

BILL SCHERMBRUCKER / The Welder

for Helen, and Cheryl

On a blazing summer morning in January 1954, in the seaside town of Fish Hoek, South Africa, my stepmother, Helen, jumped down off a two-foot dividing wall onto the concrete, and her sandals made a loud slap which shot my heart into my mouth. She was eight and a half months pregnant, and I fully expected the baby to pop right out of her. After everybody had finished scolding her for her impetuosity, and the weather clouded over, my older brother and I set off on our bicycles for a camping trip at Cape Point. ("Go as planned," Helen insisted. "Naggie and I can cope if the baby comes.") From the shelter of our rocky cave Christo and I stared like Keats' Cortez at the demarcation line where the friendly, warm, green Indian Ocean meets the cold, blue South Atlantic, then took our fins and masks and sheath-knives and slid into the swelling waves, in search of food. For three rainy days, we lived on fried *perlemoen* (abalone) and condensed milk on bread, then pushed our bikes up to the road and pedalled back over the Simonstown mountain to Fish Hoek, wondering if the baby had arrived.

It happened late that night. I listened to the scurrying and anxious voices as they went off to the maternity home, and my only assignment in the affair was to take a bucket of warm water and a couple of rags next day and clean up the leather back seat of Naggie's Ford Prefect where Helen's water had burst while Christo was driving her to the home. Father flew down from Kenya, and in a few days Helen came back with baby John. Naggie's flat was so filled with people that we had to rent an extra room from the upstairs neighbour. Now we were a family of four brothers, Christo 20, me 16, Geoffrey 3, and the newborn John.

My father had married Helen (Beck) Muller, a widow with a small son, in 1952. During their first year of marriage she had another brief and secret pregnancy. One Sunday out from school, I snooped and found a drawer full of dry bloodstained gauze pads.

"Helen," I said, "I was looking in your drawers for nail clippers and—"

"Oh my God, Billy!" she said, "burn them for me, will you. I didn't know how to get them past the servants."

I emptied the drawer into a brown grocery bag and took it to the kitchen and stuffed it into the Aga Cooker (“*Ufanyaji sasa, Meetila?*” Liru asks, “What are you doing now, little Hitler,” and I reply, “*Si shauri yako, Mzee,*” “None of your business, old man.”) Helen did not refer again to that incident until 22 years later when she visited me in Vancouver in 1974. “It would have been simply impossible to have another child that soon into the marriage. I was desperately trying to find my feet in Kenya, when I discovered I was pregnant. I was prepared to do anything to end it. But fortunately it ended by itself.”

And now another 30-some years after that, I sit at my desk on Saturna Island B.C. looking out through the curves and forks of a Sitka willow framed by erect pine and fir, towards distant Tsawwassen, where little white ferries come and go, and I drop my gaze into the computer. The screen is a tunnel through jumbled time frames into pictures and emotions on another continent that I try to join into a coherent piece. It comes to me how strong a woman Helen was. Christo was so upset at our mother’s death that he couldn’t easily accept her—couldn’t stand her sloppiness. He tells stories to this day about her lack of carefulness: one morning she drives to the bank and withdraws a large amount of money, enough, say, to pay a labourer’s wages for two years, then places her purse on the roof of the car while she unlocks the door, gets in and drives off, forgetting what she put on the roof. All that cash lost somewhere on the road, *that* famous blunder. And her protectiveness of little John, turning him into a mama’s boy. Nor is Chris alone in these criticisms. I push the tape recorder button: Mona Stanley, my godmother in Kenya: “He was a naughty little devil, that Johnny. I didn’t like him at all. I reckon he gave your father more grey hairs and heart worries than anything else in that home of yours. Came to stay with me on the farm. *Oh*, he didn’t want this, didn’t like that, wouldn’t eat cauliflower. And I said, ‘You’ve *got to eat it!*’ He looked at me and gave me a dirty look. Eventually he ate it. But as soon as his mother came, his nonsense started again. Wouldn’t eat this, wouldn’t eat that. I think your poor father took the brunt of it all.”

