

1956

## The Breaking Point

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### Recommended Citation

Falch, Sally (1956) "The Breaking Point," *Exile*: Vol. 2 : No. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol2/iss2/8>

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## THE BREAKING POINT

BY SALLY FALCH

It was a little after ten on a Cape May summer morning, a morning exactly like some thirty previous mornings, for the sun had fought the haze and come out an intolerant victor. The tide-smoothed rocks shed their veneer of dawn dampness unwillingly and Jan sensed an equal rock-like lethargy. Having leaped and skated across some hundred rocks she was content to stand and watch a small sea bird that promenaded with the tide. With one hand she shielded her face from the sun and with her other she clutched the sweat-corroded handles of a striped beach bag and the bottom rungs of an ancient beach chair.

She sensed her smallness, browned legs and shoulders separated by a white and clover dotted swim suit, bloomer style; her hair enveloped by a crew-hat, its whiteness relieved by scattered seaweed smears; and green Garbo sunglasses that followed the arch of her very dark eyebrows and threatened to slide down her cold-creamed nose. Her hand set the glasses in place and the sea bird vanished. She stared at its vanishing point, then shifted her eyes to calculate the sun. Deciding on a shallow rock trough designed to catch the sun, she put down her bag and unraveled her beach chair. It squatted with five feet on a tilted rock, the sixth protruding over a small basin-like scoop still filled with unevaporated brine. Carefully she slid into the chair.

In the sun's varnish her body became statue-like except for an arm that groped in the beach bag. Slowly, it emerged with a rumped, paperbound copy of "1919." Crane-like, the arm arose to lower its catch on her bloomed lap, then reached up and pushed her sunglasses back against her nose.

The drying rocks parched to a pearl hue, and off the jetty the flamingo-feathered Sightseer appeared and grew large, its gaudiness accentuated by the costumes of those crowding its decks. Jan lifted her green-hazed eyes to watch, then glanced down at the book. On the fly-leaf she read, "To Jan from Bob Dos Passos, Spring, 1955." She frowned and the glasses slipped down again. "Damn these glasses and damn him," she muttered.

"It is impossible," he had said when giving her the book, "to read this masterpiece dispassionately." Not, "I hope you like it" or even "I think you'll like it." Just bland assurance that she would. Maybe she had already read it. Bob would never know. He would never ask her. His ridiculous assumption of the author's name was another charge she would like to convict him on — his casual claiming of the book, just like everything else in life, as his own.

The bobbing cork that was the sea bird returned, and as Jan watched, it dived and surfaced with its fish. Her eyes dropped to her book and again she heard Bob's words the night he left for Europe.

"Well, Honey," he said, "you ought to have plenty of time on your hands, so read your book. That ought to keep you busy for awhile. When you finish it you'll want to read some more of his stuff. He's really good."

Nothing about how he was going to miss her or how much he loved her — just read a book. Of course she would. Of course she was going to spend a whole summer at the shore reading books — books he had picked out so she could converse with him and his friends.

"Little did you know," she said to the image of Bob's face floating before her in the water, "little did you know, my friend, what a passion-piece this book could be. This book has become a symbol — an absolute symbol of you and me and the bogus relationship we've had."

In the brightness of a ten o'clock sun it was easy for Jan to be objective, to see that every minute they had spent together had been one-sided — his side. He thought everything in life had been put there for his amusement — college, fraternities, the summer, and her.

He had been very careful when he pinned her. "This is just for now — right?" he asked. "No permanent strings attached, OK?" And because he was so near and said those words so gently, she said yes. What he said made no difference. She wanted the pin

because she wanted him. The conditions she could ignore, because in the back of her mind was the naive thought that the pin could only make things better.

He had never been unfaithful, in the usual way. She had never had to worry about other girls. It wasn't that other girls weren't crazy about him, but he accepted female attention as his just reward and was calloused to it. It was just that she had never held first place in his mind. How many week nights all winter long she sat in the dorm while other girls, pinned and otherwise, went out for study dates, coffee dates, and to early movies. But not her. He had always regarded her as week-end fun. From Monday until Friday she sat alone in her room, planning all the things she would say to him when she saw him again. But when Friday came and she went down to the lounge to meet him, she saw only his smile upon her as she walked toward him — his smile and his all-over innocent hungry-to-see-you look.

And they had wonderful times. Fabulous week-end trips, plays instead of movies, swimming at mid-night, thirty straight rides on a roller-coaster, champagne when others were drinking beer — and she loved it. That she had not been included in the planning of these flights to the Land of Fitzgerald never really mattered — until she thought about it later.

