

## *Houseboat Sabotage ...*

The lights ringing Lake Union shone like beacons across the night-shrouded waters. A cold breeze stirred the surface of the vast lake, breaking the reflected beams into dancing points of brilliance. Choppy waves slapped at the glacial-sand beaches as they had for ten thousand years.

An obscure figure eased a matte-black inflatable kayak into the water and disappeared into the rubbery shell, adding scarcely a ripple to the already agitated lake. Paddling swiftly but quietly through the water, the figure propelled the small craft in a straight line along the irregular shore. It was heading directly toward the marina where the *Come Ye Heather* was moored, placid and secure, a lighted castle among the dark sloops and schooners, the ketches and yawls, of the Seattle weekend sailing crowd.

Once the kayak had cleared the outlying breakwater and reached the more protected waters within the marina, it made its way through the labyrinth of docks, boats, mooring lines, hoses and dinghies ... toward the *Come Ye Heather*.

Slipping between the bulky houseboat and the floating dock, the kayak finally came to a rest. The dark figure quietly tied the kayak to a cleat on the houseboat deck, took a glinting implement from within the kayak,

then slid into the water like a seal.

For fully fifteen minutes the figure labored, arms rotating slowly, splashing rhythmically. Chips of wood floated aimlessly away from the craft, caught up in the small eddies that formed in the moving, liquid darkness of the marina.

Then, as quietly as it had begun, the work was finished.

The figure disappeared into the kayak again, which glided toward the breakwater, into the dark embrace of the city-girded lake and its necklace of lights.

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Early the next morning, the cell phone in Owl Man's pocket vibrated like a rattlesnake and pounded out its ring tones—the ominous opening to Bach's Mass in B Minor. He was driving on the freeway across Seattle. The sun had not cleared the horizon yet. Ordinarily he would have let the phone buzz and jangle until he had arrived at his destination. Only then would he listen to the message. But today was different. Some instinct moved him to answer the call, so he turned off abruptly at the next exit and spoke while still rolling.

"Hello?"

"It's Heron Man. I'm at the houseboat. Fex wanted me to call. He thinks you'd better come on down."

There was a pause, then a tussling sound as Fex grabbed the phone from Heron Man.

"Owl Man, get your ass down here right away!"

It was Fex. His voice was jacked up several notches and he sounded nearly hysterical. It was that squeaking sound he had made after fainting, when he saw Heather kneeling over him in the houseboat.

"What's going on, Fex?" said the Owl.

"Somebody's screwin' around with my houseboat. It's about to sink. Get down here now!" Fex struggled to bring his voice back down to a more authoritative register.

"I'm on my way. Ten-four."

Owl Man had deliberately lowered *his* voice to what he called his "police frequency"—that deep bass voice with the disciplined, clipped urgency of Broderick Crawford in the old "Highway Patrol" TV series. Owl Man could still see Crawford's loose chops quivering as he barked into the two-way radio handset at the door of his black Buick cruiser, his felt fedora set at a dashing angle.

For some reason, Owl Man had been uneasy all morning. As he

merged into the early flow of freeway traffic, he checked both rear-view mirrors, carefully scanning the traffic behind. He noted colors, makes and models, looked for a pattern, saw a black sedan. Was someone tailing him? It had tinted windows so he couldn't see the driver. Broderick Crawford? he thought. Joe Friday? Or was he imagining things? Too many TV cop dramas? Maybe Sal, Fex and Coo were getting to him.

Owl Man went over some recent events: Coo had tailed him to Tully's and made them walk separately to Dunkin' Donuts. Sal was jumpy, always looking over his shoulder, talking about Jolene or "the Feds." Sally and Heather ... well, that was another story altogether. Owl Man knew he was associating with people who crossed legal boundaries with ease, and who tended toward paranoia as a result. Was it all rubbing off on Owl Man?

His mind shifted back to the scene at the houseboat. Was it really sinking? What was going on? Certainly nothing he, Owl Man, had written up. Or was Heron Man moonlighting a little? Owl Man wanted to get there as soon as possible, more to satisfy his own curiosity than to jump at Fex's imperious command. Were there other actors in this drama? Did someone have it in for Fex? Was there something Owl Man had overlooked? He reined in his speculations, knowing his imagination could easily outpace the situation. Let's just wait and see, he thought.

He was walking down the floating ramp—inclined more steeply than before, due to the low tide—when he saw Fex's houseboat at Berth #27. The roof was noticeably tilted toward the dock. It wasn't sinking, not yet at least. Nor was it on fire. Nor had it been smashed up. But something was definitely wrong. A group of men stood on the dock, hands in their pockets. No one was doing anything. Were they watching it sink? Or trying to figure out what to do?

