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A VIKING FUNERAL

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By Mary Charles

According to legend, after the captain of a Viking ship died, his body would be placed in his longboat, which was then set afire and released onto the outgoing tide to carry him to Valhalla.

My husband was born in Norway. Possibly he inherited his love of the sea from his Viking forebears. Certainly he was never happier than when on a boat. On summer visits to his childhood home on Norway's east coast, he took me on wondrous rides in his father's old shellacked lapstrake with the grudging pull-cord starter. We rode out in the sunlight among the skerries protecting the harbor, into deep-shaded fjords, past seaside villages so charming they were almost a cliché. Then, from the terrace of his parents' home overlooking the town, we would sit long after bedtime gazing out to a glimmering sea where the sun left its signature until midnight. Geirr was at peace there.

We spent most of our careers in New York, at a pace far removed from that of Geirr's languid Norwegian hometown. When the opportunity came to exchange our terrible little apartment in Manhattan for a terrible little house on a coastal canal in Queens, we began to float in America.

After work most afternoons from June through October, we would idle our way by boat around Jamaica Bay. We watched the wary nesting osprey on their tall poles as we floated south along JFK's Runway 13R. Then we would ease west under the A Train swing bridge and past the Rockaways on our port side, north to Marine Park, and east again toward home.

On weekends, we might venture further west, around Coney Island, beneath the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge and into New York Harbor for a glimpse of the Statue of Liberty. As an immigrant, Geirr felt a special connection to that monument. Seeing her was to him a sacred moment.

In Norway, pleasure boats are rarely given names. But in America, almost every boat, ship, and dinghy displays its moniker on the transom or above the starboard waterline. Our first motorboat, a 28-foot cruiser with a wooden superstructure and a leaky stuffing box, Geirr named *Murphy* to acknowledge the law of predictable misfortune. She was a troublesome tub.

Peaquod was our little Boston Whaler, deliberately misspelled to prevent identification as the boat that pursued Moby Dick. Afternoons in that

low-slung boat were the outings where I felt most attuned to this watery world. To reach a hand over the gunwale and feel the water rush through my fingers was to remind me that we were *in* the sea, not merely *on* it.

For a few years, we also owned an O'Day Widgeon sailboat, which Geirr saw and bought from under its owner one day while both of our boats were cruising the bay. That boat succeeded in humiliating Geirr, who had never in his life capsized until the O'Day came into his life and keeled over every time we set sail. The final straw was the disgraceful capsize in our own waters, observed by neighbors and talked about for weeks. The O'Day was scuttled soon thereafter.

Our final boat, a tall 32-foot twin-engine Luhrs, Geirr named *Sweet Thursday* in honor of John Steinbeck, his favorite author. There we entertained on summer afternoons.

My friends from work or Geirr's fellow journalists, houseguests from Nashville or Dayton or Europe, and the occasional foreign diplomat – all were eager for a cruise on *Sweet Thursday*. One or two would join Geirr on the flying bridge for the 360-degree view and Geirr's running commentary, while the rest of us lounged on the aft deck, where I pointed out the sea-level landmarks.

Geirr established an abiding tradition on *Sweet Thursday*. Every September, as a whiff of fall arrived, six or eight neighborhood men boarded for an afternoon afloat with KFC and Rolling Rock. Women were never invited on that outing, which suited us wives fine. While the men cruised, we women discussed important things and readied the grill to welcome our sea warriors home.

Hurricane Sandy in 2012 virtually drowned our little house and made matchsticks of our dock. That storm accelerated our plan to relocate to a snow-free climate. And when the time came for us to move, our neighbor across the canal inherited our beloved *Sweet Thursday*. As new owner, John also assumed Geirr's role as genial host of the annual Chicken and Beer Cruise, which continues to this day.

Dementia mutates the personality, scrambles the preferences, disfigures the very nature of the person. Geirr had been a renowned storyteller. As a journalist for newspapers and broadcast networks, he explained complex concepts about economics and politics in narratives that were spellbinding even when the subject matter was dry. At leisure, he held friends captive with provocative tales from his swashbuckling life.

Although I had been irritated on occasion by Geirr's long-winded oratory, this love of words was his essence. And so, the diagnosis of aphasia became a daily heartbreak. Speech had been his superpower. Now, it was his nemesis.

