

ONSET

An American's Voyage Beyond Borders

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A Novel By
JB Gatling

JB Gatling
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**JB GATLING
PUBLICATIONS**

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Dedication

This novel is dedicated to my wife and her strong support of my efforts, even when I was unaware.

Characters

Howard Family

Granny, Bernard's grandmother
Bernard, Brett's Father John, Bernard's father
Brett Sophie, cousin
Nora, Bernard's mother Charles, Jimmy's son
Dee, Brett's sister Joshua, Brett's son
Desmond, Dee's son
Jimmy, Brett's brother
Vivian, Brett's second mother

Howler Family

Elisi, Clara's grandmother
George, Oliver's father
Oliver, Clara's father
Clara, Brett's first mother
Pat, Clara's sister

Johnson Family

Staunton
Josiah
Trent
Martha
Samuel
Jessica

CrossCore Family

Eaton Two Ghanaian Students
Steve Two Ivorian Students
Sharon Linda
Blake CrossCore team
Jill Young John

African Family

Ghanaian villagers
Akenboa
Boatwoman

Jensen Family

Dr. Jensen
Aunts
Zena Melody
Ned, Zena's cousin

Hill Family

Beverly
Nina, partner

Arbor Hill Family

Bill Truit
Shirley, Gert, Granny, and James

Smith Family

Carleton
Chauncey, Carleton's son
Alfred
Wilemina
Nathan JoHanson

Aikins Family

George, Lailani's father
Lailani
Keisha, Lailani's niece
Remy, Lailani's friend
Viola, Georges' aunt
Calvin Ward, assailant

Others

Val, friend
Jazz, Brett's mentee
Gwendolyn Russell
Melinda Smith
Bob Baum
Onset Crew
Gjurin Llvala & Croatian Navy
Rev. Sipes
Lieutenant Dorn

Shaka
Boston bus driver
Cy Trowig
Stewart Greenberg
Trunk Thomas
Jason John Paul, Skipper
Willie Helms
Captain Williams
Thunder

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Prologue

Their long journey together from Albany to the easternmost tip of Long Island allowed them to bond again. As far as he could recall, he hadn't felt this close to his boy since he was a helpless newborn in constant need of fresh diapers. So Brett Howard willingly endured the occasional leg stiffness at the cramped driver's seat in his crowded van. He was encased all around by the overflow that refused to fit into the bursting rear cabin and back seats. All manner of gear surrounded, them including three jumbo size duffle bags filled with supplies and clothing, four canvas tote bags stuffed with food, games and toys, and the extra large book bag with the boy's required summer reading. They were all front seat companions squashed together for the eight-hour ride.

Although the boy was seven, this marked the first extended road trip they had taken alone together. In between the boy's constant snacking, game playing and periods of intense reading, they talked about pretty much anything that popped out from his active young imagination. He responded as best he could to the rapid-fire questions and comments about life, people, feelings, and things. He could see the boy's emerging identity and personality, and realized that very soon, sooner than he had previously imagined, Joshua would no longer be the little guy in cute short pants, and that he would have to keep up to stay relevant in his boy's life.

Yet that had been harder to do lately. Endless rounds of project management decisions, design and construction meetings, site visits, and the always essential fundraising events had consumed much of his life during the past three years. And here he was again taking another long overland pilgrimage back to the brick and mortar of his passion. He knew it was the embodiment of a long held vision coming together. But this time was special, and he had company riding shotgun next to him. He glanced over the mound of gear to the boy, who was emitting a barely audible snore and taking a catnap.

Has it really been seventeen trips so far, or is it eighteen?

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He was keenly aware that his entire family had sacrificed for his dream. He had been so infused with passion for so long, he failed to realize until recently that he had slipped well over the edge into zealous commitment. But his family had endured the frequent long absences and supported him nevertheless. And they accepted his late night telephone calls while he traveled as a substitute for touch and feel. They even grew accustomed to his occasional absences at birthdays and graduations, and at anniversaries. Yet he never felt that they begrudged his efforts or disbelieved in his dream. But maybe, he admitted, he was just kidding himself. Uneasily he wondered whether there was a later price to be paid for his zeal within his own family.

Focus on the road, stay sharp!

