

Friends

Summer 1941

By Claire S. Derway

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On a hot July afternoon in the summer of 1941, Sara MacGrady and her best friend, Hilda Bessie, sailed their Beetle Cat out of Padanaram Harbor and into Buzzards Bay. When they left the pier at the village boatyard, there was a light, but steady breeze - strong enough to let them easily navigate around the boats moored in the harbor. This summer, many of the family sailing ships usually afloat in the harbor, remained stored away in winter dry-dock. War had broken out in Europe. The girls' parents often talked about the frightening spread of this conflict. Since early spring, Hilda and Sara had been rolling bandages on two afternoons a week at the Red Cross Centre on Ash Street in New Bedford. Now many of the boats, both sail and motor, remained high up in large wooden cradles outside the boatyard sheds. The girls thought all these

boats stuck on land had the look of a nautical parking lot. This summer, these boats had not been launched. After helping this morning at the Red Cross, Hilda and Sara were glad to be out for a sail - glad to have reached the Bay's entrance in such a short time.

Big, chunky rocks tumbled one against the other all along the full length of the stony jetty at the harbor's entrance. A wide channel of water flowed between the jetty's bright, blinking light and the soft, sunny shoreline stretched along the opposite side of this salt-water passage. The girls noticed that there was not even one car driving on Smith Neck Road, the narrow, two-lane tar road along the harbor's edge. Both road and harbor were quiet.

They set out for the first large bell buoy moored in the Bay. Their small boat was designed with a gaff rig. The canvas sail was filled with enough wind to carry them right along. A Beetle has no seats. Hilda and Sara sat down on the wooden planks of their cockpit. Now underway, they enjoyed the sheer good time of being on the water. Sailing was adventure. Straight ahead, across the Bay, the eight Elizabeth Islands filled their eyes like sheltering companions. These islands had Indian names. First you could see Cuttyhunk, then Pennikess, which had served as a leper colony in the

19th Century. Speaking in unison and with lots of flair, they called out the name of each one of the other six isles in the Elizabeth chain: Nashawena, Pasque, Naushon, Weepecket, Uncatena, Nonamesset. Wonderful sounds in a different language.

As they neared the bell buoy, the wind began to soften. Their sail began to flap more frequently. What was happening? Usually, in the afternoon, you could count on spanking breezes. Now the Beetle began to laze along more than move. In what felt to the girls like minutes, there was not even a small puff of wind. They were surprised, even slightly alarmed. Both girls had spent lots of time on the water, all kinds of water. However, they had never seen such a sudden quieting of wind and water. Soon both their boat and the large base of the bell buoy were going to be right beside each other. The buoy's usual toss and turn, dip and sway had been completely stilled. Sara had never seen its four big clappers hanging straight up and down like this. The bell did not clang once.

Usually, no matter how quiet the day, Buzzards Bay creates a perpetual cradling movement in the way its swells lift and lower a boat. Not so today. From their saltwater berth, Hilda and Sara looked out in all directions. In just a few minutes there was no wind at

all. The bay's surface was beginning to have the glassy look of a fresh water lake. No boats in sight. The girls realized they were at the whim of the Bay's currents.

Hilda looked at Sara, "It's so still - sort of spooky".

Hilda and Sara were best friends. They were both twelve years old and went to Dobson School in New Bedford, Massachusetts. Hilda wore her long black hair in two braids. Sara thought Hilda was so beautiful; she looked like the actresses the girls saw in movies. Boys wanted to sit next to Hilda in assembly and they argued over who would get to walk beside her when she went down County Street to visit her Aunt Martha. Sara liked Hilda's sense of fun. They often spent the night at each other's houses, staying awake far into the night, talking in excited whispers.

Sara's braids were auburn. Sometimes she talked in a loud voice - gave people orders in a bossy way. She was chunky and sturdy, but people did comment on her pretty eyes. Sara had a wacky sense of humor, which made others laugh, and she was an especially loyal friend. Boys liked to talk to her, but they never made a fuss about her. Mostly, they talked with her about their homework.

