



NARROW DOG TO INDIAN RIVER

TERRY DARLINGTON

**TRANSWORLD
BOOKS**

About the Book

No-one has ever sailed an English narrowboat in the USA before ... for reasons that become clear as Terry and Monica Darlington and their whippet Jim sail down the little-known Eastern Seaboard of the USA - including thirty-mile sea crossings, blasting heat, tornadoes, alligators, and the walking dead ...

But the real danger comes from the Good Ole Boys and Girls of the Deep South waiting along the shore. Captains and planters, heroes and drunks, dancing dicks and beautiful spies all want to meet the Brits on their painted boat and their thin dog and take them home and party them to death.

Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Florida - lost arcadias, shining sounds, and incomparable cities - a thousand miles unfold at six miles an hour on a hilarious, dangerous and always surprising journey through a wonderland.

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Narrow Dog to Indian River

Terry Darlington

To
Lucy and Richard
Clifford and Katherine
Georgia and Mark

with our love

I've come on Floridas you won't believe -
Arthur Rimbaud, 'The Drunken Boat'

CHAPTER ONE

STAFFORDSHIRE

Their Gods Are Not Our Gods



THE LIMEY QUEEN of Greenwich Village - Covered Thinly with Maple Syrup - The Marine Terminal - A Thread of Silver - Captain Rob - The Wayfaring Stranger - Their Gods Are Not Our Gods - Farewell Party - Mum and Dad - Summerstreet Lane - The Small Green Ones with the Spotted Bellies - Pork Cracklins - Mantovani - Jesus Ears - Derek and the Alligators

The trouble with you is you are obsessed with the USA, said Monica. The GIs gave you too much gum in the war and you read too many comics and saw too many films - too much Captain Marvel, too much Tarzan, too much Terry and the Pirates, too much Alan Ladd. But America will crush you like

it always has. Remember after the New York Marathon, when that gay fireman went off with you over his shoulder? If I hadn't come along you would be Tits Magee now, the Limey Queen of Greenwich Village.

I was in a bit of a state, I said. He was trying to help - he was very nice.

What about when you opened an office on Madison Avenue and lost us a fortune twice? Now you want to sail down the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway. It is eleven hundred miles long. There are sea crossings bigger than the English Channel. There are flies. There are alligators. There are winds that blow at two hundred miles an hour. Ten thousand people drowned in Galveston and look what happened to New Orleans. And you want to sail down it in a canal boat six feet ten inches wide.

There's no such thing as a wind of two hundred miles an hour, I said - the air would catch fire. And Galveston and New Orleans are somewhere else - they are on the Gulf of Mexico.

But that's where you want us to go, isn't it? A narrowboat on the Gulf of Mexico, and you have conquered the US or died in the attempt. And Jim has to die with us. You and me are seventy; we've had our lives, but Jim's only five. He knows you are going boating again - the way he looks at us and shivers. This isn't the Trent and Mersey Canal, it's not the Thames at Henley, it's not the Rhône - this is a bloody wilderness, halfway round the world.

You could stay at home, I said.

You would never come back. Your bloated corpse will be found in some deserted bayou, half eaten by alligators, with three times the permitted alcohol level.

We'll go over and do a recce - check out both ends of the journey: Virginia and Florida. Trust me - I would never do anything to upset my Mon. Slightest problem, we'll stay at home.

How about rednecks and bikers, are they a slightest problem? How about gun nuts and gangsters? How about snakes and poison ivy and rip tides? How about hip-hop and preachers on the radio for a year? How about you have always bugged it up in America and now you are going to do it again? I knew there was something funny about you from the start - just because you went to Oxford and liked poetry I thought you were OK. In fact you are a bloody lunatic, and I don't know what I ever saw in you.

It was my pilgrim soul, I said, and my commanding presence, and my wild, careless laugh.

I could have married that Frenchman, said Monica. He looked like Yves Montand.

Halfway up the east coast of the USA, Chesapeake Bay reaches a hundred miles towards Washington.

