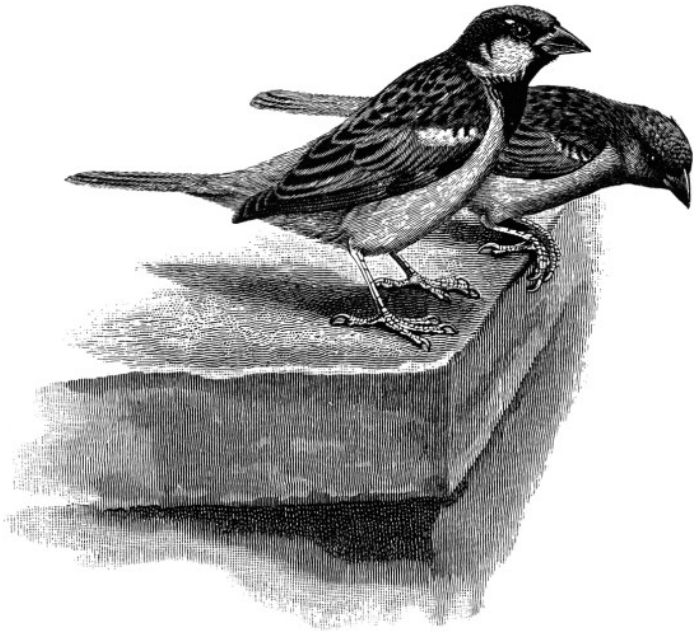


The Crooked Thing

Stories

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*O love is the crooked thing,
There is nobody wise enough,
To find out all that is in it*

—W.B. Yeats

YOU CAN'T DRIVE TO KAUA'I

I was lying in my bed howling. Wind knocked against the thin pane window of my boarding house room like it was galloping in on a horse in the night. I howled and the wind sang back. I opened my arms and howled again. And once more the wind sang back to me. This day was unique. Like it read my mind. The winds and I became one. Back and forth until the sky grew light and the clouds had vanished.

Vancouver in winter is wet and grey, with an endlessly depressing sameness that dulls everything. Easterly winds don't come through here often, but when they do, they arrive with a holler. A little over ten years ago, a winter easterly ripped through Stanley Park in the middle of the night, taking out power lines, and upturning trees that crushed cars like pop cans. They say that wind uprooted 10,000 trees. I've been waiting a long time for an easterly. I don't want to be angry anymore. The wind grew quiet and so did I. In the lull I whispered, Carry me. Carry me to Kaua'i.

I won't be going to Kaua'i for a beach holiday. I'm going there to start a new life. The sun and those trade winds and the easy life are going to open a new chapter for me. I could feel in my bones the bigness of the adventure I was about to have. This was only my second big risky venture ever. Tanya was the first. I reached across the bed for her. For her muscly, tiny, tough arm.

"I've got the water, two thermoses of coffee and I think I'm going to need twelve Reuben sandwiches from The Bavarian, sweetie. And did you get the Nanaimo bars?"

I could smell the Hawaiian coffee already, and IZ was playing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" in my head. What I would give

to play the ukulele. I began to whistle, picking up my volume above the rattling of the window, trying to wake up Tanya.

“I’m thinking eight days, babe. But I’m planning for twelve. Just to be safe.”

I leaned over to kiss her. “I wish you were coming with me.” All I held in my hand was a rumpled blanket. Every morning I relived the loss. Tanya was gone. She left me a year ago. And it was my fault.

Once I’d arrived at work at the Granville Island dock and loaded my food and water under the bench of my aquaferry, I put my regrets out of my mind and my mood began to soar. I had to work until 10 p.m. ferrying people from Granville Island to downtown Vancouver and back. Then it would be good-bye city, hello Kaua’i. November has been a slow month on the aquaferry. There were a few early morning commuters and no one at all taking the aquaferry midday. You’ll think I’m crazy, but I rode back and forth on my route, accelerated the engine and screamed, “I love you,” into my empty boat.

After that, I got through my day by going over my list and planning my route, waiting for quitting time. Even though my ferry had been empty for the last three crossings, I had to run the route. That’s the rule. At exactly 9:55 p.m. just minutes before I was due back at the berth for the night, I pointed my aquaferry west, away from Granville Island. I zipped up my Arc’teryx hoody, wound up the ropes, and ducked my 6’4” body into the pilot’s seat. Appearance matters, and I looked smart. I’d bought the jacket with my first paycheque. Cost me the whole wad. A whole week of ferrying locals and tourists back and forth across False Creek. Tanya hit the roof.

