

A PAIR OF SIXESFebruary 18, 2002Robin Loudon

After graduating from medical school in 1947 I spent six months as an intern in the professorial unit at the University Hospital. The clinical tutors in the unit (Junior faculty) had been increased in numbers by doctors recently released from the armed forces who wanted to test their chances in an academic career. They were snapping at one another's heels to publish papers. I thought that they used their time to argue about patients and to argue about diseases, and to do unnecessary tests, rather than to look after sick people or to teach me how to do so.

A notice at the medical school on the "Positions Available" notice-board sounded interesting. A job abroad, in Newfoundland, with a minimum salary of \$4000 per year. It was part of the new "Cottage Hospital Scheme" which had been set up to improve health care for the scattered population of Newfoundland. I wrote for more information.

The doctor would be based in St. Lawrence, an outport, (as they called the little fishing villages in the more remote parts of Newfoundland), and would cover those living in the southern half of the Burin peninsula. No, there was no hospital there at present, but one was planned for the near future. The nearest hospital was in Burin, thirty miles further north, which could be reached by boat, and it had a doctor. So I had gone to work in an outport with a population of about a thousand and a hinterland with about another thousand, which had not had a doctor for 18 months. They had never had a dentist, a nurse, or a midwife. This sounded adventurous: the real thing.

Reading bits of the history of Newfoundland also made it sound an adventurous place. In 1947 John

Cabot, looking for a short-cut to Cathay or China, sailed west across the Atlantic. Thirty-five days into his voyage he found land. There were no signs of life, and no source of food on the barren coast which he had time to explore. So he went back to England, and told King Henry VII that he had found land which he believed was Cathay. He could find out if this were so only if the king would agree to finance a larger expedition that could spend more time exploring the coast. The king agreed, and Cabot set sail with high hopes, but he and his boats were never seen again.

Thirty-seven years later, in 1534, Cartier sailed west across the Atlantic to find a passage to the East Indies, and again found rocky, barren land with no signs of life. He was able to prove that this coast was part of a large island by sailing around it. He returned to England to report his findings. Forty-nine years later, in 1583, Sir Humphrey Gilbert returned to plant a flag and claim this New Found Land in the name of Queen Elizabeth. It thus became the first British colony.

Efforts at colonizing were slow and one colony set up in 1610 was abandoned ten years later. One small colony was set up for a group of Roman Catholics being persecuted in Britain, and it and several other colonies on what would later be named the Avalon peninsula of Newfoundland survived, with difficulty.

Canada was now being explored and colonized by the French and by the British. The battles between these rivals in empire-building were made even more complicated by the English civil war between Cromwell and Charles I. But the colonies in Canada and in what would become the New England States, and in Newfoundland, stabilized, grew, and developed sources of food. The most important food was the enormous supply of fish. In some places the fish were so plentiful that all that was needed was to lower a basket into the water from a boat, pull the basket up, and tip out the fish.

The varieties of fish in the coastal waters of Newfoundland included several large species, such as cod, tuna, and swordfish. Swordfish could weigh up to 200 pounds, and if one were caught, it would feed a whole village for days. By the early 1800s New Englanders started harpooning swordfish from small boats. As swordfish swim on their own, and do not swim in schools, finding them was the problem. A single swordfish needs a big feeding ground to support it. A man up the mast would watch for fins, guide the boat to a fish, and the harpooner threw. An expert look-out and a skilled harpooner could earn a fortune. For catching swordfish, schooners proved more suitable than the little fishing dories, especially for fishing the Grand Banks which lie a hundred miles off the island, to the south-east. If a fishing Willie Sutton had been asked why he always fished the Grand Banks he might have answered: "Because that's where the money is."

I decided to give this job a try. I flew in a Lockheed Constellation from Scotland to Keflavic in Iceland, then via Greenland to Gander in the center of Newfoundland. From there a train took me to St. John's, the Newfoundland capital, where I spent two days learning about my new job, and exploring the city and its beautiful harbor. Next I went by train across the Avalon peninsula to Argentia, to catch the steamboat to St. Lawrence.

The steamboat, in summer, stopped at the outports once a week going West and once the next week going East. The Burgeo came and went, and then the Baccalieu came and went; they were two of the steamships owned by the government railroad. There were no railroads on the Burin peninsula where I would be working, because of the difficult terrain. So they used steamships during the summer, and during the spring and fall when the fog permitted; but not in the winter when the ice came. The land separated people and the sea connected them.