At the mouth of Chesapeake Bay you turn south into the Elizabeth River. On the left is Norfolk, and on the right, Portsmouth. From our hotel room over Norfolk we looked down the river, a quarter of a mile wide. The Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway begins here, and follows the river for seven miles, and then sets out across the Great Dismal Swamp. We didn't know much about the Great Dismal Swamp, but we were not sure we liked the sound of it.

Over the river a US Navy aircraft carrier, and nearer to us a ferry crawling between the two cities; wood and rails, its false paddle-wheel turning. The sun came up quicker than in Stone, and the river went to flame then deepest blue.

There were seventeen breakfasts in the hotel, and lots of African-American waitresses who said y'all y'all the time. We knew most of the breakfasts, except for the biscuits and gravy. The biscuits were scones, and the gravy was a salty white sauce. There were funny little sausages and hills of crispy bacon. So that's what happened, I said, to the crispy bacon we used to have before the war.

If you stood at the buffet an African-American gentleman would cook you a waffle, and you could have sauce made from fake cherries, or syrup made from fake maples.

We'll get fat, said Monica. And we are already fat after sailing through France.

No doubt, I said, but what can you do? The North American continent is blessed with the riches of nature, and covered thinly with maple syrup.

*

Dave, the Operations Manager of Atlantic Containers at Portsmouth Marine Terminal, was a nice man with a beard. So that's a narrowboat, he said, looking at a photograph of the *Phyllis May*. Never seen one before - my God she's thin.

Most of the canal boats in England are like this, I said - the locks on the main system are only seven feet wide. The original barges were seventy feet long, ten feet longer than the *Phyllis May*. They were pulled by horses. The boating families lived in the little cabin at the back. It was a culture of its own and it died out when the railways and lorries took over. Then in the nineteen fifties people started making narrowboats out of steel as leisure boats.

How much does she weigh?

Seventeen tons. Ten-millimetre flat bottom: paving stones for ballast. Draws two feet - on a wet day you can sail her up Stafford High Street.

What's she like to steer?

You stand on that counter at the stern, and hold the tiller behind your back. She has no bow thrusters but I can do most of what I want if there are no big waves or winds or currents.

There are big waves and winds and currents on the Intracoastal, said Dave.

He took us round the terminal. Containers in piles, and machines a hundred feet high with two legs that pick up the

containers between their knees and roar about and put them down somewhere else. Yachts on trolleys, and lorries and helicopters and tanks, waiting for the fifty-thousand-ton roll-on roll-off container ship that will carry them off around the world.

This is your crane, said Dave – the little one. We call him Clyde. He's only two hundred feet high. I guess you will want to be on your boat when we drop her in.

Yes, said Monica, he will, and Jim and I will stay on the wharf.

I tried to take a photo of Clyde but I couldn't get far enough away.

Dave introduced us to the ladies in the Portsmouth Marine Terminal office. We can't wait to meet Jim, said Nice Amy. We have eleven dogs between five of us. Tell Jim that we will have several bags of pork skins waiting when y'all arrive – are they the same as pork scratchings?

In June, I said, Jim will give us an opinion.

Down the Intracoastal Waterway at thirty thousand feet. A thread of silver across the Great Dismal Swamp, which looked like the weather map on the telly when it's raining. Then sunlight on Albemarle Sound, and on Pamlico Sound, both wider than the English Channel. Along North Carolina the chalk line of Atlantic surf, and just inland the silver thread welling into lagoons and swamps and meanders. In South Carolina, past Charleston, and then through Georgia, the coastline is a madman's jigsaw, and it doesn't get much better in Florida. Now Lake Okeechobee is on our right, misty blue to the horizon, and the Everglades draining in endless patterns to the south.

We turn along Alligator Alley, the motorway across the peninsula, hold to the fast lane, and glide into the long slow afternoon of western Florida.

At the marina in Fort Myers the million-dollar plastic cruisers *Tarpon* and *Gulfstream Rose* lay quietly depreciating. From the rail an egret looked at us with a lemon eye, and trod its spotted foot, hustling for a sandwich. (An egret is a sort of heron, or perhaps it is the other way round.) A lizard trickled between our shoes, changing colour as it went. Four pelicans in the sky, and beyond them a vulture, its turkey head peering for corpses.

