

Adrift

Seventy-Six Days Lost at Sea

Steven Callahan

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LARGE DORADO

FROM
BARCELON

CATCH
FOURTH DORADO
AND
THREE TIGERS

BARBADOS

GENAMA

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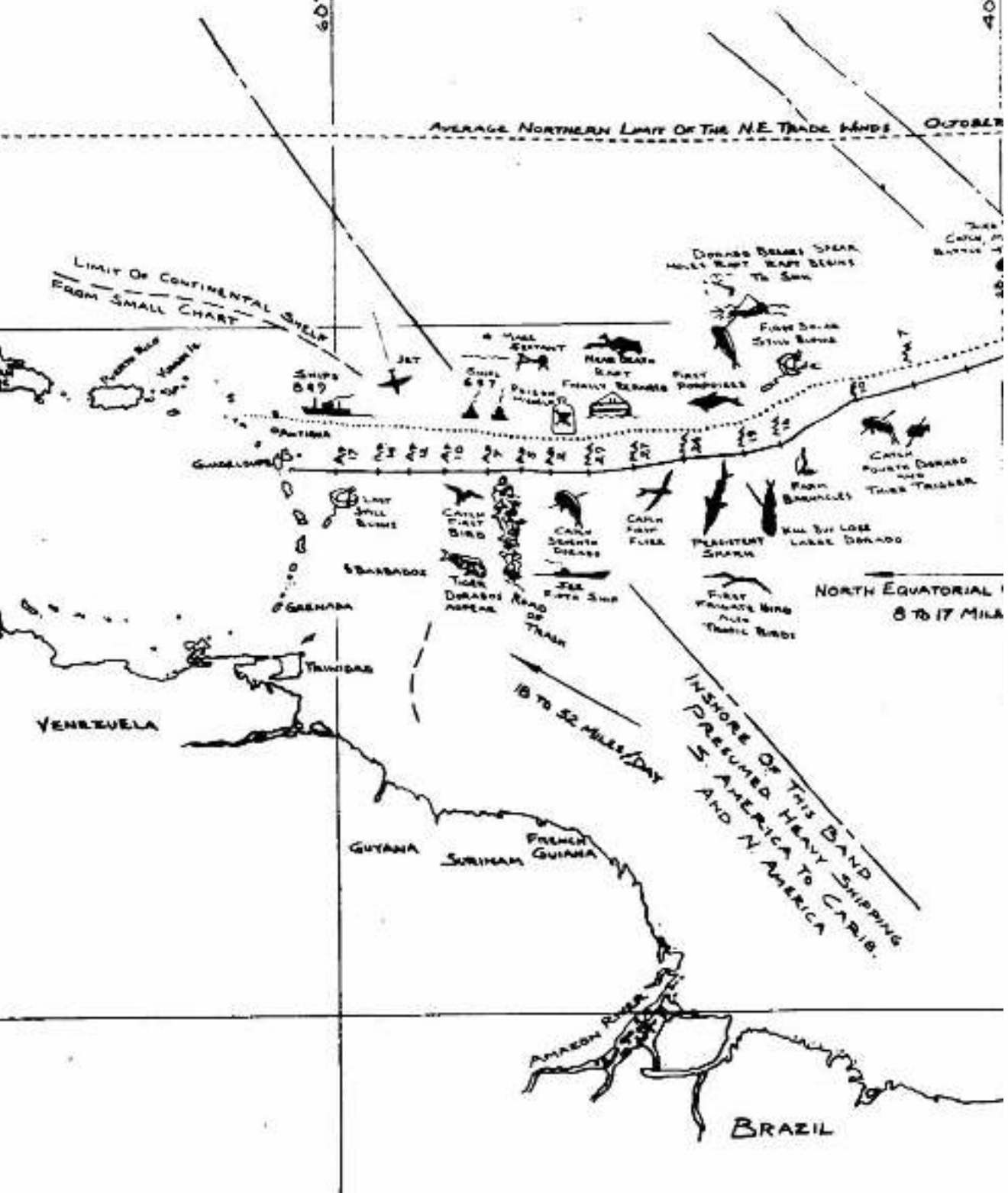
AMAZON RIVER

BRAZIL

NORTH EQUATORIAL
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18 TO 52 MILES/DAY

INSHORE OF THIS BAND SHIPPING
IS PRESUMED HEAVY TO CARIB.
AND N. AMERICA



A Mariner Book
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
BOSTON • NEW YORK



This book is dedicated to people everywhere who know, have known, or will know suffering, desperation, or loneliness.

First Mariner Books edition 2002

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Acknowledgments

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I am grateful to Dougal Robertson for his excellent survival manual, *Sea Survival*, which unfortunately is out of print. The Robertsons, the Baileys, and other voyagers who went before me kept me company through their books and provided not only essential practical advice but also the inspiration to pull through.

I might not ever have made it ashore had it not been for my timely meeting with the Paquet brothers and Paulinus Williams. They and the other people of Marie Galante were very kind and helpful during the final stage of my voyage and my subsequent recovery.

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Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the sea. It has taught me quite a lot in life. Although the sea was my greatest enemy, it was also my greatest ally. I know intellectually that the sea is indifferent, but her richness allowed me to survive. In giving up her dorados, she was giving up

her own children, so to speak, in order that I might live.