She'd lie in bed in some hotel on one of their week-end escapades as the sun lighted a wholly unfamiliar room and ask herself what she was doing there. Guilt swept in slowly with the tide of day after Bob's greater power was gone. She'd think of her mother and how utterly appalled she would be. She wanted to talk it over with Bob, but was afraid. The thought that he might not understand terrified her. Twisting and turning, she couldn't stay in bed. But by the time she was standing at the mirror putting on lipstick the mirror would reveal only frivolous shining eyes, her eyes that weren't her own because in a few minutes they would be seeing Bob again.

Then she'd go down to the hotel dining room to meet him for breakfast and he'd smile and say, "Frivolous, you look great. You know, that's what I like about you. When I left you four hours ago, I never dreamed this vision of loveliness could appear at the breakfast table. Your recuperative powers, my dear, are amazing." And they would sing all the way back to school.

"Stop it, Jan," she said to herself. "Stop it, or the sea you sail will run neurotic."

The Sightseer was again passing the jetty on its return trip. From the next pier came three sharp blasts of the rescue signal. As Jan watched, the beach awakened. Sun-browned forms like elves sprang from under the distant toadstools. Jan sat up and squinted at the maze of multi-colored bathing suits that stumbled across the rocks. But the hurrying shapes slowed and then turned to make their way back to their towels and portable radios.

"That makes four false alarms in the past two days," she said to herself and lowered her chair another notch. She picked up "1919" and took out her bookmark — a letter from Bob. It was the third she had received since he boarded the Queen Elizabeth two months and fifteen days ago.

The envelope was marked "Par Avion," and the letterhead showed a hotel crest — a marvelous horse's head sprouting out of a crown. Jan reread the sea-smeared lines:

*Dear Frivolous,*

*Just a note to let you know my plans after hitting New York, which is on Aug. 2.*

*As I understand it, we get in sometime in the morning after declaring foreign goods on Ellis Island. I plan to see about transportation to Cape May as soon as possible, and I don't see any reason why I shouldn't be able to get there that evening.*

*I will have to borrow some money from you until I get home as my roll has dwindled from a vast fortune to next to nothing. But what the hell, how many times do you go to Europe?*

*I'll tell you about the last part of the trip when I see you.*  
*Love, Bob*

She was dressed in her tan-revealing black sheath on the evening of the second when she received his telephone call from Philadelphia. Before she had picked up the receiver she had known what she would hear. "How many times will this have to happen before I learn?" she asked herself. "Promises fall from his mouth as easily as wags from a dog's tail, and mean just as little."

"Why aren't you—?" she began when she picked up the phone.

"Hi, Frivoli," he shouted into her ear. "Listen, Baby, I'm as sorry as hell, but I don't think I'll be able to make it tonight. I met this guy I prepped with about six years ago — well, you know how those things go, a few beers and anyway he convinced me I ought to stay over in Philly for the night. So, I'll see you tomorrow or so, OK?" Then came a breath-drawing pause and then he added, "You're not mad or anything, are you?"

He's as sorry as hell—, she thought, —he's as sorry as hell — which isn't sorry at all.

"No," she said into the phone, "I understand. I'll see you tomorrow then — Bye."

She stood by the phone fingering her dress. Why don't I get mad at him when he pulls tricks like this. But no, she mimicked herself: "I understand."

Then she ran upstairs to do the impossible — explain Bob's actions to her roommates. And after they had gone in a slither of gossip at the door, she wept. She awoke the next morning with the thought that had finally put her to sleep. Europe was enough. Two years had already been too long for this fiasco.

She waited an hour for the train from Philadelphia.

"Whose oven did you crawl out of?" he exclaimed as he came to her and spun her at arm's length. "Why you're a veritable sun-goddess. It's good to see you, Frivoli. I've missed you, you know that? And how's everyone doing this summer at Cape May, may I ask?"

"Every—everyone's having a wonderful time," she said.

"And we're standing here—Come on!" he said. And off they went to begin a better time than most. For money they squandered her best tip of the season—she had received it only that night at dinner. They went to Henri's, a little bar across from the hotel, and for once Bob talked as though she had ears to hear. He brought everything alive to her — the Existentialist he met on the Left Bank, a house party on the Italian Riviera, a Blue Grotto gondolier who sang about Pepsi-Cola, the nineteenth century old whorehouse at Pompeii — even the bitter Germans at Heidelberg.