I was 22 years old, and didn't know a lot. The people there were fisherman and miners and their wives and children and parents. Only about 100 of the 1000 people in St. Lawrence and about 50 of the other thousand elsewhere in my area of practice on the peninsula had ever been outside Cape Chapeau Rouge, which guarded the harbour, or been beyond Lamaline, the tiny fishing harbour at the other end of the dirt road which ran for almost 20 miles. It was maintained by Mr. Grandy and his team of five. They went with their picks, shovels, and truck from one end of the road to the other, past a lot of little harbors with two or three houses, and maintained it in commendable condition for the limited traffic that it carried.

St. Lawrence itself was rather a pretty little fishing village around a cove, with a wharf where ore-boats docked to pick up a cargo of fluorspar ore about once a month during the summer, and where the Burgeo and the Baccalieu docked. Fishing dories were tied up at wooden landings here and there around the cove. The grocery store had the largest platform. They shared it with the best boat in town, powered by an inboard diesel and owned by the mining company. I was told I could have the use of it if any emergency needed transportation of a patient to the hospital at Burin. During my six months there I used it twice; it was a great comfort to have it available.

The main road ran around the St. Lawrence cove. Then one road went up over a hill and a mile across to Salt Cove Brook where the fluorspar mines and mills were. Another road wandered south for twenty miles along the shore, with occasional harbors, glimpses of ocean and the rocky coast and cliffs, through hilly country covered with scrub, but no trees: not in this part of Newfoundland. A few patches of land had been cleared near the shore to make small fields, and one or two cows wandered around these looking for grass. Piles of fish lay on the shore ready to be cleaned beside the little field close to where I was staying, and cows and pigs and hens ate some of the fish and

fish offal. The taste of the milk, eggs, and pork and the smell of the outdoor air proved that some but not all had been eaten. The fields cultivated to grow vegetables were fertilized with fish, and the potatoes and cabbages tasted of fish. I don't like fish.

These inhabitants were delighted to have a doctor, and I have never done less and been appreciated more. I cared for them as best I could with a stethoscope, two syringes and a packet of 20 hypodermic needles, several suture needles, many sterile sutures, three pairs of dental forceps, a blood pressure cuff, a Bunsen burner and ten test tubes. I had no microscope, no x-ray access, and no laboratory access other than that provided by the Bunsen burner and the ten test tubes and a bottle of Benedict's reagent, which when added to urine and boiled could, I believe, detect sugar in the urine. I don't remember ever using it. But I spent a lot of time in my little surgery, which had a doctor's room with a desk and three chairs, a waiting room, two cupboards, and a stove.

Much of what I did was sew up cuts, which I could do reasonably well, having spent a lot of time as a medical student in the emergency room. The miners got some nasty injuries, and I splinted and stitched, and went up and down the mine shaft in the cage which in this mine went down at an odd angle, with the rock face sliding by very fast, following an 18 inch vein of fluorspar. It is the most beautiful mineral that I have ever seen flash in the light of a lamp; and I have been down various mines; coal mines in Scotland and South Wales, lead and zinc mines, a salt mine, and a gold mine. These fluorspar mines in St. Lawrence were the only two in the northern hemisphere, and offered an alternative source of income to fishing.

Within a few days of my arrival I had my greatest success. An attractive young girl came in clutching her face in a scarf, and asked that I pull out one of her teeth, a left lower molar. It so happened that I had had a friend, a dental student, do a root canal

filling in the equivalent tooth in my lower jaw when I was a final year medical student and he was a final year dental student. He had given me most satisfactory inferior dental nerve block. I told this young lady to lie back in the chair and relax, and got out the syringe and some local anesthetic. With my tongue in the corner of my mouth, trying to remember where my dental friend had stuck me, I poked around and injected until she said, rubbing her chin: "Doctor, my mouth feels funny. It's all gone numb." I pulled out the tooth and she said "Thank you doctor, I didn't feel a thing." I did: I felt a great deal of relief. The next morning the waiting room was full. I pulled a lot of teeth, but had rather less luck with inferior dental nerve blocks.

Nor did I have much more luck with other problems afflicting attractive young ladies. One came in with the concern that she might be pregnant, and I suggested she come back the next afternoon, as I wanted to have a pair of rubber gloves available. I also wanted to have a look at my obstetrics book. The next morning when I arrived rather early and saw her in the waiting room I said: "You're earlier than I expected, but come on in. Lie down and take off your things." I pointed to the examination couch behind the screen, went to get the gloves, came back pulling one on, and found a rather worried young lady sitting up on the couch and clutching her legs. "It's all right, Jane, this won't hurt," I said. She clutched her legs tighter and said "I'm not Jane, I'm Marion. Jane is my sister, my twin sister. I came to ask you about my sore throat."

