



THE BATAVIAN

Ted Polet

(EXTRACT)

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The fairway was buoyed, with the red and green lights marking the shallows winking at me in the darkness, and the ship was steaming into it at full revolutions as we approached the estuary mouth. I was alone on the bridge, with the lookout outside on the bridge wing as was proper, and I felt a faint disquiet as we were running too fast for the narrow channel. Should I call the Captain, or would he interpret that as weakness or indecision on my part? Why hadn't he come up on the bridge as was customary in confined waters?

The vibration of the main engine transmitted itself through the deck to the soles of my feet, and looking at the echo sounder, I saw the bottom shelve rapidly, the depth readings diminishing steadily and the graph on the screen rising. As the next course change came up I saw the buoys beyond the bend in the channel had disappeared, and panic rising, I jumped to the throttle controller of the main engine.

As I made to grab the handle I suddenly awoke in my bed, sweating from the nightmare. The first grey of morning filtered through the curtain as I turned over to look at the alarm clock, which said 6:15. The sutures of the operation wound painfully stretched my skin, and my stomach still felt bruised as I turned on my back again.

Whew, that had been close - I had heard of these nightmares from my sailor colleagues, dreaming you're responsible for a ship that goes out of control, but I never yet experienced it myself. It must have been caused by all I had been through recently.

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The next morning, the company phoned about an appointment with the HRM department and the company doctor. This time there was no excuse to put it off, so that same afternoon I drove to Rotterdam. They received me in a cool and businesslike manner, although they asked politely about my health.

I told them the short version of what had happened and of the diagnosis.

They asked after my medical prognosis, upon which I replied that I needed to have a check-up with my specialist doctor first, because I was unable to say anything this soon after the operation.

They pointed out that I had been on sick leave for a year and the Social Security Service wanted to start up a reintegration procedure. Again, I said that I had to consult my doctor to be able to reply to that. I felt they were putting on indecent pressure and the visit to the company doctor's examination room on the same floor of the building didn't take the feeling away. He prodded and felt and listened to my innards merrily burbling away. 'Mm. There is no one home in there,' he said cheerfully. 'When can you go to sea again?'

I repeated what I had told the HRM chaps, upon which he also mentioned the Social Security people. Things were becoming rather boring.

As I left, they asked me to come up with an answer from my doctor within a fortnight. The bill of health in my seaman's book was several months overdue and urgently needed an update.

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Right at the far end in a corner among the massed scum and filth blown from the basin was an old neglected two-mast boat, which was covered in green algae. The varnish had peeled off the brightwork, the teak on deck had split, the standing rigging was sagging and the halliards looked frayed and rotten. Bert Verweij went straight for the ship and got a key out of his pocket. Now what was he thinking of?

She was a big vessel, about fifteen metres long, with a bowsprit sticking out even further, at least four and a half metres wide, and my eyes were drawn towards the hull which under all the filth seemed to have graceful lines. The masts were about the same height, apart from a topmast on the mizzen, and schooner rigged. She had a weathered-looking carved figurehead depicting some sort of ancient warrior. The sails thankfully were nowhere to be seen – they would have rotted in the state the ship was in.

'Shall we look inside?' Bert asked. He didn't wait for an answer and stepped through the entry port on deck and into the cockpit to open the access hatch, which slid back with difficulty.

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That autumn I worked like a slave to make the ship habitable and clear up the mess on deck. I took pleasure from working with my hands, and funnily I forgot my illness in the process. I had occasional complaints, but the toilet was close by and it didn't really bother me very much. The regular check-ups in the hospital became less frequent, I took my medication and seemed to thrive. Even my body weight was back to its usual level.

The interior of the Batavian was in a reasonable state even though improvements were needed there as well, but in view of the approaching winter I did my best to repair everything on deck first and complete painting and varnishing outside. I hired a ship's carpenter for the more complicated jobs and he advised to replace a few bits of teak that were irreparable. This wasn't exactly cheap, but worth the investment.

By mid-October the weather began to worsen, but everything on deck had now been painted and tightened up. All the hidden leaks had been traced and sealed, so nothing trickled inside anymore in a downpour as it used to. The brand new diesel heater did its job, which I needed because the nights got steadily colder. The heating system had been fitted with insulated air ducts that led to every part of the ship. Even in a frost I'd be comfortable.