In America you pass examinations and then you can be a captain. Captain Rob was a nice man without a beard: fully denimed, blue-eyed, wiry. I would not like to be a fish on the other end of the line from Captain Rob.

You hit Albemarle Sound in North Carolina as soon as you have crossed the Great Dismal Swamp, said Captain Rob. Albemarle Sound is the estuary of the Chowan, and the Pasquotank, and the Alligator Rivers. You have got to cross it to get into the Alligator River on the other side. It is very wide. You are out of sight of land. First time I went over, the wind came round against the current and the waves were six feet high. I turned back, and I was lucky to get in. Pamlico Sound and the Neuse River are no better. But you've got nearly a year - y'all wait for a good day. There is big commercial stuff, so keep out of the way when that comes along. And the powerboats can turn you over - some of the people who drive those are crazy. But you shouldn't get squashed in a lock chamber because there are almost no locks. You are connected to the sea all down the coast.

We went down a canal connected to the sea in France, said Monica - the Rhône à Sète in the Camargue. It kept trying to wash us into the Mediterranean.

Is it going to be very hot? I asked.

Anywhere up the Waterway it can be over a hundred and absolute humidity. The heat could kill you - with you being so old. And watch for the flies. There is a green one - if you knock it off it attacks you again. Then there are the no-see-

ums - they burrow into your skin. They are so small you no-see-um.

I got some lotion from the Avon Lady, I said. It's the one the fishermen use against the clegs, the Scottish horseflies. I put some on and as I walked by our kitchen door the varnish peeled off.

Bring some for me, said Captain Rob.

What about the manatees? I asked, don't they get up to three thousand pounds?

Yes, but they are all right unless they lean on you.

What about the vultures, asked Monica, and the alligators?

The turkey buzzards won't attack you until you are nearly dead. People worry about the alligators of course, but they come out in the dark and you can see their eyes shining round the boat before they start to climb in. Have you got a steel front door?

No, said Monica.

There is a new arrival these days, said Captain Rob. It's a monitor lizard seven feet long. They run at thirty-nine miles an hour. They eat dogs.

Jim can do forty, I said.

I guess he'll have the edge then, given a fair run. The hurricanes can be a problem. They are mainly in the summer and the autumn, but last year Wilma didn't come until the middle of October. Sometimes they don't reach the Carolinas and Georgia. But sometimes they do, so they could catch you on the way down.

What happens then?

Hell and destruction. Get the boat out on to the bank and head for the high ground.

What else is there to stop us?

There are the panthers and the bears and the anacondas, and the Red Tide. We don't like to talk about the Red Tide. But even if you sink, or get ill and die - with you being so old - you will have been the first English narrowboat on the

US waterways. If you make it to Florida I will pilot you on to the Gulf of Mexico. I'll lead you out in my charter boat or come on the back of your funny boat with you. There will definitely be no fee - it will be my pleasure to help in this grand endeavour.

We went to Ida's Bon Appiteatery on First Street, Fort Myers, to celebrate the end of our research trip. I am not slow to the bar but a thin grey-haired man got there first. I was once a wayfaring stranger myself, he said, and no traveller from overseas buys his first drink while I am around. I have seen sorrow, toil and danger, he added, everywhere I go.

Look, I said, you can't do that - all right I'll have one of those beers that smell of barbecue smoke - a Samuel Adams - and cheers.

And I'll have a gin and dry martini, said Monica, and thank you very much. The barmaid filled a half-pint glass with ice and held it low. Then she took a gin bottle with a spout and held it over her head and emptied it into the glass. She looked at the glass and frowned and opened another bottle, and added another two inches from that. Then she took an aerosol of dry martini and squirted it in the direction of the glass.

I am going outside to shout at the cars, said the Wayfaring Stranger. It's all right - I know most of them. He went outside and sat down at a table and started shouting at the cars.

I turned to the man on the next stool. Would you be an American gentleman? We just love your crazy accent.

My name is Michael, said the gentleman, and I am a fireman. I was born here, and so were my parents and my grandparents but I am an Irishman of purest blood - I observe St Patrick's Day and drink little but Guinness. Empty your glasses at once so I can refill them. What is your name?

They call me Tits Magee, I said, and this is my girl, Gulfstream Rose.