We spent an hour each week with a young speech therapist, whose company Geirr enjoyed because she was cute and sweet and relentlessly optimistic. But her word-finding exercises were Greek to Geirr. He had spoken a half-dozen languages, and now they overlapped into his own personal Babel.

When words failed him, Geirr looked for other ways to communicate. Once, when both of us were frustrated over my inability to comprehend, he irritably picked up a pen and drew the thought: a circle within a circle within a circle. He was telling me he wanted to go to Target.

As the disease progressed, Geirr lost all interest in boating. He no longer wanted to own a boat or even to board one. For the first time in my life with him, he showed fear of the sea. This was the man with whom I had sailed around the southern tip of Norway in a fresh gale while he stood laughing into the wind. Now this same man needed to be coaxed into a bathtub.

In his last days, when we had said all there was to say, I lay beside Geirr and read to him from his favorites. John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee adventures. Poems of Wallace Stevens. *Cannery Row*. And, of course, tales of the sea. Sometimes I imagined I saw him smile. It comforted me that those words might be helping to ease him from this world that had become so alien.

And when he was gone except for ashes, I felt the need to return him to the sea that had been his joy. The idea of a Viking funeral began to take root. I talked to friends and relatives. My brother in Tennessee located a miniature Viking ship. Geirr's sister booked a flight with her husband from Norway. John offered *Sweet Thursday* to lead the funeral cortege. I had an inkling that what I planned was not strictly legal. Nevertheless, I persisted.

On the first day of fall, two months after Geirr left this earth, we sent his ashes out to sea at sunset. Friends and family from near and away boarded

Sweet Thursday to escort Geirr as he began his final voyage. In my imagination, that journey would be out of New York's Jamaica Bay, into the warm current of the Gulf Stream, and across the Atlantic toward Norway and Valhalla.

As we set the little Viking vessel afloat in flames, *Sweet Thursday* was joined by a half dozen friends' boats to form a protective circle around the ceremonial pyre. We listened to "Crossing the Bar," the haunting hymn about life's final voyage. Geirr had dismissed the idea of an afterlife, but he would have appreciated this rendition of the Tennyson poem, sung by The Long Johns as a sea shanty. Tears flowed as I opened Geirr's dusty bottle of 25-year-old Macallan to toast a life that had mattered to all of us.

Docked at the yacht club and fueled by food and drink, we told "Geirr stories" well into the evening. Some were sweet, some raucous, some deeply personal. One described an unforgettable first encounter with Geirr. It involved competitive swearing. Another spoke of the intellectual sport of seafaring one-upmanship. A few revealed Geirr's clandestine generosity. Together the tales swelled into a rich celebratory stew.

Afterward, I equated our Viking funeral to the New Orleans tradition in which the procession to the grave is a musical dirge, while the exuberant post-burial parade expresses that the time for mourning is past. When I reflect on that bittersweet September day, I can almost hear Geirr guffawing over my outlandish notion of a Viking sendoff.

And now, a few years later, Geirr remains alive in daily conversations. I often tell "Geirr stories" to my Florida friends. They never knew him in life, but he lives for them today through the memories I share. Geirr's sister does the same in Norway. My wish is for all whose loved ones have departed to tell the stories of those lives. There, in the telling, life does go on.

Mary Charles is a bona fide *amateur in the literary field. She spent much of her creative capital burnishing the images of multinational corporations. It was only after retirement in 2019 that she found her own voice. "A Viking Funeral" will become part of a larger work based on life with her colorful husband. Mary leads a memoir group in her southwest Florida community and revels in the authenticity of small yet meaningful stories told by real people.*

Interview with MARY CHARLES

What was your writing process like for this essay?
This essay was born straight from the "moving on" part of the grief process. I've been writing and sharing "Geirr stories" for the four years since his death. "A Viking funeral" was a way of telling bits of several stories in one piece. It will become part of my memoir, *Travels with Red*.

How about your revision process?
Revisions are so much more fruitful when you allow fellow writers and trusted friends in on the process. I got priceless feedback, and I also trusted my own editing instincts.

What's the most important thing you've learned about writing over the years?
For most of my working life, I was a copywriter for large corporations. I told their stories. Now that I'm free to write what I want, I realize that all stories – whether advertising copy or novels or essays – are driven by plot. Every good story is.

What's your best advice for writers of creative nonfiction?
Never think of it as an essay. Think of it as a story.