This was all very well. But there was the young man who told me he had tuberculosis of the spine and was paralyzed from the waist down. He was, and I went by every week to see how he felt and how his catheter was doing. He was worse, as often as not, and he made the best of it. I could do very little to help him or the several others who told me they had tuberculosis, and had been told to rest. Worse than that was the couple who lived next door to the house where I had my

board and lodging. This couple next door had been married for five years, dearly wanted to have a child, but had almost given up. But now Gloria was pregnant. She had an easy delivery and required little more than encouragement and an occasional wipe. It was a boy, and she loved him, and tried to feed him. But there was something wrong. The baby was trying to suck, but looked sick, cried pitifully, came out in a rash, got worse, and died when he was less than two weeks old. They asked every day what was wrong and the best I could say was that I thought that he had had an infection, and probably some stomach abnormality.

Sooner or later, I had to go home. After six months there, it was time for me to go back and learn more about medicine and how to look after people better.

I had enough money to pay for the boat trip and the plane fare home, and I booked my flight. The last two weeks were busy: "Doctor, we heard you're leaving; before you go. . ."

I had all my stuff packed when the railroads went on strike. The railroads ran the Burgeo and the Baccalieu, so there wasn't a steamboat to take me to the mainland. John Slaney, a fisherman whose arm was much better now after my simple treatment of a local infection and removal of the piece of fish-hook causing it, agreed to take me as far as Burin in his fishing dory. He thought I might be able to get a boat from there, over the bay to Argentia. From there I could try and get a ride, if the trains were still on strike, to the airport at Gander. I had enough to pay for the plane to Scotland, and, I thought, for the boats and train.

So John Slaney took me through the fog to Burin and dropped me off. He warned me that it might be turning storm that night, but at least it would blow away that damn fog. I walked up to Patrick's house and told him my plans. Patrick was the only other

physician in the Burin peninsula, and I had needed his help a lot in the last six months. He was sorry that I was leaving but understood why. He had gone there two years after his graduation from medical school, and had stuck it out for 18 years since, deriving satisfaction from doing what he did with what he had: and he had done a lot. And he had little; but he had a nurse, and an x-ray machine. He had a hospital with four beds and an operating room with a table and a sterilizer and lots of instruments. One of his patients had had a set of triplets, all well and now four years old; another patient had had a nephrectomy done by Patrick, using his nurse as anesthetist, assistant, and nurse. My training had told me little about triplets or about nephrectomies. Nor had his, but he had read it up.

I accepted Patrick's invitation to go with him to a poker game after dinner, when he assured me that the only boat which might leave for Argentia in the next week wouldn't leave until the poker game was finished. The boat was a swordfish schooner and the skipper, Theo, wouldn't leave until the poker game was over - or if he did I could leave with him. Patrick and his wife fed me well; then he looked at his watch, told his wife "We'll be at Aubrey's, upstairs, if you need me" and off we went, Patrick and I, through the rain and a good deal of wind.

Aubrey's was the only grocery store in Burin. Upstairs was a large store-room with a table and a good view of the harbor, and a group of poker players to whom I was introduced. They included Theo, the skipper of the swordfish schooner that Patrick had told me about. The weather for a couple of days had been impossible for swordfish fishing. That needs a chance to pull in a few hundred pounds of swordfish, and bring them back before they rot. I speak of times 42 years earlier than those that Sebastian Junger described in his 1997 book "The Perfect Storm". In 1949 swordfish schooners were made of wood, fishing lines were short, and there was no radar or sonar, little radio contact, no helicopter, and no such thing as a global

positioning device. But the weather was just as bad then, just as unpredictable, and weather reports and forecasts were fewer.

Theo, the skipper of the schooner, knew that he couldn't go fishing, but thought he could get back to Argentia, his home port, all right if the weather would settle down a little. More than a dozen people were in Burin, like me, stuck by the strike that had stopped the regular steamboats. Theo had plenty of potential passengers and their fares might help offset the loss of fishing income.

We had a splendid view of the storm outside, and the cliff-ringed harbor below, with its harbor lights. Boats were rocking wildly. Big waves were coming into the harbor from the southeast, bouncing off the northern wall, and splashing spray. They tried to teach me how to play poker. Patrick sat to my left for the first few games and didn't take a hand himself. He whispered in my ear, looking at my hand over my left shoulder and suggesting "Fold" or "He's bluffing" or "Raise them". After a few games he thought I was getting the hang of it and got himself dealt in. Nine o'clock still showed a good deal of wind, and a fair poker loss on my part. I was beginning to get some feel for the game and to wonder whether Patrick was winning because he had been advising me. His gains and my losses increased to the point that I changed the way that I held my hand. He could no longer see mine, nor I his; but I continued to lose, and he continued to gain.