It took more than one sailor to change my name to Gulfstream Rose, explained Monica.

Michael said that our hotel was in one of the older areas of the town and it was dark and we could get murdered so he would walk us back. The barmaid put a lid on Monica's drink so she could take it home for breakfast. On the way out we tried to buy a beer for the Wayfaring Stranger, but he was shouting at the cars.

There was no one around. From what we had seen of the southern USA there was never anyone around. No one in Norfolk, Virginia, day or night, and no one in Fort Myers, Florida. Just empty streets and the smell of barbecue smoke. We knew that American citizens were to be found in the shopping malls at certain times, and in bars. Where they were the rest of the time we did not discover.

Goodbye Michael - so many thanks. We'll be back.

Goodbye Tits and goodbye Gulfstream - y'all have a great trip now.

It looks like the *Phyllis May* could get down the Intracoastal with a bit of luck, I said next morning over the biscuits and gravy, if we can avoid the hurricanes. We have got June to the following spring - we have to average only an hour's cruising a day. We can choose our weather for the big crossings. We can have some lovely long stops; get to know the towns and cities, where there are any. But what bothers me is that we are not really close in with the culture here. Going down to Carcassonne was dodgy enough at times. And in France the weather is more like ours, the countryside is more like ours, the towns are more like ours. The French are Europeans like us - realistic, cautious, tired. However much you like the US, their people are not our people and their gods are not our gods. You know what they were like when we opened our office in New York - Oh of course you

will sell a lot of research reports and make a lot of money, no problem. They have long antennae – they pick up on what you want to hear. They might agree to one of my ideas about boating and we could be sent to our deaths out of politeness. Or something really American could get us what we didn't expect – like a raft of lumber or a water moccasin snake or a venomous hummingbird that kills with a peck. Or we might say the wrong thing about Vietnam or Guantanamo or Jim Reeves or the Civil War and someone will shoot us. They are very excitable, and they all have guns.

You dream up these crazy schemes and when it all gets real you start to lose your nerve, said Monica. Look at Dave and Nice Amy in Portsmouth, and Captain Rob, and the Wayfaring Stranger, and Michael. The Yanks won't shoot us – they will look after us, and Jim too. The pork skins will be waiting in Portsmouth, whatever pork skins might be.

But we must not forget, I said, for eleven hundred miles, that their pork scratchings are not our pork scratchings, and their gods are not our gods.

In Stone we organized a farewell lunchtime party and a lot of people came. Our daughter Lucy made a speech and everyone said it was much better than I would have made. Peter and Karen from Canal Cruising told us they had never seen wiring like the French wiring on the *Phyllis May* and my how they laughed. Peter said he had taken the engine out and serviced it very thoroughly and Karen gave us a silver St Christopher medal for the ignition keyring just to make sure. We talked with our friends of all we did together thirty or forty years ago and agreed it could have been yesterday afternoon. Cousin Ken, who had seen us off to cross the Channel, gave us a bottle of champagne to open if we reached the Gulf of Mexico.

Next day the papers were full of stories from Florida. A lady had been sitting on the bank kicking her feet over the

water and they found her arms inside an alligator. A scuba diver had gone down into the canal and not come up. An alligator with one eye had jumped on a jogger and pulled her into the water. There was an 87 per cent chance of a major hurricane, and the hurricane season would begin a fortnight before we arrived. Last year had been the worst year for hurricanes on record.

We must take a positive view, I said -

*How can a man die better
Than facing fearful odds
For the ashes of his fathers,
And the temples of his Gods?*

Let's go and see my mum and dad.

Down the southern end of Staffordshire is Albrighton, a little town with a church and chestnut trees.

Before our family was broken up in the war we had chestnuts in our drive. The candles were white and the leaves were soft. Then one day the candles went out and the leaves yellowed and frayed and cartwheeled away.

I collected the washing-up liquid from our camper van, and a trowel and a brush and scissors. I walked up the path. The headstone had been infringed by the sod, as if the earth were pulling it in. I bent over and cut into the grass and heaved it away and then I got some water and poured it over the stone and scrubbed it. The letters came up white - *Together again*. I knelt down.