As he talked, Jan felt her summer fade to the nothingness of waiting it had been. There's time for all that, Bob, she thought. Tonight's our night, so talk about us. She wanted to tell him she forgave him the phone call and the times he had forgotten her, but instead she began talking — fictionizing a beer party in a tree-top,

boat trips she dreamed of making with him, and an all night trip to Ocean City from which she got back just in time to greet her guests coming into the dining room for breakfast.

Then Bill, the bartender, said, "You're smoking too much. It's the excitement of having the boyfriend here, isn't it?" She laughed, and Bob put his arm on hers.

They left Henri's, took off their shoes and danced on a darkened beach to the juke box music from a boardwalk concession. "Let's not become tedious," Bob cried in the middle of "Begin the Beguine;" he ended the dance and they went for a swim. They rolled and tumbled in the night surf and eventually let the waves carry them up on the beach where they laughed and kissed and watched the sky clear for the dawn.

When Bob left her at her door in the hotel he asked, "What time do you get through serving breakfast?"

"Nine-thirty."

"Good, I'll be down at nine and then you can serve me breakfast and we'll get in an early morning swim. We've got to make the day a big one, Frivoli, because I'll have to leave this paradise the day after."

She was too surprised to do more than kiss him goodnight. Leave? How could he think of leaving so soon. He had just arrived. Why? No reason, of course — just going.

The noon-day sun turned the rocks of the jetty into a thousand hotplates. Jan reached into the striped beachbag for a towel and spread it underfoot. Then she pushed the glasses up once more into their rightful place and applied a fresh layer of cold-cream to her burning nose.

"Damn him, damn him," she said again. "He promised me he'd be out early. If he's not going to do what he says, I wish he wouldn't even bother to say anything."

At nine-forty she had left a note with the desk clerk telling him to have Bob look for her on the jetty. That had been two hours ago. How could he do this. Their first and last day for months and he was sleeping. Talk about self-centered, egotistical, thoughtless—. This is it, she said. This is absolutely the breaking point. As far as I am concerned, when he arrives—if he arrives on the jetty—before I have to go in and serve dinner, I am going to tell him to go. Just go. It is going to be the end — finis. And I am going to be the girl to do it. No one person has a right to make another suffer so much.



So there'll be no more dancing on the beach in the wee hours of the morn. I'll find someone who'll be content to do the two-step at a country club dance and I'll be a happy person — all right, it's settled. Just stop thinking about it, she told herself. From now on peace of mind is the cry and for the first time in three years I'm going to have it.

She was busily trying to shove "1919," the American masterpiece, in a crevice between the rocks when she saw him coming out on the jetty.

With her new peace of mind she could laugh. He was a ridiculous figure in the sun-tanned paradise. Europe had been cultural and broadening, but it hadn't put a healthy tan on his body. Onward he came, jumping from puddle to puddle on the rocks. Jan looked down at her own toughened bare soles and thought, this is going to be easy. For the first time since she had known him, the young self-assured gentleman of the world looked somewhat less than at ease. His vulnerability gave Jan a sense of power she had never felt before. "Hot feet, what a way to die," she murmured and laughed.

She was still laughing when Bob made a great leap and landed on her towel. "It's a morning to laugh at, Young One," he said. "It's really great to be alive, *nicht wahr?* Got to get some of that ocean of yours on my unseared flesh. Tell you what, Frivoli, I'll race you over to the next pier."

The always-cold Atlantic and the thought that she again dived, unthinking, into one of his escapades, struck Jan at the same time. She surfaced just in time to see his white body fuse with the green. She started swimming with long, strong strokes, but in no time he caught up with her, his arms whispering in a space-cutting crawl.

"Why didn't you tell me this ocean was so cold?" he gaily shouted. "I can tell you one thing, Frivoli — this stuff's a heck of a lot different from the old Mediterranean. Swam there once, you know."

"Don't talk," she shouted, "or a land-lubber like you won't make it. In case you don't know it, you've got a long swim ahead of you."

"What rot you talk, Woman," he said as he gave a few exaggerated kicks and passed her.

Jan imitated him and got a mouthful of salt water. She coughed and salt tears spilled from her eyes. Well, that's not going to happen again, she decided. Follow your own advice, my girl, and

take it easy. Her eyes regarded the far off jetty. The race was only something to be endured.

Methodically, she began counting her strokes. Wonder how many times I'll have to kick before I get there, she mused. She began to calculate but the attempt bored her. She turned over on her side and began side-stroking. She could see the beach as she swam. It looked strange and far away — like rick-rack bordering a blue cloth with each umbrella a multi-colored polka dot. She tried to eat up distance by allowing herself five kicks and no more between each umbrella. By the time she had perfected her system, she realized she had passed Bob.