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I had slept for half an hour when the radar alarm went off. To starboard, two points before the beam, was a cargo ship closing relentlessly, the bearing of which didn't change. It was heading straight for me and was going to reach me within ten minutes. I turned off the autopilot and luffed. That didn't work, so I tacked to put as much distance between him and me as I could. The ship passed a few hundred yards astern of me – I heard the rumble of the main engine and the roar of the engine room fans. Through the binoculars I couldn't see anyone on the bridge. On its stern was written Conakry as its home port – Guinea therefore, one of those jokers registered under a cheap flag who had bought their Mate's ticket on the local market.

I had been lucky in the alarm actually working, or they wouldn't have found anything left of me. I put the boat back on course and reset the alarm circle to four miles, my lesson learned. It should give me ten more minutes to react to another of these mid-ocean meetings. I clambered on to the cabin roof, checked around me and returned to the sleeping bag to try and shut my eyes again.

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The sky became overcast now and the air cooled rapidly, so I went down to visit the heads and put on my sailing gear, with a lifejacket over it. That wouldn't help me if I went into the drink in the middle of the ocean – suppose you drop in and see your boat sail away from you! But a lifejacket has a built-in safety harness and mine had a line fitted which I could hook onto a lifeline on deck. Now I was dressed against the weather and able to face whatever was thrown at me.

At the end of the day the wind started to haul through and the sky ahead went black. I decided to reef down and had just put a double reef in the mizzen when a howling squall put the boat onto its side. The water came into the starboard gangway before she paid off. Luckily the boom jib held, and close to the wind we soon made nine knots as sheets of spray broke over the weather bow. The boat started to pitch violently and once or twice shipped it green over the bows. We carried too much sail – looking at the wind gauge I noted thirty-five and forty-knot gusts: a force eight, a true summer storm. I slipped the jib sheet a little and luffed to go forward and reef the jib. The mizzen kept the bows into the wind and speed dropped as we lay hove to. As I wrestled with the jib on the foredeck, a playful little wave broke over the rail and dragged my legs from under me as it ran away to leeward. I fell, hit my head on something solid and the lights went out.

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When the injured were carried in, her first task was the triage process – classify the patients in those who couldn't be saved, those needing immediate attention and those who could wait. In that sense she was a death angel to those that were worst off.

Never had she expected her country would become so torn and devastated after the 2011 rising, in the wake of the Arab Spring when it had seemed all the dictators were going to be overthrown one by one. Until then almost everyone had patiently endured the dictatorship, despite the repression against those who dared protest and the chance of the hated secret police suddenly kicking in your door at night.

She had never considered politics – as long as you didn't speak out against Bashar al Assad and didn't have suspect friends or were very poor, you could

lead a normal life. She came from a middle class family – her father had owned a company trading in machinery parts and her mother had been a trained nurse. Her parents were educated people who looked towards the future and when at twelve years of age she had announced she wanted to be a doctor, they had supported her in every way. She dozed off and went into a restless sleep, muttering to herself as she dreamt. She didn't hear the helicopter taking up the assigned position and dropping a barrel bomb.

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I brought the boat alongside, hung a few mooring warps overboard and flipped down the swimming ladder on the stern. There were so many of them that I had to shout at them to prevent them capsizing the Batavian. 'One at a time. Slowly, slowly,' I yelled as I pulled them up the ladder one by one and sent them forward. 'Spread out and sit on deck, both sides!'

There were about twenty-five adults and a dozen children, and even the Batavian was in danger with all that top hamper. One or two of them bled of small injuries because of the panic, and some were terribly sunburned. The deck was full of people – they sat on the cabin roof and in the cockpit. The Batavian was low in the water and rolled sluggishly, which I didn't like very much.

The woman in the inflatable passed me the children, calmly but quickly. I took them from her and swept them into the cockpit to their mothers, one by one. She was the last I helped aboard, wet through. She was of medium height and quite beautiful, with clear brown eyes, straight eyebrows, a fine skin and regular features, but she had a terrible scar on her cheek. My heart turned as I saw it.