That’s one dimension of the conundrum—my “poor father”: a man of great enterprise and success, a founder of the Eldoret Rugby Club and in ’52 elected president of the Kenya Law Society while his new young wife struggles to “find her feet” socially in Nairobi; a man who never looked back from the day in 1910 when he was chosen to sit erect on his horse at the age of six, one hand lightly holding the reins and the other firmly gripping the flagpole of the royal standard, leading the parade

into Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape for the King's visit to celebrate Union. Who emigrated to Kenya to help build the country, and now, a lifetime later, was battling cholesterol and hypertension, after a war by terrorists who had vowed to drive all of us Europeans and Asians into the sea. And now on top of his other worries, damn it! this moody child of his who had appeared as a surprise, and hid behind his mother's skirts, and wouldn't so much as eat his cauliflower...

Oddly, Father had an empathy for food repugnance. I was astonished, in our house in Muthaiga at the beginning of my mother's fatal illness, when I lingered over a half-eaten dinner and Father told the servant quietly, "*Chukua sahani*," ("Take the plate away"), then said kindly to me, "You don't have to finish that. Vegetables are an acquired taste. I only came to it later in life."

Laxity, remission, *caritas*, caring. Another dimension of the puzzle. "We are but little children weak, / Nor born to any high estate."

My father used to rub our chests with camphorated oil when we were sick, especially after Mother died. He murmured a mantra as his hand massaged. "Get you better, get you better." But when he came back home from Nairobi in office mode, and found domestic muddle in the house, he would blow up.

(Move aside, Pa! This story is about John, not you.)

"Hello?" I answer the phone. It's 1999.

"Bull?"

"Yes John?"

"How did you know it was me?"

"Nobody else calls me 'Bull.'"

"Am I mispronouncing your name?"

"I'd call it perfect."

"Look, shall we come and see you, man?"

"Definitely. Where are you now?"

"Florida. The boat's on dry land."

I try to take in the story. In his sailboat *Ferdinand*, which he built with his own hands, my little "mama's boy" brother has left South Africa with his wife and two children, en route for New Zealand. First, it took them a year to get permission to emigrate with the boat, during which time they lived aboard at Hout Bay, near Cape Town. Then, when the government relented and the South Atlantic storms abated, they sailed via Saint Helena to the Caribbean. Aboard the forty-foot boat, they have

lived for four solid years, pausing once in Trinidad to give birth to another child (changed their email address from Ferdi4 to Ferdi5). And now he has bought a used Chevy van and built sleeping bunks in it and they are on their way to Vancouver. How did John become such a Hercules?

In the mid-1960s, as his health deteriorated and the British lost their will for empire, my father began retrenching. He sold the coffee farm at Kiambu and moved into Nairobi. He managed to get his savings out of the country, and eventually, as the blood pressure machine displayed disappointing numbers, he sold up and booked passage on the Lloyd Triestino boat to Cape Town. Back where he'd come from forty years before, Father and Helen with the two teenage boys. They bought a house and painted it, and he died. "A tired heart."

It happened so quickly that everyone was shocked, worst of all John. A single memory sustained him: He remembered how a few years earlier at the age of ten, near our coral beach house at Diani south of Mombasa, he had found a wrecked aluminum airplane float, and persuaded Father to buy it. He put a mangrove pole mast on it, and Father helped him rig a canvas lateen sail, and he spent his days sailing down past The Two Fishes Hotel to Jadini, and tacking back against the wind. Now in Cape Town, everything was lost. Father dead, coffee farm gone, Diani gone. Nobody spoke Swahili, and worst of all, they forced John to learn Afrikaans at school, a language he wanted nothing to do with. So he refused to attend. Helen cajoled him, but he stood his ground and eventually turned violent. It got very bad. One day he raised a kitchen knife against her, and our brother Geoffrey had to drive down from Sasolburg to intervene and sit on him. There was talk of a Borstal institution. Eventually he made a pact with his mother: "You just leave me alone and I'll leave you alone, okay?" They coexisted in the house without communication.

At fifteen, he stopped school altogether and began hanging out at the Zeekoevlei Yacht Club. He learned to weld, and fabricated a boat trailer on a discarded BMW rear axle, and sold it for cash. Then another. Soon he was getting orders for yacht trailers from all over the Cape. He made enough money to buy himself a motor bike. But one day he had an accident and, lying in hospital with both legs and both arms broken, he decided to forget motor bikes and stick to boats. He worked on Geoffrey's uncle's boat and realized that that was something he could do.

Then he met Cheryl.

"Would you like to take a trip to the Seychelles?" he asked her.

"Where is it?" she said.

"Islands about two thousand miles north, in the Indian Ocean."

"Ja!" she said, "*Lekker*, man."

"Okay, I'll build a boat."