Owl Man approached the group. Regardless of what had taken place here, the houseboat seemed stable, just listing to one side. He looked around. The disturbing thing was that a small clean hole, one-inch in diameter, had mysteriously appeared just below the waterline. A few wood chips floated sluggishly in the oily water around the pilings and against the hull. They looked like peelings from the freshly bored hole, as if someone had applied an augur bit and some elbow grease to Fex's "floating castle," as he called it, and which he had christened the *Come Ye Heather*.

But why had they bothered? Not to destroy it or sink it—the hole was easily spotted, easily repaired. Nothing catastrophic. Perhaps someone just wanted to get Fex's goat, or send a warning message, or play him for a fool. The possibilities ran in many directions.

The men stood in their bulky coats, caps and beards. With the

exception of Owl Man, everyone was smoking. Two cigarettes, one pipe. And one cigar—that was Fex. Smoking was forbidden on the docks, of course, for obvious reasons, but the signs were upside down or crossed out. Most of the men who lived on the boats were bachelors. They had sacrificed for their freedom, and they didn't like to be told what they could or couldn't do. From a distance, Owl Man fit right in, with his turtleneck, cap and beard, but up close he stood out. He listened to the conversation, yet he was not part of the group. Meanwhile he scribbled in a small, vest-pocket notebook.

"Have to pump the bilge real good."

"Yep. That's for sure."

"Maybe get Alex down at the Boat Works to plug that hole."

"Yep."

"Don't look too bad anyway. But who'd do a thing like that?"

"Damned if I know."

"Me neither."

Even Fex, who usually sought control and dominance in any conversation, did nothing to stem the steady drip of pointless clichés. No one seemed to know what to think, say, or do. Finally, Fex looked at Owl Man, shook his head and nodded toward the listing craft.

"You got any bright ideas, Owl Man?"

Owl Man was about to speak when Heron Man came trotting down the ramp, followed by a short-waisted, long-legged, red-bearded young man wearing jeans, a flannel shirt and red suspenders. Despite his red beard his hair was blond, flowing in curls to his shoulders. There were several wood chips in his hair. He carried a long, traditional carpenter's toolbox stuffed with hand tools, including a brace and several augur bits.

"Hey, Alex!" one of the men yelled. "When are you going to finish painting my dinghy?"

"Soon enough, Max, soon enough. *Omni festinatio*, you know." Alex Bystrom had a slight Scandinavian, or perhaps Minnesotan, accent, and he was a bit of an intellectual. He read a lot, quoted Latin, and compared every novel to Moby Dick. He did most of the woodcraft repairs around the docks. The consensus was that Alex was a wizard with a chisel or a block plane. Even Fex admired his skill.

But as Heron Man and Alex reached the group of bystanders Fex noticed the augur bits in Alex's toolbox.

"Hey, wait a minute, Alex. You got the same damn size bit as that freakin' hole in the *Come Ye Heather!* Maybe you been stickin' your fingers where they don't belong!" Fex was anything but deft when it came to metaphors.

"Now what are you talking about, Fex"? Alex had known Fex a long time, and was not impressed.

Everybody there, including Fex, knew that Alex had nothing to do with the damage to Fex's houseboat. He was there to fix it, nothing more.

"I've got work to do, Fex. Where's the problem?"

"Down there." Fex jabbed his finger in the direction of the hole.

Alex leaned over, took a quick look and said, "Doesn't look too bad."

Without saying more he took a short section of oak dowel-stock from the toolbox, shaved it into a taper with a small plane, selected a leather mallet and approached the listing boat. With one foot on a dock brace, and another on the boat, he reached into the water, fit the dowel in the hole and whacked it once with the heavy mallet. Water splashed against the hull and over all the onlookers. They jumped back. Two cigarettes were extinguished by the spray.

"Hey, watch out!" Fex was examining his stogie, sucking on it, trying to keep it burning.

Alex cut off the excess dowel stock, gathered his tools, turned to Fex, and said, "That should hold until you get this thing pumped out and floating upright again. I'll send you a bill for this tomorrow. If you want a real repair you'll probably have to tow it to dry-dock or rent a portable crane, something



to get the hole well above the waterline."

"That'll cost a fuckin' fortune!"

"You're a big shot, Fex. You can afford it." Alex picked up his toolbox and strode up the ramp. He had to get back to work on Max's dinghy.

Owl Man made some more notes and thought for a moment. He could hear the muted sound of the bilge pump working, and the soft splash of the evacuated bilge water spilling into the lake. He turned to Fex and said, "Why don't you leave it alone for now, Fex. It's not going to sink. Let's drive over to Tully's with Heron Man. I'll buy you a plain drip. Maybe Tully has some donuts left."

"Make mine a chocolate with rainbow sprinkles and coconut. No, make it two." Fex was determined to extract some advantage out of the situation, if only by getting two donuts instead of one.

Heron Man, with curious amusement, said, "Are we ready then?"