

Excerpt from:

“After and Before: The Story of Hatley Chambers”

By Glenn Seerup

...I followed the sidewalk. It led down to the park and the rolling path winding along the side of the Charles River Basin.

“Hatley! Hatley! Hatley!” The sound of my name coming from across the park awakened me from my reverie. The volume grew as the sound approached quickly. A girl on roller blades with a baseball hat sped toward me. As she abruptly slammed on the brakes, stopping right in front of me, I stood nose to nose with Leigh.

“You scared the shit out of me, Leigh.” I gasped stepping back. “I thought you were going to skate right through me.”

“It’s better than being run down by a stranger right? What are you doing wandering around my park with your head down anyway? That’s awful dangerous with loons like me on the loose.”

“Just clearing my head. I thought I was safe. You are supposed to be working.”

“I told’em it’s a nice day, I’m taking the afternoon off. Want to go clear your head on a sailboat?”

“A sailboat? What are you talking about?” She caught me completely off guard.

“Great wind on the basin today, I’m going down to take out a sailboat.”

“You can do that?”

“Stop with the questions! Damn you’re making this difficult, just go with it. Do you want to go on the sailboat or not? I’m not gonna stand here and discuss it any longer.” She started skating past me.

“All right all right. Where should I meet you?”

“Meet me at the entrance to the boat house. I’ll go check in.” She called back without turning.

It took me several minutes to retrace my steps back to the boat house. I always envied the people tooling around the river on the sailboats as I walked across the bridge. They seemed so carefree and happy. They always waved but I always felt it was a ‘Hey look at me, I’m sailing’ wave not a ‘Hi how are you’ wave. I was excited to get to be one of them.

“Here.” Leigh threw a lifejacket at me. “Put that on and sign this.” She said gesturing to the waiver form on the counter. “You ever sailed before?” I shook my head no. She threw her head back laughing an evil laugh, turned, and walked out the door. I followed, suddenly reluctant. “Do you want to put anything in a locker?”

“Can I take my camera? Will it get wet?”

“You can take it. But leave the rest of your stuff so it’s not bouncing around.”

We walked out to the dock where several identical boats were lined up. Leigh strode directly to number 49 and jumped down into the boat, turned and held her hand out for me.

The hull, a glorified oversized bathtub with two bench-like planks running down the sides, sat four people somewhat cramped. With only the two of us, however, there was plenty of room to move around. Leigh parked me toward the front, telling me not to move until we were out of the mooring area. I watched as she adjusted lines, tied knots, and made sure that everything that was supposed to move, did so appropriately. Never before had I seen her so energetic and thorough about anything. I could practically see her mental checklist as she worked her way down knocking off items one by one. I watched in silence, afraid to break her concentration.

Finally she let loose the last knot and we slowly separated from the dock. The breeze caught hold and we headed directly across toward another group of docked boats. A low groan began to emit from my throat when we got within ten feet of the other boats before abruptly turning. The sail violently crashed across the boat with Leigh, never flinching, expertly ducking her head under the boom. With that we headed for the narrow passage to the river basin.

“Were you showing off or just trying to scare the hell out of me?” I asked as we hit the open water.

“We had to tack that way to get the right line.” She answered.

“I know I’m a novice but why didn’t you just head straight out?”

“Dumbass. You can’t sail directly into the wind. Seriously, you’ve never sailed before?”

“No. I know absolutely nothing about this.” She chuckled. Leigh always enjoyed having the upper hand. She thrived on having other people at her mercy. This seemed to be my theme for the day - first held hostage by Daniel at the building, now by Leigh on the water.

“You can move back here now. Just be ready to duck when I tell you to. You know why they call this the boom?” She asked me while smacking her hand on the boom. “Because that’s the sound it makes when it whacks you on the head when you’re not paying attention.” I uneasily slid down the bench toward her, one hand feeling my way along the edge of the tub, the other clasped firmly around my camera, even though the strap was securely wrapped around my shoulder and torso.

Once settled, I looked at Leigh and saw a person I’d never seen before. She sat up straight and tall, arms taut, one hand on the rudder and one holding the main sheet. Her head tilted up, braced against the wind whipping across the sail, she taunted the wind with her strong set jaw. Constantly making adjustments with the rudder, she deftly guided that boat across the expanse of water, past the other boats, greeting them with a friendly wave and a smile. The surly girl I knew that sat on the front steps of our apartment building snarling at passers-by no longer existed in this setting.

“Leigh, this is a side of you I’ve never seen before. It’s kind of nice.” She maintained her stare off into the distance over my left shoulder.

“Prepare to tack.” She said.

“What does that mean?”

“Duck, idiot.” With that she threw the rudder to the side and the boat lurched to the left. I pulled my head down as the boom swung across just grazing my hair on its way.

“Oh. I’ll try to remember that.” I replied sarcastically once I recovered. “I mean it though, you look happier here than I think I’ve ever seen you.”