After several miles his mind drifted again, this time back to his mother. Before she succumbed to lung cancer, he was able to fly her and his father up to the ten-acre grounds for a visit. They were grateful and they were happy. Dad loved seeing the engineering plans and renderings, and talking for hours with the on-site architect about the details of the amazing transformation that by then was well underway. Richard was kind enough to patiently answer all of Dad's technical questions and commentary about the build-out, without pointing out that the math and engineering assumptions behind the comments were decades old.

That had given him precious time alone with his mother. She never once complained about the long and sometimes jarring tour that she insisted they take around the various construction sites on the property. As he pushed her wheelchair equipped with the ever-present oxygen canister, she ignored the discomfort and asked him dozens of questions.

Your dream is now real, Brett, and the hard work to protect it lies ahead of you.

Vivian had smiled up at him back then and squeezed his hand with all the strength she could muster. Later, they rested together and sipped cold water at the far end of the pier, watching the splendid parade of all manner of watercraft in front of the expansive shoreline. Five months after that, she was dead.

Damn, I miss her.

He knew that she had been a mother to him in all respects that mattered, and he had never once labeled her his stepmom.

How many others can say that they had not one, but two committed mothers in their lifetime? I can. Both are gone, Clara so long ago, and now Vivian.

“Daddy, is Grandpa Bernard coming to visit us this summer?”

The catnap was over.

“I don’t think he’ll be able to get away, Joshua. Dad’s been under the weather recently and his doctors asked him to slow down a bit and take it easy.”

“Daddy, is Grandpa Bernard going to go to heaven like Grandma?”

He knew the answer to that question was yes, and that it would happen within the next few months. He also knew that truth was much too severe for a seven-year-old, even a precocious one like Joshua. His father had helped spark the boy’s intellectual curiosity, and they had long ago developed between them a special bond. It would be hard on the boy when the end came.

The reality of his father’s terminal illness weighed heavily on him even now, months after they talked about his diagnosis of advanced prostate cancer. It was a tough telephone call. Before that, he had naively assumed they had twenty or more years ahead of them together. Despite having all the weeks to adjust and to accept the new reality, it still hurt him deeply to realize that his dad would be gone soon, less than a year after Vivian. Then he fully realized for the first time that he, along with his sister and brother, would be alone on the front line of the family, involuntary guardians of the old knowledge and the old values.

“I think Grandpa Bernard will be okay if he follows doctors’ orders, Joshua.”

Changing the subject quickly before the boy could formulate another question, he asked him about the activities that he was looking forward to participating in during the summer.

“When I get back home next week, I want to race in the Albany lake regatta again like last year, Daddy. I want to win that first place trophy this time!”

Then suddenly, with equal intensity, the boy dug back into one of his favorite games, shutting out the world.

Joshua’s bold declaration about sailing made him remember his wife’s recent warning as they left the driveway to start the trip.

Brett, keep a close eye on him and promise me you’ll keep his sailing up there under control. Promise me!

He’d promised, and he fully intended to keep to that commitment. But her skeptical look as he backed the van out into the street told him she most likely remembered a similar commitment he made to her long ago, when they were kids together. Or maybe his own guilt made him imagine that she remembered. Back then he had pleaded with her to join him for a Saturday afternoon sailing trip on the Albany lake where he spent so much time practicing.

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Finally she agreed to come out on the water, despite the fact that water sports were not within her comfort zone at all. Truth was that he wore her down with repeated requests. But she finally joined him on the condition that he promise to engage in no daredevil stunts, and definitely no racing.

He'd fully intended to keep that promise as well. But he couldn't control the weather.

That sail began peacefully. It was a warm and humid July afternoon, with a light five-knot easterly breeze flirting above the water. The blue lake was placid. Many young sailors were out that day; most of them were boys in the same club as him. Several were racing at the northern end of the lake around the temporary course markers. He figured he could race any other day, so he was fine with missing the regatta. He was feeling pretty good about spending time with her and showing that he was a skilled sailor, despite being new to the sport. But when he smiled at her as he was letting out more canvas, he saw the fear on her face as she stared past his shoulder at the sky.