When Helen visited me in Vancouver, she told me that she'd gone on an Anglican retreat and been converted, and a few weeks later one of her friends informed her that John had also become a Christian, Pentecostal. Over supper, she broached the matter with him, and he acknowledged it with a shy smile. This was the first conversation mother and son had had since the "leave alone" pact. He brought his friends over that night, and they baptized her in the Holy Spirit. During her visit to Vancouver, John phoned twice to check that she was okay. "See, Billy?" Helen said. "God is real!" She went home to Cape Town and a few weeks later a neighbour came to visit, and found that knocking on the door made no impression on Helen, whom she could see sitting with her eyes open in an armchair in the living room. She had died of a stroke, aged fifty-seven.

John asked Cheryl to marry him, and she said, "Sure!" even though it meant she had to resign her teaching position, according to some chauvinist British rule still in effect in South Africa. But she taugth on as a temporary and eventually put John through Technical College, and then, when he realized that that wasn't good enough, through the University Engineering school.

"One day we're coming to see you, *Boetie*," he told me on the phone, and I noticed that he had lost his famous antipathy to Afrikaans. Even his accent was decidedly *jaapie*. "We'll sail up under your Lions Gate Bridge and say hello, man. How 'bout that?"

So here we sit in North Vancouver, in 1999, waiting for the van to arrive from Florida. (He investigated sailing up the Mississippi, then trucking overland, but that proved too costly.)

The two bigger children scramble out of the van and romp around us like monkeys, leaping on our backs, crying, "Uncle Bill! Uncle Bill! Auntie Sharon and Uncle Bill!"

I take the one-year-old Meg from Cheryl's arms, and the child allows me to hold her. She turns to look as I point out Mount Baker, and her cousin Julia's playhouse

in the backyard, and then Penny's house next door. "And there's a hazelnut tree, see, Meg? And there's a black walnut." The child inspects my face, six inches away, then pronounces her verdict loudly in my ear: "Blah! Blah! Blah!"

Night after night they tell us their stories: how they ran out of cash in the Caribbean and Cheryl went from boat to boat in the dinghy, a floating charlady. How the hurricanes came and then there was lots of paying work for John, so that they prayed for more storms. How he invented a hurricane-proof anchor, and stayed aboard *Ferdinand* when all the other boats were evacuated ashore to the schoolhouse in Saint Maarten, and Cheryl watched nervously with the others, as he rode out the storm, testing his invention. How word suddenly buzzed through the yachtie community that New Zealand rules had changed: if you didn't take up landed immigrancy within a specific time you lost it; so John persuaded a wealthy German to let him refit his damaged boat for ten thousand bucks US, then persuaded him to pay him up front so they could all fly to New Zealand and sleep a few days on somebody's floor and have a postmarked letter delivered to establish residency, before flying back to the Caribbean.

After a month with us, they set off to see Vancouver Island. John is not interested in engineering jobs; he could spend the rest of his life working on boats. They've heard that there are good prospects up at Comox. But when they return from the Island a week later, they are more determined than ever to head for New Zealand. They have bought four bikes and a child carrier seat at Walmart in Victoria and will strap them on the deck, so that when they land at islands in the South Pacific, they'll have a means of getting around. I take them for a ride in the Seymour Demonstration Forest, and when we get back to the house, John says, "Bull, I'm not happy with this seat, hey? I'm going to weld a bit of pipe in there to make it longer. Where's your welder?"

"I don't have a welder, John."

"You don't have a welder?" He looks at me in dismay. "How do you live, man?"

All too soon they are gone. Back to Florida via Texas, sell the van for what they paid, relaunch *Ferdinand*, on through the Panama Canal, out into the Pacific.

Somewhere between the Cook Islands and Auckland, a huge Pacific wave swelled up on them without warning, in the middle of the night, when they were all asleep, on autopilot, with open hatches. It broke and crashed into the boat.

"Every damn thing we own got soaked!" he writes. "It really pissed me off."

They'd be short of cash when they reached New Zealand, so I asked John how they would manage for housing.

"I'm gonna buy a cheap plot of land," he said, "and bring in the electric and water connections, and we'll get a guy with a machine to dig out the earth just so, and put the boat in there, and live on it."

I shake my head, remembering little Johnny who wouldn't eat his cauliflower. Remembering Helen, who shielded him from a bullying culture.

And Cheryl, who takes the trip with him wherever he wants to go.

