

Over the Ocean Blue

He read in the manner of his sleeping supported by a hammock stretched diagonally across the bedroom. His sturdy height ended in cropped black hair; a haircut, he performed intermittently aided by a mirror. His snipped here and there until all was even, mostly. His name added a middle-eastern spice to his native Colombian ancestry. He fancied the guitarra, played with care, and sang with tenderness. Until this morning, he had never ventured offshore from his native Santa Marta.

The craft was on loan from a friend. The red gel coat showed dappled pink, a vintage kayak. The Colombian and his Australian friend, a sailor of some experience wrenched the boat out of a small storage room and banged it up three flights of stairs. The crumbling concrete stairs outside the apartment building led from beach to lobby. The temptation to cast the kayak from the stairs to the water was countered by the likelihood of missing the water altogether.

They heaved the boat up the switchback rise to the lobby of the apartment building. The building stood at the top of a steep hill. The prospect of lugging the boat down the street and then to the beach felt daunting. The porter spoke of a wheeled carrier. They returned to the storage room and foraged for the trailer. Following some adjustments, the boat balanced its way to the edge of the Caribbean. One man guided the bow; the other anchored the stern with his weight.

The launch was uneventful. With inelegancy, the boatman synchronized paddling, banged their paddles, and tried again. They set a course for El Morro a tiny block of rock island. A single house gripped the yellow rock at various levels. The

Colombian couldn't say who lived there; mystery with white caps pounding Yesterday the wind had blown fierce from the north. Gusts pushed people sideways on the street. Grit brushed their teeth. Sand, newspapers, plastic bags, and shore birds flew together restless. The two men agreed to give the day a try. The sky and the sea mirrored restless blue.

With the breeze astern, they gained El Morro in forty minutes. They decided to try for Playa Blanca. This beach is reachable only by boat and they were past the half-way point. The turn toward Playa Blanca exposed them to the strength of the wind. Spray struck the boat with regularity of a morning shower. They smelled of the sea. The paddling took their breath. After twenty-minutes, El Morro remained in exactly the same position on the port side. No headway. They laughed and tried harder, "put your back into it lad," the Australian commanded.

Still the island remained in the same position. In a growing weariness, the down-under sailor counseled it best to steer the kayak off the wind and toward the western point of Rodadero beach where they had begun. Paddling would be easy with the wind at their backs.

Without looking anywhere but in down, they were surprised when a worn power boat drew alongside and circled the kayak. The wind made it hard to hear. The gist was, "We'll give you a tow otherwise you'll end up in Barranquilla." Barranquilla was two hours south by car. The Aussie's, "No," expressed confidence and was exclaimed without hesitation. "No, we're fine, gracias."

Seafaring folk know the wind is fickle. On the other hand, a landlubber would conclude that if the wind was blowing in your face turning a 180 degree would bring the

wind against your back. Not so here. The wind thunders down various arroyos in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. Thus, the kayakers paddled against the breeze, and now, against the current. They paddled hard with concern about synchronization abandoned. There was progress. But then almost imperceptively the Aussie in the after seat felt a curious sensation. The kayak seemed sort of tippy. That thought was dismissed, after all, these boats are extremely buoyant, and they have self-draining scuppers. He assumed they must be sideways to the current with the wind dead astern. Minutes later the weird play of the boat was getting worse or his imagination was getting better. Then he put his legs over each side trying to balance the growing awkwardness. The kayak was definitely tippy. But that cannot be, he reasoned. The boat drains automatically—water flows in, water flows out.

The draining part was less clear. Why was the boat so loopy? Why indeed. The drain holes were now underwater; there was less and less control. “Paddle! Paddle hard!”

The kayak began to yaw and roll. Then, in slow motion, the boat reversed itself, top became bottom, and bottom became top. When the worst happens fear rests. The sailors laughed as they clung to the red log. The Colombian bobbed in his yellow life-jacket as he gripped the stern. There was some sputtering from both. The horizon appears the near when the eyes is three inches from sea level. They estimated the crumbling concrete pier two futbol fields distant. They had launched from the beach near the pier.

They considered swimming to shore in the life-jackets and let the boat fend for itself. Unfortunately, the kayak belonged to a friend. They should try to return it. They attempted to swim the boat shoreward—one hand for the swim, one for the boat—without success.

After various strategies to bring the boat to sand, they hit upon one that looked a failure from the beach. The Colombian, a less than confident swimmer, clung to the stern and kicked. The Aussie flipped a paddle lengthwise on the upturned bottom, moved forward, and wrapped each leg around the bow. Trying to retrieve the paddle proved several failures, but last he had it hand. He lay belly up in the water and stroked backwards. The indignity of their return was exceeded only by the un-wisdom of their launch. It occurred more than once to the Australian as he paddled on his back that seaman must assess the seaworthiness of an unfamiliar boat while on shore and not on the sea.

So it was that from the beach two old men, sun-dyed, and skinny as boys followed these proceedings without comment. The kicking and paddling continued with increasing periods of rests. Twice the Australian lost his leg grip and let the paddle go. As he began again he called out, “Hey, mi amigo, can you touch the bottom?” “No,” occurred five times. The estimated distance to shore lengthened. At last, feet felt sand. They rested secure in the warm inshore water. Now they pushed and pulled the waterlog of a boat. Finally they reached the beach.

They paused. They looked at each other. “The boat is full of water—very, very heavy.” They waited until a wave might aid their efforts and lift the water-swollen kayak ashore. No such gift was offered inches of surf. They wiggled the bow and stern back and forth all the while pulling to get the boat out. Little progress. Both looked helplessly at the gathering of observers, no takers. Now dried and sweating, they continued the wiggle and heave of the bow and stern of the kayak until it cleared the water and squashed down

on the wet angle of beach. They bent over their knees for breath. The Colombian felt dizzy and steadied himself with a hand on the kayak and stared back toward the stern.

And there rose a fountain. Actually, several fountains flowed upward through nine exceedingly poor attempts at fiber-glass patching. He stared and both began to laugh.