In summer, when her father went out on his boat, he usually took Sara with him. They sailed to places like Hadley's Harbor, Menemsha Bight, on The Vineyard and sometimes, when they had extra time, went all the way to Nantucket. On those weekends when they were not out on the boat, Sara got to go with her father up to the factory where he worked. It was up in North New Bedford. At the "shop", as Daddy often called the factory, there was lots to do. Mr. MacGrady designed tools and all sorts of products for the fastener business. Sara liked the big industrial spools of heavy, steel wire stored in the parking area. When she jumped from one spool to another she felt like a cat. Sometimes Dad would let her run a header machine. It could draw and cut metal wire as if it was as soft as cotton thread.

Hilda and Sara both liked movies and big words. When they could get permission, as they usually could, they went to the State Theater in New Bedford and sat through the entire double bill, sometimes staying to see one of the movies twice. They memorized poems and recited them to each other. When they came across an astonishingly exciting word in a book, they would say it to each other over and over again. In this way, it became one of their words, special words, that Hilda and Sara felt sure were known only to them. This

summer their big word was, in fact, a phrase: “manifold sensations.” They felt excited when they said it. Sometimes they would go into gales of laughter at how wildly funny and special these words sounded to them.

Now they longed for the usual hum of wind across the stays. A Beetle Cat is only a little over 12 feet long, its gunwale, with a half-inch molding, less than a foot above water. Today the wooden boards of their small cockpit felt increasingly hard. The canvas sail lazied against the mast. Their boom wandered aimlessly back and forth across the cockpit. Slowly and unpredictably, currents in the water carried them back and forth around the buoy. Sara was worried. Drifting in Buzzards Bay was all right as long as no high-powered engine driven boat came roaring along. A Beetle Cat is not easy to see from the deck of a fast moving fishing boat or freighter. From where Hilda and Sara sat, in the cockpit of their boat, the side of an oncoming freighter would look as high as the eight story Roosevelt Apartments in New Bedford. Buzzards Bay began to appear vast. A haze powdered the Padanaram shoreline to the West, and the Elizabeth Islands, south and east, appeared dim as imagined lands in ancient stories.

There was nothing they could do. For the first hour and a half they held up pretty well. They trusted someone would come along, or the wind would pick up. Now and then, each girl raised an arm over the side and dipped her hand into the salt water. When underway, heeled over and slicing through water, it was fun to put your hand overboard. Today, it felt like reaching into a puddle on the street. They each splashed their face with salt water until they realized that the salt on their skin made the sun's rays feel hotter. Sara wished she had a milk bottle filled with fresh water.

While keeping watch in every direction, they told stories and sang songs. Their loud voices in two-part harmony attracted seagulls. These tough birds kept gliding and soaring above the boat. Sometimes their wide wingspread made them seem to hang in mid-air while they examined the two young girls. As Hilda and Sara's time adrift lengthened, the girls' cotton shirts began to feel like woolen sweaters. In this hot discomfort, Sara noticed that the shirt Hilda wore was buttoned all the way up to her neck.

“Hilda, open your top button. It's hot out here.”

“Oh, I'm okay.”

Sara worried that with this heat and windless air, Hilda might develop patches of an eczema outbreak.

Sometimes these were followed by an asthma attack. Sara knew the symptoms. First Hilda would have red splotches break out somewhere on her body. Then, a few minutes later, she might start to wheeze. At home, Hilda would cover the eczema splotches with an ugly grease called Black Tar Ointment. It was the gooiest stuff Sara had ever seen. When Hilda's asthma was bad, she needed to stand over a pan of boiling water to help herself breathe. Out here, what could she do?

“Hilda, don't be dumb. Open your shirt.”

As the sun began to lower, the seagulls sputtered into complete silence. Not one single caw. In absorbing companionship, they shaped themselves into a wing formation, one much like wing of their own. Then, they flew away. Now both young sailors had to listen to the sudden quiet. It made them both quite somber. Hilda reached up to her neck and began to open the buttons at the top of her shirt. She knew why Sara was worried about the heat and her closed shirt. Sara kept her eyes focused on the bow of their boat. She didn't want Hilda to see how concerned she was, even a little frightened. Sara talked to herself in a stern voice: "Stop being a worry wart".

