

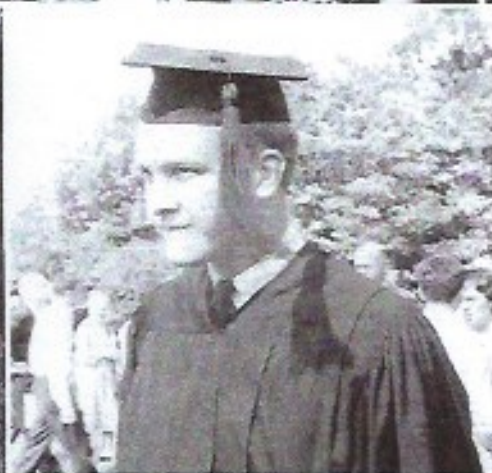
David Lewis Plimpton



Photographs and  
Two Stories







## BARE FEET

By David L. Plimpton

I drove down that long road by the golf course, by that pond, lily pads by the shore, and the car's tires hummed with every turn; it was late. A small towheaded boy, bottom sore from too much bicycle riding, used to stretch for the pedals along that road on one of his daily trips to the boatyard. A small boy with a sore bottom — that bicycle was too big. I shifted my hips in the seat of the car: no permanent damage.

And that boatyard, the Chester Crosby Boatworks; there was a large white shed whose backside opened onto the bay. It had a high roof, swallows nesting in the rafters. All day long it was the whine of band saws guided by stocky practiced fingers along patterns penciled on mahogany. The whine, like a wolf baying at the moon, reached a high, melancholy pitch, and then diffused into the upper atmosphere. Syncopation; the percussion instruments came through again: tap, tap ... tap; tap, tap ... tap; a skeleton of curved ribs took on safe graceful lines, bow to stern and keel to topside. There were coils of rope, coils to sit on, and under bare feet, a worn wooden floor with bumps of dried paint. I could cure an itch on the bottom of my foot by rubbing it against the floor without fear of getting a splinter.

They were workingmen. Danny was Irish, red hair, a red pockmarked neck, a red face with a black cigar clutched in his

teeth. He used to peer into the souls of motors, puff through the chewed swampy end of his cigar, "Peter, pass me that three quarters wrench. That's me boy." Allen with his juicy ham sandwiches every day at noon; "Peter, you want to help me take the tug over to get that yawl by the jetty?" "Yes," we went. Sometimes I held the big pegged steering wheel. I hoped some friend in the sailing class saw me as we passed the yacht club. I waved and smiled to myself. Then I watched the waves unpeel before the bow of the tug and tried to detect a repeating pattern in their fan-like rebounds. The tug idled in alongside the yawl; ropes to throw; ropes to catch; a small boy tugged at a hawser the size of his wrist, then let go; the yawl was in tow. I commanded the yawl's helm, the sun and the wind on my bare shoulders, back to the boatyard.

Eddy was Chester Crosby's son; he had long wavy brown hair and a tanned face. He wore T-shirts made of terry cloth, carried a comb in his back pocket, and had a girl named Bunny. I liked her; once she tried to comb my hair, one day after the three of us had been swimming, but my hair was too short. We used to lie at the end of the pier and bake in the late afternoon sun. Eddy talked of having his electric razor fixed and Bunny asked if perhaps they could sit in the balcony that night at the movies. I snuck rubs at my chin and wondered about those long tanned legs and her polka dot short shorts in the balcony.

And Skinny, a young mechanic; his six-foot frame, coated with greasy cloth, explained his title and implied his occupation. His nose was too long, his forehead too wrinkled, and his skin too white to achieve a natural handsomeness, but he made it unimportant by walking on the balls of his feet. He was constantly brushing his blond hair out of his eyes with greasy fingers whose nails were a roadmap of black scratches caused by stubborn nuts

and bolts. A towheaded spider, he was able to crawl into the stomach of a motorboat and crouch by the motor, both kneecaps jammed into his cheeks, and realign a crippled engine's ligaments for hours. I peered down from the deck and watched his fingers scurry among a jungle of empty cylinders, cam shafts, lifting rods.

The car surged over the backside of a dip in the road: I felt my back press into the seat and concentrated on braking and navigating into the gravel driveway. Gravel: deep gravel that made me fall from my bicycle — iodine on my elbow, a smart. The driveway in moon-shapes behind a small grove of pine trees — pitch on my hands, in my hair, sticky and hard to rub off before bed. The grove is covered with pine needles. I used to lie there on my stomach and wonder at passing station wagons with well-groomed dogs in the back seats and well-groomed women in the front seats; prickles on my belly, the part that, when prone, my T-shirt did not cover.

I got out of the car and my feet scratched against the gravel. The moon was full; it shone through the pines leaving patches of yellow on the ground that vibrated with the wind. The split rail fence was green with flaky moss — a splinter the time that I failed to hurdle it, then a long needle whose blackened point had been sterilized by a match.