He turned back and saw it too—the thick black squall line racing over the water. It was barreling directly at them, blotting the sky and other boats from view. He dropped down from his seat on the transom and yanked in the main and headsails, securing the lines with rapid lashes around the cleats. Then he grabbed the tiller and moved closer to her, pulling them both low while he checked her life jacket. He put both arms tightly around her and turned her face into his chest just before a high, heavy wave broke overhead, drenching them to the bone. The small centerboard craft was lifted out of the water by the next rolling swell, and then thrown back down several feet, all the while bucking violently but somehow remaining afloat. Then the dark, gusty wind punched them hard and lashed them with stinging rain. They held on to each other. He knew she was praying.

Within minutes the squall passed over, racing away to inland. In its wake, a brightening golden tint spread across the entire lake as the sun emerged.

“Joshua, that's our exit coming up. We'll take Eastern Shore Road out to the point and be in camp within thirty minutes.”

The boy smiled wide, showing his missing front tooth.

Part One
Early Passages

Chapter One

Father

Bernard Howard had always been large for his age. At fourteen, he was almost six feet tall. Like his father, he was heavy-boned and solid. It was the kind of frame that made him the natural choice to be catcher for the baseball team. Yet despite the bulk, he was agile as he inched his way forward on elbows and knees down the long, dark hallway. He carried a rifle on his right shoulder. Behind him and breathing hard was his cousin Sophie, who was visiting again this summer from Boston. Three years younger than him, and a bit plump, her fatigue showed as she struggled to carry most of her weight on her elbows and knees. But of necessity she also used her arms, shins, and belly. She tried hard to keep up and stay silent. So far, everything was going the way her big cousin had instructed.

The ammunition bag that she towed also impeded her. In her overactive imagination, she harbored fears that they would never reach the setup point where he would be able to take the shot.

But she struggled on because Bernard was her favorite cousin, and more like a big brother to her. No matter how crazy his schemes, she would rather be here with him than anywhere else, and she wouldn't let him down. Sophie lived for these summers, leaving her divided family behind and visiting Granny every year. Bernard usually came over the first day she arrived. The trips broke up the long monotony of her time at home during the rest of the year. As the child of a second marriage, she was ostracized from the family gatherings back home that were controlled by her dad's ex-wife. After a time she preferred to be alone, and had long ago stopped pretending to be interested in what the half-sisters and half-brothers were doing. Here once again with her cousin, life was thrilling, and she felt involved and alive.

Halfway down the corridor, he signaled her to stop. The temperature in the narrow space had already reached eighty-five degrees, and they both were dripping wet. The brief pause allowed them to catch a little bit of breath. He took a long swig of water from his army canteen and handed it back to her.

“There they are,” he whispered, pointing ahead to an open door leading to the kitchen at the end of the hallway. Standing slowly up straight while she pressed against the wall, she could see a round head in the distance, framed in the soft glow of light coming through the pantry window. But to her surprise there were at least four others, and they all huddled around as if to form some manner of protective shield. Sophie slowed her breathing, trying to throw off the mounting stress and focus on what needed to be done. As she resumed her squat position, she steeled her nerves, determined to execute her role. She hauled the bag closer to her, readying the gear.

Without turning around, he reached back with an open hand as they'd practiced, and she firmly placed the tripod rifle mount into his palm. He kept his eyes fixed on the target as he secured the mount to the rifle and raised it into position. Then he reached back for the ammunition. He quietly opened the chamber and loaded the shot, keeping the safety on.

Gradually and silently, he eased his big frame up to a position where his head and shoulders were above the tripod mount. He looked down the long barrel, using the forward sight as his guide. After fixing the target, he signaled to Sophie to come over. He wanted her to look down the barrel at the target. Anticipating this moment, she removed a small six-inch wooden footstool from the sack and stepped up.

It was on target, she said to herself as she nodded back to him. They had done it—almost, at least. Stepping quietly off the stool, she placed it back in the bag along with the remaining ammunition and took her place behind him as he cracked his knuckles and peered once again down the barrel. He hand signaled her to take cover while he nestled the stock of the rifle into his shoulder and released the safety. Then he gently placed his forefinger on the trigger while making minute adjustments. Ever so slowly, he increased the pressure, just as his father had instructed him to do years ago. He stopped breathing and slowly pulled.

