

From *Near a Far Sea*, by Don Noel

Chapter 1 Reminiscing

"I tell you, Mist' Don, blowing that reef was the finest thing anybod' ever did for this village!"

Mister Arthur -- in 28 years of friendship and collaboration I've never called him anything but that; it is a custom of polite address here -- has walked over for a late-afternoon visit, and is trapped on our sheltered patio by a pelting tropical rainshower. It is a gift: We have time to share memories.

Arthur James will be 75 years old in a few months, a ripe old age in Jamaica. He remembers when men went to sea in their oversized dugout canoes -- 100-mile round trips -- by sail, before the Second World War. He learned from his father to hew those boats from giant trees; he has made and repaired them all his life. His neighbors have hired him and respected him for those skills. But even more they honor his fairness, even temper and quiet way of mediating disputes.

He is a church-going man. Many a Sunday morning I've seen him in a dark suit and tie, walking two miles up the sun-broiled, dusty road with his wife -- she in a bright-flowered frock -- and children or grandchildren in shirts-and-ties or neat dresses. Tens of thousands of Jamaicans make such pilgrimages; main roads and side roads are lined Sundays with pedestrians on the way to or from church. The women wear light colors and sometimes deploy parasols, but the men are always in black or dark grey suits with at best a straw hat.

White suits would make the walk more pleasant. No Englishman would have gone out even mornings, let alone in the noonday sun, in a dark suit. But the colonials' white suits never caught on. One suspects a belief in a stern deity; surely no merciful God would condemn his faithful to bake in black once a week.

Mister Arthur has always been lankier than I and almost as tall; the dark Sabbath suit only accentuated his gauntness. Like most in the village, he is hardly more brown than a sun-tanned tourist, and his features are aquiline, craggily handsome. There is a legend of seamen shipwrecked here -- British, German, Irish, the story varies -- who stayed and raised families. The real forebears may have been early-1800s indentured servants from the British Isles who earned their freedom and a grant of land -- although there's no explanation why they might have clustered here. I prefer the more romantic shipwreck version. In any case, most folks on this five-mile stretch of coast called Treasure Beach are markedly lighter-skinned than most of their countrymen.

This evening he seems thinner than I'd remembered from our last visit, but apart from a few aches and pains he is in fine health. "Too fine," he says; he's not sure what he's still living for. The wild ways of the younger generation don't suit.

"Don't suit." I'll not often try to replicate the Jamaican patois, and certainly not Mister Arthur's, which is so rapid and thick that after all these years I still strain to follow him. But perhaps I can occasionally catch the timbre and cadence: Not "it doesn't suit me," but "it don't suit."

I demur about the reef; he insists on more praise than I deserve. "Before that, men had to come from far sea before dark, so the boats wouldn't be mashed up ('mahshed up'). After you he'ped us blow the reef, we could build bigger boats. The men could stay out longer if the weather was hard and the work was slow. So they could put out more pots and make more money."

We pause; I savor a whiff of that harvested sea. At home in New England, ocean air is as much fish and seaweed as salt; here it seems pure salt. A few dead fish wash ashore, mostly

bony trunkfish tossed overboard as the men sort the catch on the way home, but in this arid, sun-drenched climate they are desiccated before they begin to stink.

Or the turkey vultures scavenge them. We rarely see noisome seagulls; too far south, perhaps. Vultures are ugly, but I admire them. Mornings they perch in our tall casuarinas trees or on the water tank, wings akimbo like the eagle on our 25-cent piece, facing the morning sun to dry the night dampness. As the day warms, thermal updrafts form; they flap away, clumsily at first. Once aloft, they soar effortlessly; often a dozen circle high above us.

Our friend Bill, a frequent guest, used to tease our daughter when she sunbathed. "Move an arm, Emily, so they'll know you're not dead yet." In fact, they're waiting for a whiff; amazingly, they rely on olfactory senses rather than sight to find their next meal.

In late afternoons, they sometimes surf the onshore breeze at treetop level in front of the house; we're high enough to look down to see them trim their flight with subtle shifts of shiny black wingtips. They bring to mind a line from Gerard Manley Hopkins' *The Windhover*: "striding high there. . . upon the rein of a wimpling wing."

There are no vultures now. The sea, less than a hundred yards away, is hardly visible in the gathering dusk.

Earlier, we watched the rain come ashore, a short-lived cell energized by sunlight on a still ocean. It roughened the glassy sea, then made a hissing, washing noise in the lignum vitae trees below the terrace, and finally beat on our aluminum roof like a snare drum. Real storms, with strong winds, can trick me into feeling chilled, although we've never had a temperature below 72° Fahrenheit. This evening's shower is just a cool respite from the afternoon heat.

But it hastens the dark. I turn on the floodlights at the edge of the patio, aimed at the terrace below. In the sudden glare we see the rain falling as straight and hard as lead shot. I can just glimpse white water, caught in the light, where waves break over the reef.

My wife brings us another Red Stripe beer, and Mister Arthur another glass of cola; he is a teetotaler. "Thank you, Miss Brad." His wide smile is luminous, even teeth that I suspect are choppers; he's one of the few in the village who could afford false teeth. In the gloom, he takes off the cloth-and-straw porkpie hat that is part of his persona, uncovering a balding pate that seems further reminder of Caucasian genes.



"Far sea," where many of our neighbors fish, is the Pedro Banks, an undersea coral and limestone formation 50 miles offshore, as big as Jamaica itself, with occasional small islands, written cays but said "keys."

Far-sea fishermen make the trip more or less once a week. They wait for calm weather, relying on radio or satellite TV forecasts from Miami, whose meteorologists have more information and seem more reliable than those in Kingston. Each captain has an unwritten contract with a man with a pickup truck who will buy the catch, and who brings ice in late afternoon before a voyage. The hundred-pound blocks are loaded into wooden chests amidships, covered with gunnysacks to slow the melting.