When Sara turned around and looked back into the cockpit, she saw that Hilda had tied her braids

together at the base of her neck. She was pushing the tiller back and forth in the water trying to use the rudder as a paddle. The boat remained stuck. Sara saw she had opened her shirt. Maybe this would help. All of a sudden, with a startled double take, Sara noticed that Hilda was wearing a rosary around her neck. No wonder she had kept her shirt buttoned! When Hilda saw Sara's surprised stare, her hand shot up to cover the crucifix.

"What are you doing wearing that?" Sara snapped. "Your father would be mad. You're not Catholic."

Sara was certain that Hilda wearing a rosary meant some kind of trouble. Mrs. Bessie, Hilda's mother, had been one of the most beautiful young women in New Bedford. She was a Catholic French Canadian from the north end of town and Hilda's father was a member of a prominent, old New Bedford Protestant family. When he proposed to Hilda's mother, he told her that his family would not let him marry her unless she left the Catholic Church. Mrs. Bessie had agreed to do this.

Even though the crucifix hanging on the rosary was quite small, Sara could see the two tiny nails, one each, hammered through Jesus' hands and a third nail

right through his two feet, one placed over the other at the bottom of the cross. Sara liked Jesus a lot. She never thought of him stuck up on a cross. Sara thought of Jesus as right inside her heart, like a friend. He let her tell him all her ideas, her plans. He didn't mind listening to her. Sara was sure that he would have had time to talk with her if he had ever made a trip to New Bedford.

With quiet seriousness, Hilda answered Sara's question about the rosary around her neck.

"I want to help Mum."

Now that Sara knew about the rosary, Hilda seemed to find more quiet in herself in spite of their drifting isolation on the bay.

"Oh, Sara, I have to tell you what happened. One day last week, after my brothers had already left for camp, Mum and Daddy had an awful disagreement. She explained to Dad that on that very day there was going to be a Memorial Mass said for my Aunt Felice up at St. Anthony's."

"Oh, the one with the tall spire you can see from everywhere."

"Aunt Felice died two months ago in Manchester, New Hampshire. She lived up there. Now her body had been brought to New Bedford so that she could be

buried right beside her mother. You know, my grandmother. I never got to meet Aunt Felice, but Mum told me she visited me once when I was a little baby.”

Sara said, “Gosh, I wish I had an aunt.”

“Mum talked to Dad in such a soft way it was hard to hear her. Mum tried to explain to him that it would mean a lot to her if she could just go to this one Mass. She almost begged him for permission to go. Dad shouted at her. ‘Absolutely not - I mean no, remember that!’ I was so surprised. You know he’s always so nice to her.”

Sara said, “Aunt Felice was your Mum's sister. I can't believe he wouldn't let her go.”

Hilda nodded in agreement. “Dad went off to work without another word, not even goodbye. Mum leaned her elbows on the table and put her head in her hands. She didn’t cry, but I could see she felt awful.”

For the moment Sara forgot the girls’ own anxious situation on the Bay. She wondered why Hilda's father had been so mean. Thinking about this, she sat straight up on the cockpit floorboards. The sun's rays, no longer so hot, cast slanted light across her body. Sara remembered how it was for lots of people in

New Bedford; it was a big issue whether or not you were a Catholic or a Protestant.

“Gosh Hilda, how come you even have a rosary, never mind wearing it on your neck?”

“Remember Father Lambert? He gave it to me.”

“Sure, he used to help us launch our canoe down on Fresh River. Remember the day we left our paddles on shore? Even in that long robe he wears, he walked right into the water and brought us our paddles.”

Glad to be able to share with Sara, Hilda continued.

“As soon as Mum went into Padanaram to get groceries, I ran next door to the Holy Cross Fathers. Since Father Lambert is a Catholic, I thought he might know how to help Mum. I told him what had happened and how sad I was that Dad wouldn't let her go to the Memorial Mass for her sister. Without telling him a lot, I could see that he understood my mother's problem. He told me he always enjoyed talking to Mum. I could see he really wished he could help. However, he said it would not be wise for him to come see Mum on this particular day.”

“With your father so mad, I can see what he meant.”

“He promised to keep her in his prayers. He says that prayers are really about paying attention, noticing others, being sure to care for people around you. Right then he pulled this rosary out of a pocket somewhere under his big black robe. He said that, at times, I might be able to help my mother by just touching the beads with my fingers and caring. Possibly, they could help me sense a time to touch her hand or give her an extra smile. If I felt there was nothing I could do, I could wrap the rosary beads up in my own hand and hopefully find comfort for myself. I’d never thought about it before, but you can’t always help people, even the people you love the most.”