The wind blew stronger. "We can't go for a little while yet", said Theo, the skipper of the schooner. He was a good poker player, and winning. The way the game was played there involved having the banker, choose the game (Draw, Stud, etc.), and decide which rules would apply as long as he was banker. One inviolable rule, however, was that every new banker had to buy a bottle of "Screech", the bootleg rum from St. Pierre that was the local drink, and that this should be shared around

the table during his tenure. Another rule was that when "Jackpots" were declared as the result of passes all around, another bottle of screech had to be bought from the kitty, and shared among the players.

The wind blew yet stronger, the bets went higher, and the screech went around. The wind delayed our departure, and so did Theo, the skipper, who had started to lose a bit, and then gain again. From time to time he would go over, look out the window, and come back and help himself to another drop of screech. After one such look he said, sloshing the drink around in his glass: "Nasty night. Jesus. If it slows down a bit we'll go, cause I've got to get out of here. Anybody doesn't wanna come can wait, but don't expect to enjoy it if you come, and don't blame me." He added, after a look around the group: "There's only one sure way to prevent being sea-sick. That's to drink enough screech. You may get rumsick, but you won't get seasick."

I thought I glimpsed a pair of Jacks in Theo's hand. I had a pair of sixes, a Jack, a three, and a four. So I quit and lost my ante, but he won a little. Next deal everyone passed, so the money stayed in the pot. And again the next time. I began to worry and to calculate. I had lost enough that I couldn't pay my way home! I knew what the trip over Placentia Bay and the plane fare would cost. I had to get another \$80 or I couldn't go home. I had to win this hand. Theo went over and looked out the window. "We'd better plan on going after this hand. It's clearing a little to the South, but it's gonna get worse again."

Theo had a bunch of passengers downstairs and nowhere to go except with him. I already had \$30 in this pot, the last, and not enough in my billfold to get me to Gander. I tried to look calm as I picked up my cards. Theo picked his up with care, and I couldn't see them. I had only a pair of sixes again, so I traded three cards, and tried to look happy when I got a King, a seven, and a four. But this time I had to

stay in, and payed to play. I got nervous when I saw that both Aubrey and Patrick looked confident and raised the bets. I looked confident and raised them again. Theo dropped out and seemed to be getting ready to leave. And I raised again on the next round. And the next - what else could I do? And the others all folded. I laid my two sixes down face up to show them as my openers, left the rest of my cards face down, and pushed them in with the rest of the discards. I picked up the considerable pot, thanked the group, poured the rest of the screech into my glass, drained it, and thanked them again. I bade Aubrey, Patrick and the others farewell, laughed at their pessimistic predictions ("You'll never make it tonight, Skipper"), went down to the wharf with Theo, and got on the boat.

That may sound easy, but it did present some difficulties. The first was getting Aubrey's door open against the wind. When we did manage to push it half-open it suddenly blew out of our hands and slammed wide open against the wall. In blew a stream of rain which threatened to soak Aubrey's hall until Aubrey threatened us with death or mutilation if we didn't get that damn door shut. Theo and I staggered down the road and along the slippery, soaking wharf, clutching at the hand-rail on its landward side. Waves breaking against the wharf were shattered and thrown back against us as we struggled along, with Theo in front leading the way. I followed in a mixture of pouring, blowing rain, and sloshing, splashing waves that hit us on one side, bounced off the wall behind the hand-rail, and then hit us again from the other side. When we reached the schooner Theo let out a yell, and a couple of bedraggled sailors stuck their heads over the side, recognized Theo, and pulled on lines to try to help stabilize the schooner as it bashed and scraped itself against the stones of the wharf. They pulled my bag and us on board with no ceremony and a few bruises, and took me below deck into the fo'c's'le. Theo had gone off with the mate to discuss their plans.

The hatch into the fo'c's'le was narrow. The sailor went down first, turning as he went to see that I could get my bag through and down the steps. The fo'c's'le itself was dark, and swaying in the waves with irregular jarring thumps as the schooner hit the wharf. The sailor waited for me, said "I think there's a bunk over there on the top." He pointed in the gloom. Towards the bows of the ship the fo'c's'le narrowed to a point, and the sides tapered downwards. As my eyes got used to the dark I could see three shelves on each side, one about two feet above the other, converging in the bows. Each bunk had several figures on it, head to toe, some sleeping, and separated from one another by bags or cases; one or two peered over the plank that ran along the edge of each shelf to keep the occupants (normally swordfish) from falling out. "That's where we stow the fish when we catch them, but I've never seen it as full as this before."

