

THE  
VOYAGE  
OF THE  
*FROG*

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ISBN 978-1-338-89176-8

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1      23 24 25 26 27

Printed in the U.S.A.

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This edition first printing 2023



*David Alspeth* stopped at the locked gate, felt in his hands the weight of the small box which he could not stand to see yet, looked down on the sailboat, and tried not to cry.

She was twenty-two feet long, with a two-foot wooden bowsprit sticking from her nose, a stainless steel pulpit above it. Her mast and boom were made of wood, kept in good shape and varnished to a high sheen. And she had stainless steel lifelines all around and a small cabin in the middle with two plastic portholes on each side.

She was old, designed by a man named Schock and made in the mid-sixties, so old her fiberglass hull

## 2 *The Voyage of the FROG*

had lost its shine and had a faintly sanded, opaque look to it, although the original color—a robin's-egg blue—still shone in the California sun. She had been made before they fully understood fiberglass and learned they could make it thin, so her hull was a full half inch thick, and somehow it made her look stout—tough and short and low and punchy and stout.

Across her stern was a wooden plaque and on it was hand carved *FROG*.

David ran his hand over his face. The *Frog*, he thought—and she's mine. I'm fourteen years old and I've got my own sailboat, my own complete sailboat and I would give everything, all that I am, to not have it. He looked out across the small marina that comprised most of the Ventura harbor.

There was a stiffening breeze kicking up the waves beyond the breakwaters and he smiled thinking of what his uncle Owen called waves.

"Lumps," he used to say when they were getting ready to go out and the wind was blowing the sea around. "The ocean is full of lumps. . . ."

And there it was—*used to say*. His uncle Owen didn't say anything now. Not anymore. His uncle Owen was dead. Oh God, he thought—this just stinks. It just stinks to have it be this way. He cradled the wooden box in one hand and pulled a plastic card out of his back pocket and looked at it.

It was a Ventura marina lock card made out to Owen Alspeth. He put the card in the slot next to the gate, heard the lock click, pulled the gate open. The tide was out and the walkway sloped down at a steep angle so that he had to hold the handrail to keep from trotting forward.

At the bottom the dock was flat, and he walked to the slip holding the *Frog*. She wasn't locked. Owen didn't believe in locks, didn't believe in anything that held or confined things.

"If they're going to steal something the lock won't stop them," he'd said. And nobody had ever stolen from him, though other boats in the marina had been hit several times. Didn't believe in locks or chains or tying things down. Ahh, David thought and he shook his head and tried to shake his grief, the memory of the whole stinking mess pouring back into his thoughts.

Owen had felt a backache and gone to the doctor on a Monday morning and by Tuesday he knew he was going to die, knew that the cancer he had would kill him, that they could do nothing. Nothing for him. Again David controlled the tears. Down the dock a bit an older man stared at him for a moment, then turned away.

It had spread so fast. The cancer—so incredibly fast. A week after he'd gone into the hospital they had found more tumors in his brain and Owen called

#### 4 *The Voyage of the FROG*

David in to visit him. David had wanted to go sooner but while they were running tests Owen had asked him to wait. David's parents—Owen was his father's brother—were taking turns staying with him in the hospital. His mother had been there when David came the first time, and Owen had asked her to leave.

David hated hospitals, and it was worse when he saw Owen lying in bed. He looked weak, caved in, dead already, dead and done, and when David saw him he was overwhelmed with the change. His uncle's cheeks were sunken and his whole face was cast in a gray that somehow looked even and flat. And the smell from him was a mixture of alcohol and urine and feces—David had heard his mother say that the tumor in his spine kept him from controlling himself from the waist down.

Instantly, without a single thought that it was coming, David threw up, and of course that made it all the more horrible. Owen, his Owen who was so close, his own Owen who had taken him out sailing so many times and who always kept himself so neat that when the wind blew his hair didn't move, his own sweet uncle Owen—and he couldn't see him without throwing up, making a mess all over the floor. To make it still worse Owen laughed. A skull laugh.

“Some smell, isn't it?”