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As I stood talking to the restaurant owner, suddenly an orange glow shot up behind the island, which was bright enough to light up the hills around Kaş on the mainland, followed a few seconds later by a deep rumble and big explosions in the distance. We looked to each other in shock. I directly thought of Leila and the other refugees in the school, and ran that way. The front door was open and there was a weak light inside. The people were awake and looked up startled as I came in. Leila was keeping the kids busy with two other women and glanced at me.

'What's happening? It sounds like a bombing raid,' she said in a matter-of-fact voice, although I could see the anxiety in her eyes. She must have had

recollections of such sounds. I took her hand in mine and told that the Turks were invading the nearby island and the Greeks were defending it with all their might.

That night we sat together in the school as one distant exchange of fire erupted after another. I could only guess at what the poor Syrians had to endure, being on the run from one war and landing in the middle of another.

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On Rhodes I'd had a photo printed and framed, a close-up of Leila made with my phone near our lookout place above Agios Georgios, where we had seen the sea turtle on the first day. On the photo she looks round to me with the beginning of a smile, exactly the way I remember her. The damaged side of her face is hardly visible, and she has the turquoise shawl loosely plied round her hair, which suits her well.

She had spoken about releasing one another, but the more I thought about it, the less I managed to. I couldn't leave her to her fate, or could I? She must be somewhere in this city of millions and I decided to return one day and search for her, as soon as my life was back on the rails. And if I'd find her, I could only hope she'd have succeeded finding her own way, and that she'd still remember me. The Batavian had been her home for a week, and before I went home I put up the photo above the chart table.

The next morning a taxi waited ashore to take me to the airport. I gave the keys to the man in the office and got into the car, with a final look at the boat which now lay strangely deserted with all the sails cleared away. A few hours later I was in the air, on my way home.

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'Captain, shall we give them some lee?' I asked the captain, who was looking at the echo sounder. There were three metres of water under the ship. He nodded.

'Half astern,' I ordered the Mate, who operated the main engine.

'Half astern, pilot,' the Mate answered and pulled the remote control handle of the main engine astern.

'Hard a-port,' I said to the helmsman, and the ship reversed slowly, but as I expected it refused to turn because the wind got hold of the bows. But this ship had a bow thruster, so I probably didn't even need to use the anchor.

'Can you give me some starboard on the bow thruster?' The Rotterdam pilot had stayed on the bridge and operated the controller of the bow thruster, which readily began hauling the bows into the wind to starboard.

'Stop engine'.

'Hard-a-starboard, half ahead.'

The container vessel now neatly turned to starboard, taking the sea on her beam. We began rolling wildly, but the containers had been well secured for the rough trip, so nothing budged.

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I hadn't been there for over two years, and the first thing I noticed as the ferry from Athens came into the well-known harbour was the air of neglect and the amount of rubbish on the waterfront. Luggage bags, plastic sheets, worn and rotting shoes, torn lifejackets and limp inflatable boats were stacked in and around the refuse skips and evidently no one bothered to clear the mess away. It looked seedy and ragged, and the inclement winter weather did nothing to relieve the impression. It could have been the refuse tip in Flushing on an overcast November day – the only colour came from the orange tiles on the roofs, it was cold and it blew strongly from the west.

Inevitably, during the approach of the island my eyes had been drawn to the place where Leila and I used to sit looking over the sea at Agios Georgios, and as we entered harbour I had to compel myself not to search out the berth the Batavian had occupied, because she was on the hard back in Piraeus – I hadn't even had time to look at her as we had travelled directly from the airport to the ferry two days previously. Bart Wijffels and the others were next to me at the rail on the upper deck, together with two men sent by the Hellenic Rescue Team, as below us the crew were busy laying out the mooring warps to bring the ship in. There wasn't a trace of the *Laskos* or any other Navy vessel, although next to the terminal two military vehicles and a grey Navy container were parked.

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Leila had been taken to Xanthi in a police van and after arrival was locked in a cell already occupied by six other women. The cell was far too small, dirty and stuffy, with mildew on the walls, and her cellmates, who were not having an easy time themselves, shook their heads in pity as they noticed Leila's advanced pregnancy. She was upset and sick with shock following her arrest and the ride in the back of the van. She had seen Eleni fly at the police and being brutally arrested and taken away. She'd had the illusion she had seen everything of the way Greece treated refugees, but now she realised she had seen nothing yet and she might have done better to leave the country as quickly as she could using the Balkan route.