I am not going to ask you any favours, I said, it is a long time since I visited you and I don't deserve any. I just want to say that I think of you a lot and will think of you however far I go and whatever I do.

They came into my mind as if they were not quite connected with me or with the earth but they were right by me just the same. I felt their sweetness and their

specialness, the ways in which they were each themselves and no one else.

It was no use asking them for luck – they did not care about beasts or tempests, illness or accident, breakdown or loss of will. What did it matter to them? Very soon we would be together again.

From Stone you go up the Moddershall Valley, then turn right into Cotwalton, backing into gateways to let the tractors by, and you park and walk up Summerstreet Lane.

Stiles: a rising path, across fields, into the sky. Look back and there through faintest blue is Shropshire: the Wrekin and Wenlock Edge. Jim swept round the horizon like a second hand, and came back heavy into oxygen debt, staggering and grinning. At the top of the hill, six hundred feet up, the bluebell wood – annihilating all that's made, to a blue thought in a blue shade.

Monica and I talked about Stone.

In Stone I can pretend I am retired, said Monica, not a full-time manager of crazy expeditions. I can play bridge and visit my children and my grandchildren and go down to Stone Master Marathoners. I don't have to organize a mooring for tomorrow night or send a chapter of our book to London from the middle of Burgundy on a mobile phone that doesn't work and we don't have to cross the Channel or sail an inland sea in a storm and I am not scared half the time.

There are the brick terraces, I said, and the canal and the river and the pubs, and the Christmas lights and the service at the cenotaph. And the Stone Festival, with the steeplechase and the Dog Derby that you and I invented thirty years ago. In the spring there are daffodils, and in Stonefield Park the primula in heaps of crimson and gold.

It was all so beautiful after London, said Monica. Remember that poem you wrote for our first Michaelmas –

The trees trawl the wind

*For angels
They stand among the leaves
Gold faces calm*

*At sunset they blow
Across the sky
In shining hurricanes*

*Fighting the dragon
Bearing our pain
Their blood falls
As gilded rain*

Tell me Mon, what are you looking forward to most in the USA?

I can't think of anything, said Monica.

*

Attention Kerry Finch, Store Manager, West Marine, Norfolk, Virginia

Dear Kerry - In February you kindly helped us choose our new anchors for the Intracoastal Waterway. This is to confirm we would like you to get two of 401596 for us to pick up shortly after June 20th. We will need chain and rope too.

Kind regards, Terry and Monica Darlington

Dear Terry - Nice to hear from you. For each anchor you would need about 1 eft of 3/8 chain and perhaps 250ft of rope.

Thanks, Kerry

Dear Kerry - Can you check your last sentence? I looked up eft, thinking it must be a nautical term, and it seems it is a newt. Nothing wrong with newts of course.

Kind regards, Terry

Morning Mr Darlington - Ha ha, I am sorry, the last sentence should have read 12ft . . . not 1 eft! I agree nothing wrong with newts!

Kerry

Dear Kerry - The chain and rope sound just right, and can you get us in a couple of efts? The small green ones with the spotted orange bellies if you can. And two jam-jars, please, and some string.

Yip, T

Good heavens, said Monica, it's a parcel of pork scratchings - they are from Andrew, the gentleman who does the canal web-log *Granny Buttons*. How nice - he must have sent for them specially. There are two sorts - Kettle Style Pork Cracklins, with Rinds Attached, and Fried Pork Rinds, which are puffy ones. It says they are made in Henderson, North Carolina. This English packet I bought to take with us says -

If not in good condition and within the sell-by date please return it to us with the wrapper - we will gladly replace and refund postage.

The American one says -

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.
John 3:16

There's no arguing with that, I said.

I opened the packet of Kettle Style Pork Cracklins and Jim appeared from behind the skirting boards. No, Jim, I said - no pork scratchings at home. These have been sent us for literary purposes, so we can report to an astonished world about American pork scratchings. You can have one or two in the pub tonight.

They look like ours, said Monica, and they are hard like ours, but not quite as crunchy and they taste of maple syrup and barbecue smoke.

