

ROUND POND

On fine spring days, my mother and I take the number 52 bus — “a tuppenny and a penny, please” — to the Round Pond in Kensington Gardens. Today, however, I’m with Father and we have travelled here by taxi. I’m holding my solid, blue sailing-boat which we’ll sail together, like other fathers and sons, although this is not something we have ever done before.

While with my mother, I exercise caution. I place my sailing-boat carefully on the water and — disregarding her encouragement — I set it on a shallow course along the rim of the pond. I know my mother to be a woman who is willing to take risks. This is not a temperament I share.

My sailing-boat is nothing more than a crude wooden hull with a light cotton sail. I know this but to me it’s still precious. I’m at a blessed age when what I have is what I want and — although I greatly admire them — I’m not envious of the older boys with more elaborate craft.

I watch them adjusting the trim, wading a few feet out into the water, holding their sleek ships in position, waiting for the right gust to fill the sails. Away they go across the ocean. All the while I clutch my boat tightly.

Father looks on while I make my timid coastal voyages. I release my boat and run to be there to retrieve it. Run and retrieve. Run and retrieve. Is it boredom that prompts him to suggest, very gently, that we could be more adventurous?

Little by little I pick up courage until at last we decide to launch the boat across the pond to the far shore. The wind holds steady and we’re there to meet it when it makes landfall.

Which of us suggests we should try one final voyage across the pond before we go home? Maybe you’re fearful this will end in disaster? Don’t be. It doesn’t. It’s true there’s a moment when the wind drops and changes direction, but it picks up again and my boat sails safely back to shore. I go home happy, relaxed, relieved.

My mother and I return to the Round Pond as before. It's an uncertain day of sudden squalls. I won't risk further voyages across the pond and my mother is content to let me potter by the edge of the water while she reads her library book on a bench.

She isn't witness to an episode later that afternoon. A boy with his father watch as their boat — becalmed and water-logged — sinks in the middle of the pond. I always knew this is how it might end. The father's helplessness, the son's heartbreak. I pick up my boat and walk thoughtfully back to my mother. She closes her book and we catch the 52 bus home.

That summer we move house. Our visits to Kensington Gardens come to an end. My blue sailing-boat is consigned to the bottom of a cupboard where — in time — it's forgotten.