The cell block had bars fitted over the windows and was surrounded by tall fences and coils of razor wire, with a watchtower and floodlights to one side – it was nothing less than a concentration camp. April had only just begun and the block was hot and stuffy – she didn't want to think of conditions in summer when her child was born. The other women in the block had been there for a long time, weeks or even months, and all that time no one had yet been sent back to Turkey – no one knew why.

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I thanked the women and walked out the road to a former shop with a signboard saying 'Health Centre' in Greek, with what I presumed was the Arabic translation below. I stepped inside the waiting room – there was a little girl about two years old playing in a corner, and the door to the surgery at the back was partly open, beyond which I heard women talking softly in Arabic. The child looked up, she had clear brown eyes, dark blonde hair and a stunning smile.

She swept me off my feet.

The girl put out a tiny hand to me with one of the building bricks, obviously meaning me to play along, so I sat beside her on the floor and built a tower. Predictably, a naughty little hand toppled over the tower as she screamed with laughter. She handed me another building brick and there was no choice but to rebuild the tower.

The door to the surgery was pushed open and a woman in a headscarf came out, continuing into the street. Behind me someone else came out of the room.

'Ruza! Are you bothering my patients again, naughty child! Ru-Za!'

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‘Last night we got an emergency call from people stuck on Bayrak Adasi. They had swum there from the mainland and were too exhausted to dare carrying on. The lifeboat was called in and took three men off the rock. They were heading for home when the Turkish Coast Guard appeared and stopped the boat. They fired warning shots – we could hear it in the harbour. The lads had no choice but to stop and surrender, and the Turks have impounded it. According to the Turkish authorities, the men our boat picked up had taken part in the military coup – soldiers who tried to evade arrest and flee to Greece. They and the lifeboat crew were arrested and taken away. The Turkish police and Coast Guard appear to have been tipped off.’

‘Can’t you ring Mehmet Orhan?’

‘Mehmet doesn’t answer his phone. Usman Yilmaz called me from Kaş. He doesn’t know where Mehmet is and says the crew of the Coast Guard cutter in Antalya has been replaced by pro-Government men who we don’t know.’

‘Good grief, that’s not looking good.’ I thought and made a decision. ‘Listen, I am in Samos with my boat, two hundred miles away from you. Is it useful for me to come your way? I am neutral, perhaps I can make a difference in Kaş.’

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The shadow proved to be a darkened ship waiting on the water ahead of us. Suddenly a bright searchlight was switched on that swept the water and in a few seconds found our boat, which was caught in a blinding white glare. I saw Nikos go rigid and stare into the light like a rabbit caught in the headlights of a car.

‘Wave to them, you fool,’ I hissed at Nikos. The Greek fishing boats were no different from the Turkish ones, so there was a good chance we’d get away with it. Nikos waved cheerfully to the Coast Guard vessel, and after a few blood-curdling moments the light went out and we chugged quietly on into the direction of Kaş. It had almost given me palpitations, but twenty minutes later we finally approached the breakwater, Chrysopoulos and I making ready in the bows. I held the bolt cutters and the hacksaw, and he held a pair of lightweight paddles in case we had to paddle the boat out of harbour if the engines didn’t start. It was dark in the shadow of the breakwater, which was a good thing because another small fishing boat just came out, making for the bay behind the Bayındır peninsula across the water.

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Two hundred yards from the shore I paused close by a few anchored yachts which evidently had fled from the quay to escape the violence. Shaken yachtsmen looked at me, and I asked the one closest to me what was happening. He said that hooligans had set the refugee camp on fire, following which the refugees had gone berserk and now were on the rampage in the town.

There had been a battle between furious Afghan and Syrian asylum seekers and a group of skinheads that had arrived on the ferry from the mainland that morning, spoiling for a fight. The rabble had torched the camp on the hill above Vathy, and attacked the people with baseball bats. The fight had escalated and moved to the town, the refugees defending themselves with everything they could find – sticks, stones, traffic signs and even crowbars and axes from a tool shop they had forced open. Several buildings were on fire – the yacht skipper I spoke with had seen dozens of injured and the ambulances had been fully occupied all day. The police had been forced to retreat and military transport planes had landed on the airfield on the south coast of the island, bringing in troops.

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