I went to the cupboard and got the salt and poured some into the bag. In England they bang in the monosodium glutamate, I said - no messing about. If you are going to eat rubbish you may as well do it properly.

Jim started to whine. No, Jim, I said, and that's final. I put the bag on the sideboard, right at the back.

Where is that bag? asked Monica later.

We found it under the table, empty.

Jim lay in his kennel - the eyes of Princess Diana, the legs of Sebastian Coe, the mind of Ronnie Biggs.

Mantovani, said Monica, *Mantovani!* I'm not having Mantovani on my boat. They play Mantovani in supermarkets in Turkey. I know what you will do - put it on loud and drink too much beer and I'll wake up at two in the morning and you will be asleep in your chair with Jim alongside you and Mantovani pouring all over my new carpet like treacle.

Mantovani is a serious musician, I said. He was academically trained, and his father before him. His cascading strings were not done with an echo-box - he scored every note. He was enormous all over the world.

He's not being enormous on my boat. And what on earth is this? The first ever British hit parade - the hit parade of nineteen fifty-two! Who wants to listen to a hit parade of *nineteen fifty-two*?

I do - I was seventeen - it is the soundtrack of my emotional awakening. Nat King Cole is great, and Frankie Laine made a solid job of 'High Noon'. And Jo Stafford sang 'Jambalaya' and she sang 'You Belong To Me' -

*Sail through Georgia in the pouring rain
Through the hardship and through all the pain
Just remember when we're home again
You belong to me*

*See the alligators gather round
Salivating for our little hound
Just remember when we're homeward bound
You belong to me*

All right, but why Johnnie Ray? Who cares about Johnnie Ray the crying crooner? Do we have to keep alive for half a century the memory of a deaf homosexual?

That's a cruel remark, and personal and quite uncalled-for. Beethoven was deaf, and Benjamin Britten was no ladies' man. 'Walking My Baby Back Home' with the Buddy Cole

Trio is art at its most high, and 'Let's Walk That-A-Way' with Doris Day is great.

I don't know how you expect me to live with stuff like that for a year in the wilderness, said Monica. In Mid-Wales we had choirs. In London I was under Sir Malcolm Sargent.

So were a lot of ladies - Elizabeth Jane Howard, the enchantress who helped save the waterways, said she had hardly got into the room before Flash Harry had his trousers on the floor. The answer is country music - the American parallel universe where we can both be at home. Johnny Cash and his 'Ring Of Fire', and Crystal Gayle talking in her sleep, and Dolly Parton always loving you, and Kris Kristofferson with your head upon his pillow and Bobbie Gentry - a man could make a fool of himself over Bobbie Gentry. And Glen Campbell in Galveston, where he used to run.

Yes great, but I thought Galveston had been swept away.

They built it again so Jim Webb could write his song.

What about Emmylou Harris, said Monica, telling us that love hurts - the CD you keep under your pillow?

Emmylou was right, love hurts. It hurt me like hell in nineteen fifty-two, but when I met you love became very good indeed.

Smooth talker, said Monica, you can have your Mantovani.

Son of a gun, I said, we'll have some fun, on the bayou.

Jim lay on the sofa sideways, his head and front legs over the edge, as if he had melted. He looked like Salvador Dali's watch in that painting *Persistence of Memory*, but this was *Persistence of Whippet*.

Do you remember you used to call him baby names when he was a puppy? asked Monica.

I didn't call him baby names, I said. No point getting soft. He's just an animal. But he was the first dog I had that was mine - the others were yours, or the family's.

You used to call him Daddy's Little Moon-mouse.

I may have called him Daddy's Little Moon-mouse once or twice, when I was feeling sentimental.

Sentimental as an eft. And the kids heard you call him that and they used to come and tell me and we would laugh.

It's not good for kids to make fun of their father, I said - they will grow up rejecting authority.

The kids are over forty, said Monica, and they have always rejected authority and they learned it from you. Look how you got expelled from school.

I wasn't expelled - the headmaster and I came to an agreement. But oh look at Jim, isn't he sweet when he lies like that. Last weekend he could hardly stand. It was the trembling and he wouldn't eat and the vet was shut.