They push off about midnight. Flashlight beams seek out the white foam where waves break over the reef that protects the Billy's Bay cove; they aim for the dark water that marks the narrow opening. We've occasionally gone down to watch them leave, but they don't welcome Brad or other women then, because to load the boat and get it into deeper water, they strip down to skivvy shorts. Or less. They want dry clothes when they climb aboard, against the wind-chill of the open boat in an inky-black night.

We hear them from the house: the cough of outboards at the pull of starter cords, sputtering and dying, settling into a dark staccato, then gunning as each captain darts through the reef opening and throttles back. From the patio we see the wink of flashlights; the first boats wait until the little flotilla of a half-dozen assembles. They stay together the first part of the trip, for safety's sake.

As dawn nears, they will go separate ways to the place in the rolling, trackless ocean where each thinks he has found a productive spot. Ernie James, Mister Arthur's son, once told me he could put his face into the sea and read the bottom 50 fathoms down -- 100 yards! -- to lower his traps into a sheltered mini-canyon in the reef where fish eddy to and fro.

Those traps are like Yankee lobster pots, but made of chicken-wire on a frame of one-inch poles; at first glance they look like poultry cages; fish and lobster swim or crawl in easily through mesh funnels in the upper part of the trap. Fish look down, a pot-making neighbor tells me, so they can't find their way out easily; the narrowing funnel makes escape even less likely.

Modern technology is just beginning to be affordable: Some men nowadays have sonar "fish finders" to read the sea below them. A few even have global-positioning-satellite devices to pinpoint their locations far out of sight of land.

Most, however, still go to sea as they have since sails were replaced by outboards a decade or more after the war. The captain sits sidewise in the narrow stern of the 40-foot boat, a firm grip on the handle to steer. A binnacle, for years his most sophisticated piece of equipment, is mounted on the plank seat in front of him; he will for the most part steer a compass course. Gasoline is in 10-gallon plastic tanks that he changes as they are used up. He gauges his course by direction and time, wind and wave -- and tank changes.

The first mate and bowman are supposed to take turns staying awake to watch for freighters that might run over the little boat, which carries no running lights in the dark ocean. The crewmen, however, often steel themselves for the trip by toking hand-rolled marijuana cigarettes -- ganja, we call it -- and so make unreliable watchmen.



I've never found the courage (or connubial assent) to go to far sea. But I've joined Mister Arthur and some of the older men who go at dawn to "near sea," an underwater coral ridge three or four miles out.

Near-sea fishermen find their pots by reference to land -- our house, prominent on its sandy knoll, washed white in early-morning sunlight against green hills, is a landmark -- but even so, it takes time to find the first one. When he thinks he's close, Mister Arthur throttles back and begins an ever-widening spiral. I stand with his two crewmen at the gunwales, squinting out at the blue, glistening water, watching for a white Styrofoam float. If there is a heavy swell, floats are tugged below the surface on taut lines, and we must watch for them in the troughs of waves.

We find one, and trace back the string of floats to the start of the pot-set. The crewmen reach over for the line and haul a pot up hand-over-hand while Mister Arthur steadies the boat with the engine. The trap breaks the surface; they muscle it aboard and lay it athwart the gunwales.

There are usually only a few fish in each -- fat grouper, turbot, blushing snapper, the little rosy-red goatfish, the blue-and-white parrotfish -- and sometimes a lobster. At near sea, a pot with a dozen fish and a lobster is a lucky catch these days. Old-timers remember better catches when there were fewer fishermen.

The crewmen untie a bit of the "lacing wire" that holds the chicken-wire on the frame, and spill the fish into the boat. They know from markings which pot is whose. The captain's fish are spilled astern, at his feet; the first mate's, amidships; the bowman's, up forward; then the wire mesh is laced back again. Elsewhere on the South Coast, fishermen bait their traps with stale bread. Our men use no bait, unless they happen to catch a crab, which (unless a visitor has said "bring me some crabs") they dispatch with a slap on the side of the boat and toss back into the trap.

The crewmen stand the pot upright on a gunwale, then tip it over; it lands flat on the water and sinks out of sight. The frame has stubby two-inch legs so it will stay put in the sandy patches between reef outcrops.

We work our way to the last float, empty the pot, and head back to the harbor -- 50 yards of open water, no more than five feet deep -- inside the barrier reef. Although we are home by late morning, the onshore breeze is already up; there is a chop on the water, even a few whitecaps.

The reef opening, when we came in 1972, narrowed to less than eight feet at its throat. The largest boats -- Mister Arthur carved them from giant *ceiba* trees, which we call here the cottonwood -- were six feet wide amidships. Even in daylight with a mild swell, he circles several times, feinting like a sparring boxer, to line up on the opening and gauge the sideways drift. Then he guns the outboard as a swell gathers behind him, riding the wave through the reef.

Coral is sharp and unforgiving; the cottonwood, a cousin of balsa, prized for its bouyancy, is fragile. The least miscalculation rakes the bottom or sides on abrasive outcrops. Mister Arthur spent half his time at the beach making repairs. Every patch made a boat less seaworthy for the trip to the Pedro Banks.

At near sea, the winds are light and local; we are in the lee of the island of Jamaica itself. A few miles farther south into the open Caribbean, the northeast trade winds resume; waves grow larger. The wind can turn hard during the 18-hour trip, making slower work to find and draw the traps, and assuring a hull-slapping, slower homeward ride.

If far-sea men got back after dark, the reef passage was downright dangerous. I have seen our next-door neighbor Philip Gordon, one of the ablest captains, a big man and strong, come through first, then jump out and wade back chest-deep into the narrow channel with a flashlight to help others find their way in.