“When I said what is the one thing you are going to do today? You know, to be happy. I didn’t mean buying a jacket, Chester. I meant little things. Walking in the park. Eating an ice cream cone. Petting a puppy. Jeez, there goes half the month’s rent.”

The sky was dark but lucky for me a full moon lit the waves of False Creek Inlet and I sailed smoothly under the Burrard Bridge. I loved that bridge. Sometimes I’d get on the speaker and tell my passengers about the history of the bridge. No one ever

asked anything, but I liked to point out a few things; the year it was built, the Art Deco style, the number of spans, why it was always being worked on.

Once I made it into the bay, things changed fast. Everything was quiet and the lights of the city were mostly behind me. It was really happening. Just me and my boat and the light we cast a few feet in front of us. I'd overheard one of my earlier passengers say it was going to be a supermoon tonight but in the darkness of English Bay the moon didn't seem so super just yet.

Usually, I would have more than ten people, bicycles, strollers, wheelchairs and dogs in my water taxi, ferrying them across False Creek from Granville Island to Science World, the aquatic center or the casino. I've had cats and parrots and a guy once with a pet iguana. Locals and tourists. It wasn't a walk in the park. It was a lot of work. You got a lot of dumbass questions from people. Like "Where is the exit door?" "Did they barge that casino in?" That's when I'd put my sunglasses on and focus on my job. Weaving in and out between sailboats and kayaks, piloting my passengers safely across the inlet.

I could easily see the lighthouse at Point Atkinson, and I focused on that. The engine hummed quietly and efficiently with an empty load. As long as I stayed in my lane and away from the freighters, I'd be fine. I counted eighteen freighters as I chugged past. All filled to the gunwales with stuff to sell us. Stuff I would no longer need once I got to Kaua'i.

I watched reflections on the water; the condos were lit up on the north side of English Bay. On the south side, the expensive houses had their lights on too. Never been inside one of those. I rolled a cigarette, trying not to focus on the tattoos on my fingers. L-O-V-E and H-A-T-E. Before I met Tanya, I just thought about getting high. Seen lots of my friends go. I didn't expect to have a future.

When Tanya came into my life I was drowning. She was the first person I ever knew worth changing my life for. She had a room then, on East Hastings. She paid the rent until I got a steady job. We lived on food stamps at first, but the room had a good radiator and a month in she got a cat she called Blue that had blue

eyes you could see a block away. There was another reason for that cat's name now that I thought about it. At the time I was too blind to see Tanya was smoking pot to get off hard drugs. Or that she was always trying to keep herself from sinking into depression. We were both stuck in our own pain. But she loved me, and I didn't think any woman was going to love me.

A few months after I met Tanya, we moved into a co-op together up on Main. I never went back to my ruined life on Hastings Street. Probably should have married her back then.

The beats of my heart started jumping under my skin. I pulled the lever to speed up my aquaferry. The lights on either side of the inlet started to blur. There was a loudening buzz inside my head. Shit, I hated when this memory came zooming back. It was a year ago and like no time at all. I had come home one day at lunchtime. The ferries weren't running. It was stormy and had started snowing. When I opened the door, I saw Tanya rolling around in bed with some guy with long hippy hair.

I was going to bang the wall with my fist. But I didn't. I walked out the door and down the stairs. Then I turned around and galloped back up. Maybe I had to know who he was. Maybe I had to strangle that guy.

When I opened the door to our room the bed was empty. I called out. No one answered. Not the guy. And not Tanya. Had they slipped out the window? I had auras then and would have premonitions when something bad was going to happen. It sucks being in love.

After that, I walked out into the street shivering wildly from the cold. Snow was falling in little wisps like coming down from heaven. I was dizzy and hungry, and I walked past drunken people. People who were like me. Like I used to be. Stepped over a guy under a blanket covered over by a mangy dog.

When we'd lie in bed talking at night, I used to tell Tanya my dream. That I was going to cruise to Kaua'i.

"Sail, you mean, Chester. In a proper sailboat. Not your aquaferry. Right?"

"No, not my aquaferry. A proper sailboat."

That afternoon I was going to stop and get a bottle of wine.