I wondered if he was upset because I had washed him in the bath, said Monica, after he had covered his neck and ears with cowshit. Or if he had realized what was going on. I know what he would think about going down the Intracoastal Waterway.

I was afraid we would lose him, I said. Like our retrievers when they got that infection. They didn't complain, they just died. Jim was worse than them - hopeless and shivering. How can you have *Narrow Dog to Indian River* without a narrow dog? If he died we could get another one but it wouldn't be Jim. I know he is a bugger, but he is our bugger. We might get a whippet that liked boating, and that would be nice, but then there would be nothing to write about. It would be like *Don Quixote* with a hero who was a practical down-to-earth sort of bloke, or *Moby-Dick* about a whale that wasn't very big and was quite fond of people or *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* about a chap who got a bit irritable now and then.

When Jim was nearly better Monica discovered a hole in his throat. When he had rubbed his neck in the cowshit he had become infected.

He realizes we are going boating again and tries to cut his throat, I said.

He's all right now, said Monica, he is practising his sleeping.

Jim had turned over on his back and pushed one leg into the air. His paws quivered and his eyes were part covered by membrane, and he yipped and chased rabbits, cutting them off from their warrens in the sky.

Jesus Ears, I said.

Jim and I went to Aston lock to look over the edge of the world - *what spires, what farms, are these?* South along the broad towpath, Jim running ahead, sniffing the grass and jumping. The May trees were hung with snow. The wind was perfumed, and the Gulf Stream had softened it and the mountains of Wales had cooled it. I would miss that wind, that coolness, more than anything else. When you are cold you can cosy up to a fire or to a girl. When you are hot there is nowhere to hide.

Derek came towards us, walking from Sandon. I introduced Derek to Stone Master Marathoners thirty years ago. He runs faster than me, and he is older than me, and he is thinner than Jim. Derek crouched and rubbed Jim behind the ears and Jim tried to enter his body by his armpit.

Borrowed your book about France, said Derek, couldn't get into it. When are you off?

In three weeks, 19th June. The boat went off yesterday from the yard in Stone to Liverpool, no problems. When we loaded her in Carcassonne to bring her back from France the crane driver dropped her and knocked the top off the gatepost, but here they are professionals.

There was a programme on telly about alligators, said Derek. In the mating season they leap out of the water and pull you in and twist round and round to tear your limbs off. You are not going to be in Florida next spring are you?

Yes, I said.

If I was you I'd take a gun. Nice little sixteen-bore would be fine. Those reptiles are fast - they bask in the sun and store energy like a battery. You have one shot and if that doesn't work it's the twisting. Their teeth are covered with deadly bacteria so if you get free they follow you round and wait for you to die.

Thanks Derek, but carrying a gun will only encourage violence.

They won't need encouragement, not in the spring. Have a good trip. And watch Jim - to an alligator he would be a pork scratching. When you come back you'll get fit again and I'll race you up the hill in the Outlanes like I always do, and perhaps one day you'll be lucky. I'll be eighty before long and I might start to slow down. I think you can get sub-machine guns in the States for domestic use.

He shook my hand and wished us luck and we said goodbye and Jim and I walked on.

When I looked back Derek was firing an imaginary tommy gun into the cut, braced against the recoil, his face without expression, like Alan Ladd in *The Great Gatsby*.

CHAPTER TWO

VIRGINIA

The Ice Storm



JIM IN THE Crate - Ziggy is Immensely Strong - The Virginia and the Monitor - Phyllis May at Mile Zero - The Ice Storm - We Have Lost Control Before We Have Started - Desert Boots - Heartworm - The Screaming Eagles - Total Systemic Collapse - A Cruel and Senseless Crime - The Designer Handbag - Farewell Party - The Sopping Air and the Blasting Sun - The Fatal Shore - Something Awfully Wrong

We could hear Jim barking before we got to the door of the luggage terminal. There was his travelling kennel and a huge fan blowing right at it and an overweight gentleman sitting by the fan and Jim barking. We stood there drenched

with rain and sweat and Monica gave the gentleman the papers for Jim's release.

Jim had been twelve hours in the crate, because there was no room for the plane to land at Washington and it had flown round and round until it ran out of gas and it had landed at Baltimore and then flown back to Washington. You would think they knew we were coming, said Monica.