The house, scales of ruddy loose shingles, loose from my tennis balls — that endless throwing and catching. There was the front door and under it the doorstep and that little crevice just below, just big enough for a hornet's nest and right in the path of a small boy's toe. I had cried, I had screamed, I had pounded on the door, hornets gouging, me swatting and wriggling. My mother had let me in; brothers and sisters had gathered to watch as my pants were taken off and lotion put on my stings. My mother gave me a hug. I resented both the hug and the hornets.

Out by the long rolling field — a swing. I stopped and examined the metal seats — a dent the size of a dime in one; yes, the shot from a twenty-two rifle fired from the window of the bedroom above in a moment of boredom.

I stood before the field, gazed into the ocean of hay, yellow waves where the breeze swayed the reeds to a reflecting angle and pitted dark troughs. At the far end of the field was the golf course fairway, a clean-shaven ridge above the drop in the far corner. A barefooted boy picked his way across the field, zigzagging to avoid the sharp reeds. He went to hunt golf balls.

I looked back, down into the low corner of the field, up past fallen trees, long black shadows, to a white shed, the chicken house. For a few years the shed was abandoned by all but the feathers the chickens left behind, and then my father moved in and made it his chicken house. He installed a desk and scrubbed the floors. There had been a mathematics aptitude test that year at grammar school in New York: an ordeal of starts, fifteen minutes, stops, and mazes of little dotted boxes to be blackened with a special pencil. A mysterious percentile ranking had been attached to me, and it had been low; thus every morning for two hours in the chicken house: "Now Peter, if you have thirteen apples and four boys ... how many ...?" My father paused; his index finger pressed down on the page, his facial muscles contracted — expectation. The finger bent at the joint, bent backwards as if supporting all the apples ever involved in elementary arithmetic. That long finger, red from the pressure bore into the page, "Now tell me, Peter, how many ... before my finger turns white ...?", before the answer turns white, thirteen, four apples, thirteen chickens, mathematics, determination, and I cried thirteen resentful tears. My father retrieved his now temporarily crippled finger, his face relaxing to a look of cloudy disappointment. "Now Peter, try, just

once more ... it's not that difficult." Yes, now Peter, try. I tried; my fingers contracted to form loose fists around the pegged steering wheel, the dusty corridor of a grammar school, low percentiles in the scratched linoleum, the girl who tried to comb my hair, a ham sandwich at noon, electric razors, ten o'clock and my bicycle on that road.

I turned, buttoned my coat, let my weight lean against the metal framework of the swing, and gazed at the porch attached to the side of the house. There was a crowd — conversation; they sat with their chairs pushed back from the long table. The table was strewn with bottles, glasses, and the abandoned frames of lobsters. Men were in light summer suits, blue and white stripes, plaid neckties, suntanned, relaxed faces; hands calloused by tennis rackets clutched cold sweaty glasses. Women with thin ankles, legs that crossed and re-crossed, brown spots, low necklines, silk prints, tanned arms and legs, melted butter, perfume — the shrill laugh of a woman. My father, deadpan, had said, "Oh Mary, come now!" It had tickled her ribs like the long feathers from the tail of a bird. The laugh trailed off, her head came forward — conversation.

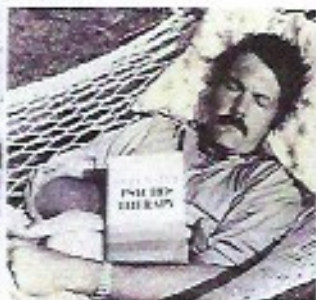
I felt a twitch; it ran down my spine and pulled at my coattail. I turned — a small boy, thin arms, a large chin; he stood with all his weight on one foot, the toes of the other foot scratched at the instep of the supporting foot. His brown eyes brooded, met my gaze without faltering. He was puzzled — the laugh. Did he want to run? I smiled, "Stay kid." He scratched his nose. Both arms outstretched, I reached to grasp his shoulders to hold him in focus. Shrill laughter rose from the porch. He stepped back, out of reach.

*"Bare Feet" is reprinted from the Yale Literary Magazine, November 1964, in which it was published just after David graduated.*











# WAYPOINTS TO HEAVEN

By David L. Plimpton

A number of years ago, I decided to become a fly fishing guide in my home waters — Jamaica Bay, back by JFK, the Coney Island flats, and the waters at the mouth of New York harbor. I took the Coast Guard exam and, captain's license in hand, bought a Parker 21, a sturdy craft whose simple layout and broad beam brought to mind a Labrador retriever shouldering through the surf. I promised the other Brooklyn guides that I planned to charge the going rate and pointed out that, at market, their experience would trump my lack thereof. I had no wish to pose a threat. Most importantly, I spent many days on the water guiding imaginary clients. Whenever I spotted fish I rushed to the bow, becoming the entitled client-from-hell with a litany of complaints and excuses that I tried to address once the fish had moved on and I returned to the helm. I also put together a web site. Then I sat back to wait for business.

One of the first calls I received came from a fellow who sounded a little breathless, as if he had just been running or lifting heavy stuff. No pleasantries. "Do you do burials?" he asked.

"You mean at sea?" I ventured.

"Yes," he said.