Get shitfaced. Maybe cop some weed from the dispensary on Main Street. But I went the other way. Turned the corner onto Waterfront Road.

That's when my auras all lined up. Like seeing my dreaming. The way after a crisis happens you can really see where you need to go. Trains arrived. People waved at me, then passed, disappearing into the afternoon light.

There was a sign in a window. Way up high. For Rent. Overlooking Crab Park and the colourful containers stacked up in the port taken off freighters from all over the world. Cruise ships, the heliport and sea buses.

A short lady named Fiona answered my knock. She smelled like cherry perfume.

"Do you have a job, Chester?" she asked after I introduced myself.

"Yes, Fiona, I do. I pilot the aquaferry."

And I had a dream. I didn't say that part to Fiona. I'd started listening to IZ. Israel Ka ano i Kamakawiwo ole. *Somewhere over the Rainbow* was my favourite. And I decided right then, I was really going to do that. I was going to sail to Kaua'i.

I turned on the aquaferry's heater and sank into my seat. The moon was getting bigger and brighter. I had my sleeping bag, pillow and a towel, and the cases of water and the Reubens stowed under the passenger bench. Two cans of gas, planning to gas up at Ganges. Maybe Victoria. These 14-horsepower engines could run forever on a tank of gas. And I had my boom box on, listening to IZ singing "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" in Hawaiian. I got energy from him that was so pure I couldn't explain it in words. It was a glow inside me. I was starting to miss Tanya.

"Excuse me, *monsieur*. How much longer? What time to arrive?"

Holy shit. Like the wind had smacked me in the face. There was a passenger sitting not ten feet from me in my aquaferry. It was impossible. With that moon casting so much light I made out a man's head with a woolly toque, and a bright orange blanket or skirt or I don't know what. And round dark eyes staring like a ghost. He looked at me; I looked at him. Why hadn't he gotten off? The aquaferry jolted a little and I wasn't sure what to do. All I

could hope for was he wouldn't guess we were off-course.

The man spoke again. "We are *en retard*. No?"

I flicked the inside light on. He was a big guy wearing a puffy jacket over a dress. Or maybe an orange robe. And good-looking. He stood up and stuck out his hand at me. "Hello, monsieur. Le bateau, he is late?"

I nodded but couldn't think of anything French to say except *bonjour*. The ceiling of my aquaferry was too low for him. He had to duck his head. The two of us ducked our heads, and then he sat down.

"We're going into the Strait of Georgia. Might be a little choppy but nothing to worry about," I said, as calmly as I could. As though I was the tour guide. I didn't mention the time or docking that wasn't going to happen.

"What hour does he arrive?"

The gusts from the heater caused the hem of his robe to swish from side to side mirroring my pulsing fear. Instead of answering, I waved my hand to quiet him and started asking questions. "Are you French? You sound French. What are you doing on the ferry this late anyway?"

"Oh, please, monsieur, if you could speak more slowly. I have a conf rence, and now I go to the H tel Sylvia."

"I thought you booked the sightseeing cruise. Ha. Ha." I'm pretty sure he didn't understand a word I'd said.

"I wish to go to my hotel, *monsieur*."

I turned up the volume on my boom box and the man sat down. He pulled something from his pocket. And lit a match.

"No smoking on the aquaferry," I said, pointing to the No Smoking sign.

The guy had lit a stick of incense and wedged it between the window and the wood frame. He wasn't talking, just sitting and breathing loudly like the wind blowing by.

Right then the ferry started rolling and I quickly grabbed a hold of the wheel and set my sights on where I was going, releasing my thoughts onto the dark churning sea. Under my breath, I cursed the tourist. I wanted to be by myself. This trip was my chance to make a new life. I'd had a miserable year. I'd poured my heart out to Tanya, and what for?

When I moved in with Tanya we lived on the nice part of Main Street. One block from the restaurant Nose to Tail, where she worked as a bartender, with a pig on the window. A fully painted pig. It was a classy joint. They had new postcards every week at the front by the window. You could take one. They were free. I took one every time.

I looked ahead, slowed to veer around a trawler, and was just getting the aquaferry up to cruising speed again when the French guy started talking.

“When is the *terminus*, Chester?”