Great! she thought, I may win this race in spite of myself. Her elation made her quicken her strokes. Suddenly, it occurred to her that she hadn't been swimming fast at all. What had he been doing? She was afraid to turn around and look — he would accuse her of stopping to rest. She swam on, slowly — dog fashion. She waited, but he did not come alongside. Then she heard him splashing, close behind.

"Hey," she called, "what were you doing back there — taking a sunbath?" There was no answer and then a faint, "Sure!" Jan listened but he said nothing else. His breath came in sobs to imitate her.

OK mister, Jan thought, if you think you're going to make me cry uncle you'll think again. She began, "He who cries wolf—" but stopped, although her own second wind suddenly came like smooth thread from a bobbin. Over the ice-like glare of the water, she located the jetty. Its fishermen and bathers appeared no clearer than they had when she had sat watching the false rescue a few hours before. She looked back at her own jetty and was shocked to see how far they had come.

She glanced at Bob and anger seized her — his eyes were closed and he was kicking up and down — imitating her. She whirled in the water and pushed his head under. "Mimic a woman will you, you big ape," she cried as her own arms, strong and sure, pulled her out of his way. "Come along, kiddo!" she yelled — then her turning neck grew rigid in fright.

Bob was stopped in the water, his head rising, his arm flailing helplessly, his mouth half opened to the inpouring sea.

"You aren't — you aren't fooling!" she cried, whirling waist-high in the water.

"I—I'm all right!" he coughed, and grew desperately and sadly quiet, his lips suddenly like purple lines of a plum laid on white cloth.

"Oh, this is terrible!" she cried, looking off to the pier ahead, to the pier behind. "Bob, Bob, you can—you can—" She held out her arms, treading water with her feet. He shook his head and struggled free of the waves.

"You—we could—we could swim all afternoon," he muttered, trying desperately to smile, as he fell back.

"We could swim back together!"

"Back?" he gasped.

"We're going back!"

"Not—not me!" With desperate effort he raised his arm and pointed— "Over there, the far pier, Frivolil!"

"Bob! You fool!" she cried. "Oh please, Bob—just this once listen to me. Please—please!"

A wave that broke too far from shore covered him for the moment and then he was twenty feet away, swimming with the batting, paw-like strokes of a puppy.

"Bob!" she called. He ignored her, didn't hear her — and in that instant she saw what she would have to do. Quick strokes bore her to him, and then her face sank beneath the green water, her mouth opened to inpouring brine.

"Bob—Bob," she gasped. "I can't — I can't possibly make it."

"You mean—you—" With valiant effort he raised her, raised her but let her down in water she was prepared to take.

"I'll—I'll have to go back," she apologized. "I—I can't make it."

Slowly, in something that just missed being a bow, he turned—and she rolled over on her side. The beach was at her back and nothing but endless ocean before her eyes. Arms—then kick, arms—then kick, arms—then kick. Over and over Jan repeated the formula. The rocks of the jetty loomed in front of her. Just a little farther now.

The waves broke against the jetty to return and pummel her. Each stroke became harder. Floating seaweed brushed her face and tangled her feet. Her hand touched a rock. She reached for it—missed—then caught hold.

Quickly she turned to him. "Only a little farther now," she breathed. "You can do it, I know you can."

His body was alternately covered and uncovered by the froth of the breakers. His eyes gripped the jetty. Jan reached for him—but slowly let her hand fall slack. At last he clutched a rock, heaved his body upon it, then fell, crucifix-like, across it. Legs still dangling in the water, chest pumping, face down, he remained. Unmoving, Jan stared at him. Finally, he made one last climbing effort and sprawled next to her.

The heaving of their bodies and the pounding of the waves filled the air with toneless sound. I should be glad, happy, Jan thought, but she felt dead inside and could give no thanks.

Bob pushed himself up on his elbow and looked at her. His eyes were lined with red, his chin smeared with brown scum. "Why—why did you turn around?" he asked, wiping at his mouth.

"Why did I turn around?" She suddenly felt sick. "I told you why," she shouted at him. "I was tired—I couldn't do anything else." Then she was sobbing.

"Never mind, I know," he said. "Thanks." There was a pause as though one kind of time had stopped and another started. "Thanks," he repeated. The corners of his red-rimmed eyes wrinkled in a smile. "Did I ever tell you what I like most about you? Your recuperative powers—my dear, they're amazing."