There was a pause at my end of the phone. I had not thought much beyond putting clients on fish, a little help with casting,

if desired. As I pondered this new twist, I kept thinking this is Brooklyn, Fuhgeddaboutit Brooklyn, where it has not been unheard of for burials to occur without notification of next-of-kin, the blessing of clergy, or the gimlet eye of the coroner — discretion assured by Air Gottis, the brand of cement boot favored by the local wise guys. How to square the ethos of catch-and-release fly fishing with a no-neck client dragging a contractor bag down the dock...?

"Is there a problem?" he asked.

"Well," I explained, "I've never done a burial."

"Captains do marriages, right? So why not ashes?"

"Ah," I said. "Ashes, as in an urn?"

"Yes. I'm honoring the last wishes of a colleague who died a while ago, with no next of kin. What did you think?"

"I wasn't sure what to think, but ashes in an urn, that will be fine."

He chuckled. "Yes," he said, "ashes in an urn." His voice trailed off and, in the ensuing pause, I imagined that he might have been overtaken by memories of his deceased colleague. At length his voice came back, sounding more tentative, almost apologetic. "Would it be all right," he asked, "if I brought along a fly rod?"

Why didn't you say that in the first place, I thought.

"Okay," I said. "You're on."

On the agreed upon day, patchy fog blanketed much of the harbor. Usually I hate fog, but given the day's agenda, a little cover might be helpful. He arrived, an urn tucked under one arm, a four-piece fly rod in a tube under the other. We set the urn on the center console, in a place of respect, next to the compass, fish finder and the GPS, all instruments which might provide the ashes with useful waypoints for the next leg of the journey. I kept

this thought to myself as mention of waypoints to Heaven could take us back to Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation, Luther's Ninety Five Theses nailed to the center console. That could make for a very long morning. We got underway and were soon on the prowl in the waters south of New York Harbor. Despite the fog, we found birds diving on swirls. His first casts were a bit loopy but, with a little maneuvering at the helm, he was able to get the fly where it needed to be, and, after a few casts, he gave a startled yelp as a striped bass took the fly and his line went taut. As the morning proceeded, there were more fish, about one every ten to fifteen casts. Midmorning we stopped for coffee and a couple of hard-boiled eggs, my standard snack. He allowed as how he had never caught so many fish. That was good. We had the fishing part of the day covered. Meanwhile, the ashes rested on the center console.

"What do you think?" I asked. "Is it time?"

He nodded and I handed him the urn and ducked down to rummage in the center console where I had stashed a bunch of flowers I had picked up at a bodega on my way to the dock. He had the urn, which he was holding over the rail.

"Whoa," I said. "All due respect, this is like peeing. You do it downwind."

We moved to the downwind rail. I scattered the flowers while he held the urn at the ready. "Would you like to say a few words?" I asked. He hadn't said much about his colleague and, while I didn't want to probe, I wanted him to feel he had full rein to proceed however he wished.

"No, I don't think so," he said.

"Would you like me to say a few words?" There were certain maritime traditions that a captain needed to honor. He seemed surprised.

“Okay,” he said, “If you would like.”

“Okay,” I said, and lit into a poem I had memorized back in the eighth grade.

*Sunset and evening star,  
And one clear call for me!  
And may there be no moaning of the bar,  
When I put out to sea,*

*But such a tide as moving seems asleep,  
Too full for sound and foam,  
When that which drew from out the boundless deep  
Turns again home.*

*Twilight and evening bell,  
And after that the dark!  
And may there be no sadness of farewell,  
When I embark;*

*For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place  
The flood may bear me far,  
I hope to see my Pilot face to face,  
When I have crost the bar.*

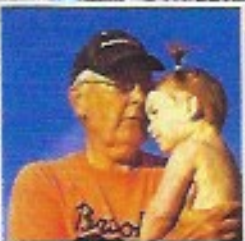
When I was done, he turned to me and said, “Tennyson.”

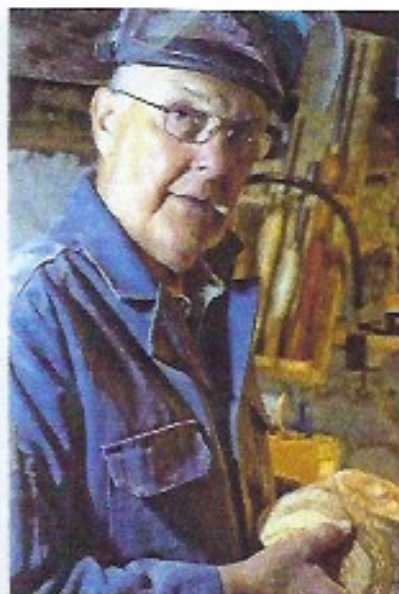
“Yes,” I said. “Alfred Lord, *Crossing The Bar*.” I noted the date and read off the GPS coordinates. He let the ashes billow over the flowers, downwind. And, because I couldn’t resist, I hit the “Man Over Board” icon on the GPS. We shook hands and headed in.

He called me a few days later to say that he had enjoyed the day. And you know, from a guide’s point of view, that’s Heaven.









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