How did he know my name? I used to turn down my ears when all those crazy people on Hastings Street were yelling at me or asking for money. I had to concentrate now on piloting my boat. Cruising speed could be misleading. It felt slow but there was no question in my mind that I would be travelling past Victoria by morning. Maybe sooner.

“I’m expecting a smooth crossing folks. Well, folk. You. Monk guy. We’ll be cruising the Gulf Islands. Galiano and Salt Spring. You could get off in Ganges. A charming small island town with a mountain backdrop. Filled with galleries, restaurants, specialty shops, food and meat markets, even a local post office and bank. I don’t know if they have a monastery there but there’s lots of people need saving. Have you been to Victoria yet?”

“No, Chester.”

I turned around like I was going to drill him. I didn’t want to go back to jail. That was a wasted year outta my life. I was angry all the time, pushing people around like they were mincemeat. I didn’t have to say anything. He seemed to know what I was thinking. He pointed to my name on the operating licence posted above the door.

“Chester, *c’est vrai?*”

The muscles on the back of my neck were going stiff so I kept talking like it was my job.

“Never been to Victoria? We have to remedy that. You could get off there. Butchart Gardens. Sidney Spit. The Parliament Buildings. Chinatown. Fan Tan Alley. You could have tea at the Empress Hotel. Tourists like that kind of shit.” I spit out words like they

were stones flying out of my mouth. I didn't care if he understood me or not. I was just trying to put a stop to his questions.

He turned his head and looked out the window without a word. He knew I was angry. I hit the light switch and turned back to piloting my aquaferry. It was maybe an hour later when I turned around again. He was sitting perfectly still and I wondered if he'd fallen asleep. In the dimness, I saw he was still sitting cross-legged. His eyes were open, and he was staring off into the distance like I wasn't even there. I looked him up and down. I doubted he was asleep. He looked like me when I was stoned. The way I would sit perfectly still but my thoughts would be flying. That was an expensive jacket he was wearing. He smelled sweet like I imagined my lei was going to smell when I arrived on the beach in Kaua'i. I got tired of looking and turned back to the water. Soon my eyes drifted shut. I could use a coffee and my stomach was rumbling.

"How about a sandwich? A Reuben with pickle?"

I strained to see if he was done staring. I wanted to say I was sorry for being a jerk. If we're going to be stuck out here together, I imagined we could be friends.

"Come on, caramelized onion and hot mustard on pumpernickel?" There's one thing I learned growing up poor. If you have food, you share.

"No, thank you, *monsieur*. I take a drink."

I sat there in my pilot's seat and I thought I was hearing things. Now the guy was squatting on the bench gazing out the window. He didn't even look at me.

"Water's in the cooler." I came close to yelling "Are your arms painted on?" That would be my old man. Nothing could bring tears to my eyes faster than remembering all the harsh things he used to say to me.

"How many minutes to this Victoria? I like to see her." Then he straightened his legs and got up to get himself a bottle of water.

I turned back to the wheel without saying anything. I was exiting the Burrard Inlet and in front of me was the dark mound of an outline of Vancouver Island. The first night of my adventure I imagined there would be birds or seagulls keeping me company. But there were none here in the open sea. Only the hum of the

motor and waves slapping against the bow. And the click of my neck as I glanced back at the monk drinking his water looking smug. I pointed the bow of my aquaferry southwest towards Galiano and Salt Spring Islands and turned my boom box on low and listened to IZ. I wasn't worried about hitting rocks or logs now that we were well past the freighters and out to sea.

I couldn't stay quiet for long. I don't know why because I'm not really all that friendly a guy. It's like I'm making up for all those years I couldn't speak.

"Really? We could catch some fish off Salt Spring Island. Salmon. Lingcod. We could add on a fishing adventure to your tour."

"*Poisson*," he said. "Fishes?"

"I think so. I mean, I've never fished before. But why not?" There weren't ten feet between us, and I suddenly felt like smiling. Maybe we could be friends.

"Are you angry with me? You know, for taking you with me."

He shook his head back and forth. "*Non, monsieur*."

"Chester," I said. "You can call me Chester now."

"*Non*, Chester. I am happy."

"Well, monk fella, travelling on the aquaferry can be risky business. You never know who's at the wheel. Or where you're going to end up."

He sat back on his butt, recrossed his legs, straightened his robe, and looked me in the eye. "I don't see everything as rose, Chester."

Even if he wasn't saying much, the truth was I was getting kind of tired of having the monk on my aquaferry.