“Don’t go getting all mushy on me. This ain’t a date or nothing. Just enjoy the ride.” I did, however, see a smile peek out from her tough face.

The Charles River separates Boston from Cambridge and the Basin is where it widens out right on the edge of downtown Boston. Some of the best views of the City are from out on the water. We sailed along the Boston side and waved to the people in the park. I felt guilty and tried to be sincere with my wave and not give a ‘Hey look at me’ wave, but it was hard because that’s really how I felt. The freedom, sun, and wind in my face raised my spirits. I finally could relax fairly certain that I would have at least a two second warning before the mast tried to decapitate me. I felt the tension of earlier in the day seeping out of my shoulders and the muscles in my jaw slowly relaxing.

“How come you’re not snapping away with that camera of your? Isn’t that what you do? These are the best views in the city and you’ve got that thing tied to your gut.”

“I’m not really in the mood.” A spasm of tension coursed up my spine.

“Not in the mood? That’s horse shit. That’s what you do. That’s your life. If you’re not in the mood out here you’re not alive.”

“That’s a little harsh. I’m just having a rough day. You’re always grumpy. What’s your excuse?” She looked at me dumbfounded.

“You haven’t even seen grumpy. Grumpy is how I am at work when I have to deal with people. I’m downright pleasant when you see me. People are stupid and incompetent. It makes me sad and depressed to see the ignorance of people and I can’t shake it when I get home at night. I replay my day over and over in my head and get madder and madder at myself for putting myself in this position. I don’t like who I’ve become at work and I resent the people I work for and work with just for being there and putting up with it just like I do. It’s a relentless downward spiral and I don’t see an escape. The only

things that lift me up are being out here on the water away from people where I can free my mind, feel the wind whipping, and see the beautiful façade of the city which masks the ugliness of the people, and knowing people like you, Hat, who are genuinely good people and are determined to spend their lives creating their own niche doing something they love rather than fitting into a predetermined societal slot in some corporation trudging through their days just waiting to die. Everybody has to find their safe place to maintain their sanity. Sailing is mine. I've never brought anybody out here before. I don't share my safe place. Your safe place is behind that black box. It's your true love and I envy you because you're finding a way to make it your life. Whatever happened earlier today is irrelevant. Relax your grip on the side of this bathtub and get back into your safe place. Start doing what you do. Prepare to tack."

"What? Oh!" I ducked.

"I only invited you here because you're different from most people I meet. You have a passion. Whether you even realize it or not, it's in you. I don't let people see this side of me. I spend a lot of energy on my tough exterior and I worry that if people see me here they won't respect me anymore. It may be stupid but it's how I cope. Everybody should have some secrets. It keeps life interesting."

I understood what she said but the memory of my belittling by Daniel and the truths of his arguments still resonated as well. Not wanting to disappoint Leigh I picked up my camera and started taking pictures. The sun reflecting off the ripples in the water as another sailboat lumbered past, the couple having a romantic picnic in the park amidst a circle of pigeons awaiting their chance for a snack, the jealous tourist looking longingly down at us and waving. It felt good. It felt right.

I turned the camera at the Longfellow Bridge as a red line train charged up from the subway and clanged slowly across. I'd ridden that train staring out the windows hundreds of times, admiring the amazing vista across the river to the gleaming glass tower of the John Hancock building, but I'd never noticed the beauty of the train itself as it floats across the bridge providing a convenient connection between the two land masses for thousands of people each day. When you're on the train you only see what's in front of you and don't get a sense of the scale of the train – the immense mass of steel floating above the endless parallel lines of metal, as the line of identical cars slid past, my lens landed on the third car from the end and the intricate graffiti tattooed across the back half. The riders inside have no idea that they are a part of a traveling billboard for an entrepreneurial delinquent lurking secretly in some recess of the city plotting his next assault.

With my excitement growing I asked Leigh to take us closer to the bridge. Without a word, the floating tub lurched around and we proceeded straight across the basin. The boat leaning wildly to the right, or starboard, she climbed up on the edge, tucked her feet under the board on the opposite side and leaned back to counter balance the force of the strengthening wind. Her jaw set defiantly, she drew in a deep breath and motioned me to join her on the edge. I climbed up and we both lay back until our bodies were horizontal as the boat rolled over the growing waves splashing a refreshing mist across our faces. She looked at me and actually smiled.

"This is why I come here." She said with a flushed face and a gasp for air, as she eased out the sail and we slowed down. She continued until we were almost directly underneath the bridge and could see daylight between the rails. Just then another train rumbled across, a huge expanse of metal hovering precariously over our heads blotting out the sunlight in sixty foot increments as it stuttered past. I couldn't snap photos fast enough. When I finished I noticed Leigh looking at me, obviously pleased with herself, and a satisfied smile beaming on her face. The sky was beginning to fade to orange and I knew we didn't have much time.

"Can you make us go fast again?"

"You bet your ass!"

Off we went.