All the journey I had worried about Jim. What if they forget to put on the heating and he freezes? What if they didn't pressurize the hold and he explodes? What if they forget about him because he is the only dog on board? Is he frightened? What if he wants to go to the lavatory? What if they lose him? What if he gets stolen? What if he dies?

*Stranger, commemorated here
'Tis but a dog you see
And yet, I beg you, do not sneer:
My master wept for me*

*Wept as the lifeless earth he pressed
Above my lifeless head
And wrote, where now I lie at rest
The words that you have read*

Perhaps I am a crank, but then so was the Greek chap who wrote that poem two thousand years ago.

The overweight gentleman let Jim out of his crate and Jim jumped him and licked his face - the gentleman had kept him cool and given him water and watched over him for two hours. Jim had been barking not because he was angry, but because he wanted to say hello.

It took us half an hour to get back inside our hire car and start it up and switch on the lights and the windscreen washers. During these travails the car rang bells and sirens and switched the lights on and off and shut down different

parts of itself to remind us that this was America and we were useless.

Next day we drove to Portsmouth, two hundred miles south, trying to drive as the locals do, on the right with all four wheels on the carriageway. The *Phyllis May* had already arrived at the marine terminal but we could not board her without customs papers. We didn't know what the customs people would make of a narrowboat coming from England. Perhaps they would take it to pieces for bombs or drugs, or send it back home as unsuitable for the journey.

The waterfront of Norfolk, Virginia, is neat and modern, with a few high-rise hotels and offices. Little remains of the old riverside town, except for the customs building, which is modelled on a Greek temple.

That's a nice dog, said Officer Nagle. That's Jim I guess. Atlantic Containers told me about Jim. Officer Ellis will do your papers. He hasn't done it before but he can come out and ask me if he gets stuck. What does your boat draw and how fast does it go?

Two feet two inches, I said, and seven knots.

Mine draws four inches, said Officer Nagle, and does sixty knots.

Jim yawned and stretched, showing off his four rows of teeth and the coiled and hurdling muscles of his thighs. I guess he can run real fast, said Officer Nagle.

Forty miles an hour, I said.

And you can go after rabbits with him, I suppose, said Officer Nagle.

Yes, I said, he caught a rabbit in the spring, but I don't think it was very well. It gave him fleas.

A real sportsman's dog, said Officer Nagle - I can see that. I had a choice of dog myself. I made a list. It would be a whippet or a Jack Russell or a chihuahua. In the end there was a chihuahua ready and it was my wife's birthday so we

took him. Of course Ziggy is not as fast as Jim, but he is immensely strong.

I thought chihuahuas were small, said Monica.

They are not very big, said Officer Nagle, but the strength is there. Underneath the fur a chihuahua is the same as a whippet. The bone structure is identical. It's the same dog - the legs, the deep chest. They have chihuahua races - there is a league. I don't race Ziggy but I could - he would do great. And my cat weighs twenty pounds.

Good heavens, I said.

Officer Ellis came out from behind the filing cabinets carrying a sheaf of papers - Oh that doesn't matter at all, said Officer Nagle, forget about that; let it go - these people are guests of our nation, for Christ's sake. Twenty pounds, he repeated.

Is it a sort of a big or a fat cat? I asked cautiously. Officer Nagle was not a small chap himself.

Fat? Not in the least, said Officer Nagle. That cat is solid muscle. He is a guard cat. When visitors come he threatens them - he growls and he hisses real scary. You know you are safe when Spike is around.

You have mountain lions here, I said. Perhaps he has a bit of cougar in him.

Cougar, now that's very likely. I never thought of that. Cougar. Mountain lion. A wild cat - a sportsman's cat.

Officer Nagle went behind the filing cabinets.

Some time later he came out with a small computer print of a black and white cat, which looked like an ordinary cat except it was very fat, and a dog that looked like a rat.

Very nice, we said.

Officer Ellis appeared. Ah, thank you Officer Ellis, said Officer Nagle - now here are your papers. Y'all have a great trip. We haven't had one of your English narrowboats here before. I may come and see you - I live just north over the water - in Newport News.