One figure leaned out from the top shelf on the left - top bunk on the port side - and called down to me "There's some space up here if you can get up", and to the sailor "Are we ready to go yet?"

"Well, the skipper just came aboard, so I guess we'll be off pretty soon. Go on up," he motioned to me, "I'll hand up your bag."

I looked around. Aft, beyond the steps up to the hatch there was a kind of bench or table, and behind that there were a couple of doors. One of these opened and out came another sailor.

"Hey, cook, can I put this guy up there?" asked the man holding my bag, pointing to the top shelf.

"Anywhere he can find some room."

So I clambered up to the top bunk, trying not to stand on one of the other passengers, and found myself some free space. The bunk was hard, but somehow my

relief at having enough money in my pocket to get home - possibly aided by the rum I had consumed that night - let me relax, and after listening to the retching of my fellow passengers for a little while I was rocked to sleep.

I was wakened several times during the night, sometimes by the hard planks I was lying on, sometimes by the rolling of the schooner as we got out into the bay, and sometimes by the groans and sounds of vomiting. Peering over the edge of the bunk, I saw one or two figures moving about, supporting themselves against anything they could hold on to. They were going in and out of one of the doors on the far side of the steps, and I followed their example; then went and sat down at the table. The schooner was still swaying quite a lot, but not as much as it had been last night. The cook came out of his door with a jug of coffee, looking remarkably cheerful.

"Coffee, anybody?" He sported me at the table.

"You like some coffee, Mister? You're the only one that doesn't look sick. Seems you and me and the skipper are the only ones that kept it down last night."

So I got a cup of coffee from him, took a sip, and left it at that while he got a mop and did a bit of sorely needed mopping. Others in the fo'c's'le were trying to clean themselves up and get their clothes straightened out. The one I remember best was a young woman who was apparently trying to get to her wedding somewhere on the Avalon peninsula and was not looking her best. Sobbing, she told me the wedding had had to be postponed, then rearranged when the boats went on strike, and again when the storm blew up. Then she cheered up a little and told me her fiancé was a sailor, so he would understand. I told her I was sure he would.

The weather and the condition of the schooner both improved. Eventually we got to Argentia, docked, paid and thanked the skipper, and headed off in our various directions. I was happy to see that there was a young man waiting on the quay who grabbed the young bride-to-be as she got off, hugged her, and seemed oblivious to her tangled sticky hair and soiled dress.

On the train from Argentia to Gander, waiting in the airport, and flying back to Scotland, I considered the two threats that I had been facing in the last couple of days. One was the calamity that could have arisen if I had not had enough money to pay for my train or a ride to Gander, or my plane to Scotland. What could I possibly have done? There was no one in Newfoundland that I could have asked for money on loan so that I could leave the country. My folks in Edinburgh would have loaned me money, unhappily perhaps, but they would have. But the thought of how to get in touch with them if I had had to do so; how long it would take, where I could stay in the meantime, how I could explain my problem - "I lost the money in a poker game": these were all enough to send shivers down my back. So I had been saved by a pair of sixes, by a lot of luck combined with some sort of poker face and play-acting, and incredibly lucky timing. The facts that I had virtually no experience with poker, and that I didn't know the poker playing habits of those with whom I was playing were perhaps counterbalanced by the facts that they didn't know my poker-player habits, and that I hadn't played enough to have any. I had been saved by luck rather than by any kind of skill.

The second threat, that posed by the storm, the waves, and the poor visibility due to fog, had been in my mind much reduced by the relief that I felt at having enough money in my pocket to get home. My almost miraculous survival of a dangerous pecuniary situation somehow washed over in my mind into confidence that I would survive the storm. With it, I had no decisions to make; there was nothing I could do,

apart from holding tight to the side of my shelf, that would affect things. So I fell asleep, and kept on falling asleep after each jar or roll wakened me. Again, I had been saved by luck rather than by any kind of skill on my part. One threat was posed by human activities and my stupidity; the other by natural forces beyond anyone's control.

I haven't played poker since. And I did get more education in medicine, from which I (and my patients, I hope), have profited.

This story has two morals:

1. Don't be stupid.
 2. When you are stupid, be lucky.
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