, and the moon landing from two hundred and fifty thousand miles away on a little acre patch of flat ocean, and lighting it. These have meaning.

I wish I knew what it was.