Sara said, “Hope you keep the rosary hidden.”

“Oh, yes. At home I keep the beads hidden in the toe of my sneaker. I only put them around my neck when I think it is safe. A few days after I talked with Father Lambert, Mum and I picked a big bunch of wild flowers in the meadow behind our house. I know she took them up to Aunt Felice’s gravestone in the cemetery. She wanted to celebrate her sister.”

A late day glare on the water washed away the horizon. Still no pleasure boats in sight and surprisingly, not one freighter, not even near the entrance to the Cape Cod Canal. Their only

companions were several porpoises rolling in late afternoon sun. Despite their predicament, the girls smiled at the good time their friends were having on this hot afternoon. Each time they rolled, their shiny backs rose over the water with a flash of silver-blue color. While watching the white splashes churned up by their play, Sara noticed that Hilda had risen up on her knees in the cockpit. She was peering with some trepidation at their rolling companions.

“Sara, I think they’re making smaller and smaller circles. I hope they don't think we're a piece of driftwood.”

“Oh, don’t worry. You know porpoises like to play. They won't hurt us.”

Sara looked more closely. Hilda was right. They were rolling more closely than usual, but there was no turbulence under the boat.

A moment later, a friendly bright eye arced out of the water along their port side. After a single roll near the boat, the porpoise returned below. A cool mist from its splendid fin sprayed the girls’ bodies and wet down their bone-dry cockpit. This shining back, soaring three feet above the low gunwale and closer to the boat had frightened Hilda. She lunged for the boom crutch stowed under the deck and stayed at the ready on her

knees. Sara, herself, was surprised when she saw the mammal's height in relationship to the low set of their Beetle in the water. Still, the big creature kept enough distance so their boat was not tossed around. Then again, on their port side, another high roll. Hilda tried to hit its glistening back, but the little boom crutch never reached the porpoise. It simply slipped out of Hilda's hand into the water - Lost.

Sara took Hilda's hand.

"We'll be okay. They won't come any closer."

Sara heard a wheeze. Hilda was beginning to swallow air, gulping it and coughing at the same time. An asthma attack! Sara called to her to stand and try and catch her breath. Sometimes this helped. Hilda stood up. For balance she grabbed hold of the slack boom, lazing back and forth across the cockpit. She held the wooden boom with her left hand. Slowly, she lifted her right arm straight up to the sky, above her head. While continuing to stand and keeping her eyes on the water, she was able to get some air into her lungs. The rasping sound of her breathing lessened a bit. Sara reached across the small cockpit and drew down the arm Hilda still held above her head. Sara took her hand and held it tightly. Hilda returned her touch with a

warm squeeze. This quieted the girls into a bravery all their own.

Together the girls stared at the empty Bay. They had never seen salt water this quiet. They understood good sailors often have to stand by and wait; people who went to sea had lots of times like this. Hilda set the tiller at dead center. Sarah picked up the sheet rope. Even though there was no wind at all, tending to their boat helped them steady themselves. Up to this point their Beetle Cat had been as reliable as a great, big, Blue Nose Schooner. They appreciated their sturdy boat.

Hilda continued her vigil in all directions. Sara kept the slack sheet rope in her hand.

All of a sudden Hilda shouted, "Look behind us!"

Both stared in shock. Rippling out behind the stern of their little ship, the Bay's saltwater parted into a foaming, white wake. Their boat was in motion and there was no wind in the sail! Sara and Hilda could feel a steady, rhythmic nudge at the back of the boat. With steady force, two porpoises, one on each side of the rudder, were rolling and pushing their boat through the water!

Hilda moved the tiller ever so slightly, just enough to set a course for the jetty at Padanaram; then gave a sharp command.

“Sara, quick, close haul the sheet!”

Sara pulled the boom, with its empty sail above, as tight to the center of the boat as she could. The girls looked at each other, then ahead to the jetty at Padanaram Harbor. The boat's motion had created a breeze. Moving air contoured their faces and shaped their bodies. They knew and understood, but were too amazed to look. They could hear splashes of water around the porpoises' bodies when, during each roll, they surfaced. Spectacular roll and plunge were gone. They swam and pushed, pushed and swam, with pressure sufficient to move the boat, but not so hard as to break it apart. Slightly above and below the water's surface, their friends were using powerful symmetry to get the girls home. This foaming trail of white saltwater glittering behind them allowed the bow of the boat to slice its way across the Bay toward Padanaram.