"I'm going to let you off in Victoria," I said.

After that, he didn't speak, so I didn't speak. Just listened to the sounds of the night; the swoosh of the waves against my boat, the drone of the motor. The sky was brightening already off to the west. It didn't seem like a whole night had passed already. He was breathing in and out loud as a foghorn. And as the light came up, I could see his face looked calm, peaceful. So, I breathed in and out too. Not as loud as the monk's breathing, but like the waves coming

in and going out. Smallish waves. If I closed my eyes all I could see was my old man taking a swing at me. He broke my arm three times one year. All in the same place. He was drunk. After that, I never stopped watching. I learned you have to see danger coming and get out of the way.

The monk got up and moved to the open window and practically hung outside. He waved me over. Jesus, there was a pod of Pacific white-sided dolphins swimming along port side. A mass of curved dorsal fins leaped in the air like they were having fun. Even though the window was small, and the monk was tall, and his head was bent at the worst angle, he followed them with his head swinging, up and down like he was the one doing the swimming.

“They follow *poissons*,” he said, laughing.

I smiled too, same as him, like I understood why this was a happy thing. And funny thing, I was feeling kind of happy with this damn monk and those dolphins. I turned up IZ and started singing. Like I was swimming myself.

After a while my eyes started to shut, I gestured for him to take the wheel.

“I’m going to get some shut-eye. Driving is easy with a lever to control your speed and a wheel just like a car to steer. Easy peasy. Do you monk guys drive?”

“Yes, *monsieur*. This is no problem.”

“We’ll head around Sidney Spit. It’s kind of early but look out for kayakers. Then I can let you off in Victoria.”

I may have fallen asleep. I’m not sure. I knew something was wrong when I looked out over the bow at Harling Point. Jesus, the air was thick with fog and the aquaferry had begun to grunt and groan. The waves were beastly. I took back the wheel. I was a little rough with him but there was no time to explain. I had to get the bow facing into the waves.

“What is this?” he asked in a quiet voice. A whisper. He was pointing to the two towers of the ceremonial altar at the Chinese cemetery, visible through the haze like you could reach out and touch them. The first light of morning was pushing through and the angle of the light set the towers aglow. But distances can be deceiving from the water.

"It's a cemetery for Chinese people. People come to burn joss sticks and offer food. We're not pulling up there," I said. I looked him in the eye. "Just to be clear. Those rocks will split my aquaferry in two like it was a chopstick."

I'd visited the cemetery once with Tanya. What I remembered of Harling Point was the sharp rocky shoreline and how somebody visiting the cemetery said the land was so close to the ocean that winter storms sometimes washed away graves. That seemed excessively negative to me.

Gulls were squawking. The sun was trying to drive out the fog, but it was cold in the aquaferry. I was shivering. What if those graves fall into the sea?

"*Je viens du Vietnam*," he said, taking out a hanky and wiping his eyes. "They battered us. Beat? Many *morts*. I was *en colère*, Chester. Angry. *Après la guerre, La France*, she gave us a home."

I didn't need to understand every word. I maneuvered my aquaferry in close to the shoreline trying to keep from being tossed by the waves so he could get a look at the cemetery. A strange tremor went through me and shit if tears didn't start running down my face too, warm and stinging.

He pulled off his toque and rubbed the top of his bald head. He was smiling and crying at the same time. I watched closely as he ran his long fingers over his head as though he was uncovering something. His eyes narrowed, and in the curve of his spine, I had not noticed before, he was old.

I didn't say anything, but I kind of loved him then.

"How about a coffee?"

While I steadied the wheel with one hand and poured coffee from the thermos with the other, a gust of wind rocked the boat sending the cases of water to the back of the aquaferry and then to the front. I dropped the thermos and hunkered over the wheel, both eyes on the shoreline.

The thing is, Tanya said she never slept with that hippy guy. She begged me to come back. I couldn't see it. Couldn't make out if she was there or not that day. Was she messing with me? Now she was 4,000 kilometres away in Ottawa living with her sister. I was the one who left her. I walked out of our room in the middle

of that snowy November afternoon, just like that. So, I was the one to blame.

My hands were blistering tight on the wheel. I turned up the volume of IZ and started singing. The wind echoed over the sound of my voice. And then a thud. The monk went to the bench and hauled out two life jackets. His boots and the bottom of his robe were swishing in half a foot of water and sandwiches wrapped in brown paper were floating and bobbing. When did that happen?