He felt the release. Milliseconds later, the round head above the pantry counter top exploded, and the pink insides shattered and covered the back wall. The pellet had lodged deep within one of the other large grapefruits at the back of the bowl, so that no damage to the room would result from any ricochet. The beautiful blue porcelain fruit bowl that contained the grapefruits had emerged unscathed. With a satisfied grin, he looked down at his favorite cousin and gave her the thumbs-up sign.

Together, using teamwork and planning, they had destroyed another fruit display that his grandmother had placed meticulously in her well-kept home. All that remained now was cleaning up the mess in the thirty minutes they had before she got home from grocery shopping. The challenge for him was not only in cleaning up, but also shooting his BB gun in the house without wasting any shots or scratching any walls. And this was not just any house. This was Granny Howard's well-tended and immaculate home. Getting away with it and cleaning up without a trace were part of the thrill for them as they plotted their way through innumerable adventures over the many summer months they spent together.

Granny Howard was a well-known community celebrity in Connecticut. She was the first woman in the county to ride a motorcycle between Hartford and Bridgeport. She also had a spitfire temperament. He loved his Granny, but he could never understand why everything had to be so immaculate in her house. Even his dad seemed to sit on pins and needles when they visited every Sunday after church. Nora, his mother, was even more intimidated by her feisty mother-in-law.

His mother had moved to Connecticut from North Carolina when she was a teenager. Later she met Bernard's dad, John, and they courted and married. Both of them came from families who believed that education was the key ingredient to creating a better life for themselves and their family. Neither of the family branches had yet to produce a college graduate from a major national university, but they were getting closer. They both thought that the Northeast was the best area to achieve that goal. Bernard and his older sister were the objects of that vision.

His mother was also conservative and timid in ways that became harder for him to respect as he grew into his mid and late teens. Maybe, he often thought, they just grew women differently in North Carolina. His mother used to say that women in the South were much more settled and sedate, whatever that meant. But as he thought about it more, he felt that there was something else deep within his mother beyond her Southern roots that accounted for her caution and fear of living. It was as if the spirit of adventure had skipped over her generation and landed on him with both feet.

Later he began to think that maybe she grew up in a time when making a mistake had such severe consequences that you dared not venture out and explore. He always wondered what the glue was between his mom and his dad, who despite singing in the choir, his deacon status in the church, and solid family man profile, had some of Granny's fire just below the surface. After all, it was his dad who taught him how to hunt and to fire a weapon in the first place.

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His grandmother, on the other hand, had been outspoken as far back as he could remember and would offer her opinion on just about any topic you cared to name. But she was always well-read and informed. She kept dozens of books around the house in different bookcases, including one that had been built into her master bedroom wall. Many times he would hear her railing against what she considered the deprivations of women being lorded over in a man's world. Though a widow as long as he could remember, she was not at all like the widows around the neighborhood that seemed to be living on a stretched budget. She even had an early model of the hand-cranked Thomas Edison phonograph from the 1890s, the only one in the neighborhood. It was the center of Sunday gatherings, and the dancing that he loved, after the meal and dishes were finished. And she let him crank it and play as much music as he wanted.

As he grew older, he felt more and more like a prisoner in his own home. His mother never came to support or encourage him embracing the outside world. Whether it was her fear of his love for sports, or her dread that he might be exposed to the wrong elements through his passion for jazz and his skill with the standup bass, her consistent harangue was always that he slow down, stop this or curb that. Those messages were reinforced through his sister, who was two years older and her mother's mirror image—always perfect in school, and always earning this or that certificate or taking another specialized course of study. But in his mind she never really seemed to attack anything big with gusto, and she never got out there and actually did something different, something on her own. He realized much later that his assessments were often too harsh, borne of frustration from what he perceived as the mental straightjacket that surrounded him.

By the time he was eighteen, he'd had enough, and shortly after his high school graduation he enlisted in the Air Force, dead set on becoming a pilot.

“Where you from, boy?” the Mississippi drill instructor demanded to know with a surly Southern drawl. He parked his wide pink face two inches from Bernard's eyes.

“Hartford, Sir,” he snapped off crisply despite his body being near exhaustion in the drenching one-hundred-degree Alabama heat.

“I never heard of no Hartford, Alabama, boy,” growled the DI, spitting tobacco juice lightly into his face as he talked and chewed at the same time. “So you must be from up there where them Yankees live. That right, boy?”