And David thought, What can I say? What words

can come out now to make this all right? And of course nothing came and he stood there with the mess on his shirt and the floor, looking but trying not to stare, hurting and trying not to breathe, and he was taken by such a roar of hate that it made his vision blur even more than the tears.

There had to be somebody to hit for this, he thought—there had to be some damn enemy to hit for this, this stinking death thing that was in the room.

“They think I might make two more weeks,” Owen said, shrugging, his bony shoulders like two hooks. Tubes seemed to be poked into him in many places and they rattled when he moved. “I doubt I’ll make a week but who am I to know?”

David shook his head—angry jerks. “Don’t talk like that, dammit. Things happen. People make it. There are things they can do. There are always things they can do. . . .”

But they both knew that the doctors could do nothing, could take nothing more from him nor add anything to him to save him.

“All they can do now is keep me drugged up and comfortable.” Owen looked past David, out the window at the hills in back of Ventura. The smog-haze was thickening and the rolling, brush-covered hills were bathed in yellow muck. “I want you to have the *Frog*.”

## 6 *The Voyage of the FROG*

Another violent shake. “No. I can’t take her. Not like this, not this way. You love that boat, you live for it. . . .” David trailed off, paused, finished lamely. “I just can’t. It wouldn’t be right.”

Owen turned a dial on a small box at the edge of the bed. A tube ran from the box to a needle that entered his arm. He had a pinched look at the corners of his eyes, from the pain, but it lessened almost instantly. “It’s a drug computer,” he said, sighing. “It drips morphine into me and I can turn it up when the pain waves up. That’s all there is now for me, little victories like that. I can turn a dial and soften pain. My whole life has come down to that. . . .”

Another silence. David was crying openly now, thinking of Owen. Once he had seen Owen dancing at a beach party with a heavy girl, and he had picked her up and held her while he danced in the sand, holding her like a feather, laughing, his arms and legs strong and tight, and now . . . now he seemed about to break from the weight of the sheets. Owen reached slowly to the nightstand next to the hospital bed, the increased drug dosage hitting him, and David saw now that there was a small envelope there. Owen scabbled for it with his boned fingers, caught it, and handed it to David.

“Here is the title, signed over to you. You know how hard it is to find a notary public in a hospital? And the marina card is there. I think she still has



some water in the tank, and there are some cans of food I left from my last trip to Catalina. I need a favor from you.”

“Anything.” And he meant it. I will die for you if it will save you. Anything.

“I am going to be cremated. I want you to take my ashes out alone on the *Frog*, out to sea alone, and leave me there. Take me to where you can’t see land and scatter my ashes there on the water. . . .”

David held the envelope crushed in his hand, held it while he cried and the silence had come again, come and stayed and grown until David’s mother came back into the room and broke it with talk.

He didn’t make a week.

Just six days. On the fifteenth of May, while David was in his last day of school in the eighth grade, his uncle Owen died in a drugged state resembling a coma. Even knowing it was coming hadn’t helped. The grief tore at David and his parents. Owen had no other family, had never married and had stayed close to them, lived only four blocks away, ate with them and was the first to take David sailing. Several times he had taken him on two- and three-day trips out to Santa Cruz Island and once to Catalina, and now he was suddenly gone.

Completely gone.

David stepped on the boat, felt her rock quickly to his weight, jerking lightly against the ropes that

## 8 *The Voyage of the FROG*

held her to the slip-dock. Seagulls had been perching on the boom; there was a mess on the top of the cabin and the floor of the cockpit, and he stepped to the side to miss it.

He unhooked the hasp holding the sliding cabin top hatch in place and slid it forward. His nose was immediately filled with the rank odor from inside the boat. The cabin hadn't been opened since the last time Owen had come to the marina, over a month ago, and it smelled of mustiness and mildew and fungus and something else as well, something David could not pin down at first.

When it came, finally, it stopped him cold, one hand on the top of the hatch. It was the smell of Owen. No. More than that. It was Owen himself. The ghost of Owen. The smell was the boat and Owen, and David could not tell in his mind where the boat ended and Owen began.

He sat then, on the edge of the cockpit, holding the box, and cried and cried, letting it roll out of him in uncontrollable heaves, his hands clasped between his knees and the sound of the waves and gulls and sea around him.