“We’ve got to get out of here,” I yelled.

He put his hand on my back and handed me a red PFD. I flinched, jumped back. Just about smacked him. It was a reflex. He started screaming. Or was it me who started screaming? I’m not sure.

Tanya never screamed at anything. That’s one of the reasons I liked her. I would sit at the bar at Nose to Tail sipping on a cup of tea, and watch her move, mix, shake and pour. I would pull every one of my fingers, cracking my knuckles. Love and Hate. She detested that sound like I was going to splinter my knuckles into pieces, but she’d never yell at me. She’d just roll her eyes.

“*Nous avons frappé un arbre.*”

“A tree? A log?” I said. “That’s a log. I don’t have a cell phone.”

“No cell?”

I had flares. Somewhere on the aquaferry there would be flares.

“I can’t swim.” I screeched. My forehead veins were popping. I could barely hear anything. Or think what to do.

“*Tout le monde nage.*”

“You’re talking French. I don’t know what you said.”

“Swim, Chester.”

“I don’t know how to swim.” My feet flew out from under me and I slid across the wet floor and into a foot of filthy water.

“*Alors, attends!*” He pulled me up, took my hand, and gestured for me to hold the center pole of the aquaferry. Then he wrapped a blanket around me. After that everything went slow. He didn’t call me crazy. He wasn’t barking orders. Just breathing in and out with a calmness like somebody talking to a friend.

I started speaking. Ranting like I was a tin can pried open.

“I smacked a guy coming out of Blood Alley once. It was a

stupid little thing that got big. Both of us were staring each other down. You learn that living on the street. He snatched my whisky bottle out of my hand. Then I just went off on him. Plowed him in the face. Not a minute later, the cops were cruising the alley, and the dude just went apeshit. The cops called him an ambulance and I got cuffed, thrown into the back of the cruiser, and taken to the clink. Just like that.”

“I not afraid, Chester. *Ton ami.*”

Then he pulled a bucket from under the bench and started bailing water from the floor of the aquaferry, which was listing to starboard. Back and forth to the open hatch, he dumped water. Smooth and calm. The bottom of his robe stirred in the slush. Everything was going by me like in a movie.

Out of nowhere, I remembered that I was in charge. I was the pilot. The captain. I had to get us out of this mess. I jumped to my feet and shoved the boat into neutral and dug out the flares. I set one off and then the other. Then I emptied out my sandwich box and started bailing with the box. Son of a gun, the box held the water. When I turned around, I could see the monk in the dimness of the galley sinking his bucket into the water and chucking it out the window. Sinking and chucking. I dipped my box back into the water and got to work.

“Chester, *chantons.*”

Then me and the French guy sang in our loudest voices.

It was noon when a police boat came up beside us. We were red-faced and shivering with gallons of muddy stagnant briny water swishing up to our knees. I was never so happy to see the police in my life. I hugged *Poisson* with all my might. That was when I felt him walk into me. I'll be damned. I laughed, looking down at my ribs, my belly, and around the galley. A door opened and a door closed, and I was alone in my sinking aquaferry. As loud as I could, I breathed in and out, like I was a dolphin rising up out of the sea. It was like a dream when the cop got on the boat, waded through the deep water, to help me onto the police boat.

The aquaferry people let me go. That was a bummer. I'm driving a bus now. Still living in my room at Fiona's on Waterfront Road.

Catching the breezes off the water. I play ukulele on Monday nights with the new bartender from the Nose to Tail.

Tanya sent me a cute card with a picture of a dinghy on the front. "I heard you on the radio, Chester. You really tried to get to Hawai'i. Maybe you should fly next time. xo Tanya."

Well, xo, that means love. I'd send her a postcard, but she never said her address.

So, I sent one to the monk, to Vietnamese French Monastery, Paris, France. I chose one with a drawing of a fish on it. "You are a very big *poisson*," I wrote. "Thank you," I said. "*Ton ami*, Chester." I wrote it like that. With the French words. That'll surprise him.

I need a bigger engine. I think a bigger engine would do it. Fourteen horsepower was too small for the 4,000-kilometre crossing. I'm going to save up and get back in my boat. Because the thing is, you can't drive to Kaua'i.