That was his first day, and the first inspection for his all-black unit at Tuskegee Air Force base. He could feel right away that he and the other black enlisted men were not welcome. It was the kind of feeling he didn't need to

guess at. The DI came right out and told them that he was going to wash as many of them out of the Air Force as he had time to boot. Uncle Sam didn't need darkies to win World War II, he would constantly remind them. Bernard soon wondered if enlisting had been a big mistake.

But after his first week, which was all grueling PT, and once enrolled in the basic class curriculum that covered avionics for service men, black or white, he began to warm to the AF. He had inherited a mathematical and scientific aptitude from his dad that allowed him to use his high school classes as a basis for success. That success steeled his will to avoid being boot-kicked out just because a cracker DI wanted it that way. So he ate a lot of crow, but he was among the thirty-five percent of blacks to successfully complete the basic avionics training and move on to specialized career choices.

It was because he had enlisted with the personal goal of being a pilot that the frequent harassment by officers and other white airmen was secondary. He didn't let it bother him too much, because he was motivated to fly and to soar above the clouds. This was a dream he had long held, ever since first seeing the air shows with his dad as a kid. Despite his later understanding of principles like thrust, acceleration, and vectors, to him the very idea of flying remained nothing short of a miracle. To be able to defy gravity and continue soaring high above and beyond the sky overhead was something he just wanted to do.

He had the grades, and he had the desire required to qualify for pilot training. What he lacked was the pedigree to fit into that small class of black Tuskegee airmen who were allowed in and eventually saw combat duty over Europe. Most were a couple of years ahead of him, and were from black families a bit higher up in the social and financial pecking order. A good number of the black pilots were also of a much lighter skin color, he noticed, and seemed to be very comfortable navigating the unwritten rules that governed who would advance and who would not.

When he learned that he wasn't selected for pilot training, it was a major blow, and he thought about quitting and heading back home. The ostensible reason for the rejection was that his large frame made him incompatible with the standard issue pilot seating and cabin areas in the B-52s and fighter jets. The explanation seemed plausible to him at the time, when all he had to do was look around and see that his six-foot-two, two-hundred-twenty pound frame was indeed quite a bit larger than that of anyone else who was selected. That visual reality allowed him to rationalize his exclusion and eventually agree to complete the offered training for an open bombardier position.

Two separate and equally devastating bombing runs over Nagasaki and Hiroshima, Japan, ended any chance that he would see live combat during the War. Instead, he shipped out to Japan as part of the vast American occupation

force that ensured the peace. Having never left the shores of the United States, he always remembered the Japanese people fondly as they were the first foreigners he ever met. They were as amazed to set eyes on his giant frame, as he observed their comings and goings as they passed well beneath his big shoulders. While he guarded this post or that post and took his free time to visit different parts of the main island, the ordinary citizens of Japan seemed to welcome him as they efficiently went about the business of recovering from the disastrous war brought to them by their elite and distant rulers.

But the peace back in post-war America brightly beacons. It promised to be a booming time, and Bernard and his friends wanted to get home and participate as soon as they were able. His very last option was returning to Hartford and to the conservative household ruled over by his mother. Granny had passed on while he was away, so that home away from his own was no longer available. Instead, he decided to settle somewhere else in the Northeast. He followed the lead of his sister, who had recently moved the twenty miles across the border from Connecticut to Western Massachusetts after her marriage.

But he set his sights on the capital city of Boston. His cousin Sophie still lived there, so he would have some family around. He figured that his military education and training, combined with the city's good technical schools, gave him the best chance for success. It was in Boston that he first met his sweetheart, Clara Howler, who had settled from Georgia a few years earlier. She had already started the slow but steady process of supporting her family's northward move away from the limited opportunities in the South. Clara was quiet and studious, though not formally trained. She was a few years older than him, but the age difference didn't matter to either of them. Her spirit was remarkably serene yet strong, and he was drawn to her from the beginning. She fully supported him in his efforts to master his technical education and achieve certification.

Clara's brothers, on the other hand—rough-hewn, working class men—would often poke fun at his constant practice of carrying books and school papers from here to there as he balanced classes along with his part-time jobs. But her sisters extended a warm welcome to him, and were happy to see their younger sibling interested in a man with some promise.

Within a year of their first meeting, they were married. Within five years, they were very busy raising a family of three: Dee, Brett, and Jimmy.