When their Beetle reached the jetty, the rolling push of their friends' bodies came to an end. Slowly and quietly the boat settled into a restful lull on the water's surface. Hilda and Sara were still afloat, but not in motion. The two porpoises who'd propelled them home, swam in one wide circle around the boat. Then, in larger and larger circles, they swam back into the Bay. Even with their increasing distance from them, the girls

continued to hear their high-pitched squeals of greeting. Porpoise voices always sound like a celebration of delight. Their friends were saying goodbye.

Ignoring the most rudimentary concern for balance on a boat, Sara and Hilda jumped to their feet. To be sure that they would be heard, they waved and shouted as loud as they could, clapping their hands in grateful admiration. The girls blew kisses across the widening water between themselves and their friends. To acknowledge the girls' kisses, each porpoise made a spectacular foaming roll of farewell. Their fan-like fins flared above the bay's surface and then, in an almost right angle descent, they were gone.

While the girls' eyes and hearts were still fixed far to the east, they heard the loud pop, pop, pop of a boat somewhere near by. Sure enough, from behind Dumpling Rock, a one-lunger catboat came into view.

Sara said, "Hooray! Hear that? Maybe we can get a tow."

Both girls liked the sound of this tubby boat with its boisterous pop pop greeting. This inexpensive, old-fashioned engine always announced itself. Whenever she and her father passed a boat using one of these one cylinder, inboard engines, her father pointed out that

this one-lunger may be loud, but it was cheap to run and reliable.

When the catboat was near enough, Sara waved to the two men aboard it. They understood what the girls needed. In minutes, Sara was holding the towrope, which had been thrown to her by a man on the one-lunger. She pulled it through the bow chock and turned it around the deck cleat a couple of times. In full motion, the girls and their Beetle now glided right past the blinking light at the end of the jetty. While Sara sat on her knees at the front end of the cockpit, Hilda sat in the stern holding the tiller in order to keep the rudder lined up with the direction taken by the towboat.

Listening to the chug chug sound of the cat boat pulling her and Hilda back to the float, Sara got a chance to think about their rolling friends in the Bay, as well as these two men towing the Beetle behind their one-lunger. She relaxed enough for a look at both sides of the harbor. She liked the high arching trees, which rose above the big house at the end of Ricketson's Point. With a turn of her head, she saw a single car traveling along Smith Neck Road. Then, in the near distance, just minutes away, she saw the long boatyard pier from where she and Hilda had set out earlier in the afternoon.

Quickly, Sara made an extra check of the towrope drawn across the Beatle's bow. Exactly in place, it was holding well. She stepped back across the cockpit to where Hilda sat with her hand on the tiller. She smiled at Hilda, but said not a word. Carefully Hilda buttoned her shirt all the way to the top. The rosary around her neck disappeared behind the white cotton she wore. Now, cross and beads were safely hidden. It took only a minute for Sara to crawl back across the cockpit and continue keeping her eye on the rope held by the cleat.

At the outermost float attached to the pier, one of the men on the boat waved and yelled, "Let go!"

Like a fast moving snake, the rope slithered off the front deck to follow the catboat as it moved away from the girls. While they shouted their appreciation to the men, momentum carried the Beetle along the pier in toward the shore and the float they used. They tied up the boat and, without any attention to the sail, still up, and the rudder, still in the water, they collapsed, spread-eagled on the float. They gazed straight up into a glowing sky. The sun was slipping out of sight. They listened to their sail flap in the light, evening breeze, the first breeze of any kind since they had sailed out of the harbor early in the afternoon. The boards on the float's

surface still held some warmth from the hot afternoon sun. The gentle heat relaxed their muscles.

Their happy prostration was broken off by the sound of two feet coming down the gangplank toward the float where they lay. The tide was quite low. The gangplank descended down at a steep angle. As the feet reached the bottom of the gangplank, Sara's side of the float dipped down almost into the water. She had to grab a nearby wooden cleat to avoid taking a slide. When the feet stepped on the float, it again leveled out.

"Hello, you two. Back pretty late, aren't you? Sara, your mother was worried. She was here a while ago. I told her I'd seen you two out by the jetty."

The girls recognized his voice before they saw him. It was Mr. Scott, Jim Scott. Even though he was much older, maybe forty or so, they could talk with him about pretty much anything. Jim Scott was one of their best friends. Though his face was weathered, even stern, there was always warmth in his eyes. When people got to know him, they gave him their complete trust. Hilda and Sara had done the same.

He and his family lived up near Hix Bridge on the East River in Westport. When Sara and Hilda were out rowing on the river in Westport, Mr. Scott sometimes pulled up along side their boat. He would turn off his

outboard motor and the three of them would chat. Both girls had heard that Jim Scott was the best carpenter in Massachusetts. They also knew that the volunteer job he did in Westport was his favorite one. He was the shellfish warden for the East Westport River. He knew every detail of this tidal river: the best places to fish, where to clam and exactly what time, on any particular day, the girls had to be careful about a tide turn if they were near the rickety wooden bridge at Westport Point.

Hilda spoke first, "Hi, Mr. Scott. Gee, you're in Padanaram awfully late."

"Didn't you two see me waving? I even shouted. I'm over at the Drake's house setting wooden planks on the pilings for their new pier. Mrs. Drake wants it done right away. I stayed late to try for a finish."

Sara answered, "No, Mr. Scott, we didn't see you. We were being towed awfully fast."

"I saw your Beetle out by the jetty. It was bobbing around like a cork. What were you two doing clapping and jumping up and down? That's darn dangerous in a small boat."

"I guess we were happy to get back to the jetty."

"Well, with no wind, how did you get back to the jetty?"

Precisely what could they tell their good friend? The rising breeze made small ripples on the water. They made for a soft splash against the empty oil drums, which held up the float's wooden surface. Neither Hilda nor Sara spoke, uncertain how to tell him about what they knew; boom crutch dropping into the water by their boat; their friends with grey-blue backs rolling them back to the jetty and then the luck of getting a tow from the first and only boat they had seen all afternoon.

There was a lot of quiet and stillness as daylight dimmed into night. No one said anything. Sara knew Mr. Scott was a real Yankee. Yankees understand silence. It doesn't make them nervous. The three of them kept looking at each other the way people sometimes watch the sky - closeness, friendship, but no words. Mr. Scott walked across the float.

"Let me help. I'll take down the sail. Give me the stays." With quick efficiency, he lowered and folded the sail between the gaff and the boom while they took the rudder out of the water and stowed the tiller under the deck. Hilda pulled up the centerboard.

"Where's the boom crutch?"

Hilda answered, "I lost it overboard." Sara could see Hilda was glad to be able to tell this much of the story.

While the girls remained on the float, checking details on stowing the boat, Mr. Scott walked about halfway up the gangplank. Then he turned around and spoke to them in a thoughtful, respectful way, "You two have lived around the water all your lives. Today there was no way you could get back to the jetty without any wind at all. You know good boat people never clap and jump up and down in a small boat, not one so low down in the water, unless something special is going on."

Hilda and Sara listened carefully, with complete attention, but remained mute.

"Whatever happened, you've decided to keep your own counsel. Sometimes it's important to keep things to yourself. That way you can really be sure what happened. I like you two. I think you're both fine, young women."

Then he turned around and stepped on to the pier. He raised his arm and waved it against the evening sky. "Get over to the Drake's as soon as you can. My truck is over there. Sara, I promised your mother I'd take you both home."

The breeze was stiffer now, unusually so for nightfall in the summer. When Hilda and Sara climbed to the top of the gangplank and stepped onto the pier, they turned to take a last look at Buzzards Bay. The sun

was gone, but the sky still glowed. In places, way out on the Bay, they saw sparkling patches of soft, gold iridescence where movement in the salt water mirrored the last light of day. They knew their friends were out there, swimming and rolling, plunging on, into deeper water - the endless ocean, which was their home.

In perfect unison, with great glee, Hilda and Sara took each other's hand, and said, "We are both fine young women, yes, we are - fine young women!" Arm in arm, they set out to walk the pier and go home with Mr. Scott.

The End