I truly hope that the remainder of my life will prove worthy of all the sacrifices made on my behalf.

Preface to the Mariner Edition

Shortly after the first publication of *Adrift*, a reporter from a rather prestigious newspaper concluded his interview of me with the question that virtually every interviewer inevitably asked: "Did your survival drift set some kind of record?"

As usual, I patiently explained to him that, to my mind, records are irrelevant. I'd spoken to many survivors who'd had experiences much shorter than mine but who had suffered every bit as much and had as important stories to tell. I noted that in any daily paper I could find accounts of those who somehow managed to live in circumstances I thought would be unbearable. I added that our nation's people seem consumed with records—longest, biggest, farthest, fastest ... These days there are records for everything. "Why, you could be the first guy to sail around the lighthouse backwards with his pants down, and that, I suppose, would be a record," I concluded. The next day in the paper, under a photo of me, read a caption: "Callahan says about his journey that it was like sailing around the lighthouse backwards with his pants down." I got one side-splitting laugh out of that. Perhaps I should have been offended, but instead I had become fascinated by the numerous ways in which people perceived my experience. In any event, this life is full of trials and tribulations, so you have to capture humor whenever and wherever you can find it.

I have been amazed that *Adrift* has remained in print for more than a decade, and the fact that it now joins a collection of books by and about such adventurers as Slocum and Shackleton is nothing less than astounding. Although I'm very nattered and grateful, I doubt I could fill even one of Shackleton's boots. Besides, I feel far from being the sole creator of whatever I may have accomplished in my oceanic odyssey and the writing of *Adrift*. Whatever accolades I or *Adrift* have received I humbly accept, not for myself but for the incredible grace and awesome complexity of the universe. Drifting halfway across the Atlantic and learning to live like an aquatic caveman showed me time and again that I am less an individual than part of a continuum, joined to all things and driven by them more than I am in control of my own path. *Adrift* may have flowed from my hand, but it is the result of the countless forces and individuals who shaped me, led me through a remarkable experience and allowed me to live long enough to tell it.

People have interpreted *Adrift* in many ways. Many read it strictly as an adventure tale. A great number have seen the spiritual and philosophical elements of the book, which I hope will remain enduring elements. People have interpreted these elements in numerous ways to fit their own religions and cosmologies. I will not debate them. In fact, I welcome them. Writing a book is what I imagine having a child must be like. You do your best, let it grow up and mature, then wish it well as it trots off into the world to make a life of its own. *Adrift* has done that. As readers find new meanings in it, I do not find my own views of the experience or my original intentions when writing about it diminished. They are expanded.

Still, on occasion I have heard a perception that makes me uneasy. Some people have labeled me as some kind of hero. I do admit to a certain pride that I was able to hang in there, be inventive,

survive, but this is a tale about failure as much as heroism. It is a tale about the generosity of life as much as it is about the trials through which it puts us. It is a tale about second chances, which I am very happy now to have. I may have succeeded in some ways, but my drift showed me my many weaknesses only too clearly, and I'm sure I made as many errors as any person could. Years after the experience, a ten-year-old boy noted that, in *Adrift*, I complained about the lack of wire in the fishing kit, but I described a light on the top of the raft powered by a battery in the water. "Weren't they connected by a piece of wire?" he asked innocently. Duh. Sometimes it takes the wisdom of a ten-year-old to show us how stupid we can be. Next time, he's coming along for the ride.

Ellsworth, Maine
1999

Introduction

It is always difficult to decide where a story begins and where it ends. However, some experiences—romantic evening, a weekend retreat, or a voyage—have fairly distinct dividing lines. They are what I call "whole experiences." To a large degree, the first twenty-nine years of my life represent one whole experience that rests outside the scope of this book. But within those years are the seeds of this story. People often ask me how I got myself into such a fix in the first place. How did I know what to do? Was the boat I lost new or had it been tried before? Why was I sailing offshore in such a small boat? The answers to these questions *are* an integral part of the story, its foundation. The foundation was laid in 1964, when, at age twelve, I began sailing.

I fell in love with sailing instantly. I can think of a million reasons why it appealed to me so strongly—the immediate relationship with the environment, the simplified lifestyle devoid of "modern inconveniences" (as naval architect Dick Newick puts it), the sheer beauty of it—but all of the reasons can be summed up succinctly: everything about it felt right.

Before I ever began to sail, I thought that if I had lived in the 1700s I would probably have become a mountain man, or some such thing. Then I became enthralled with the history of the sailing ship, of square-riggers battling their way around Cape Horn. I yearned for the romanticism and adventure of ages past. Shortly after I began sailing, I read a book called *Tinkerbelle*, by Robert Manry. In June 1965 Manry had sailed his 13.5-foot boat across the Atlantic in seventy-eight days, a record at the time. Something about the simplicity of Manry's boat, and his accomplishment of so much with so little, struck a chord in my heart. He showed me that a life of adventure was still possible in the latter part of the twentieth century.

From that time on I dreamed of crossing the Atlantic in a small boat. As years went by I learned the skills necessary to accomplish this goal. I read books about all of the great voyages: the raft crossings of the Pacific by Heyerdahl and Willis, and the circumnavigations of Slocum, the Hiscocks and Guzzwell. Before I was out of high school, I had helped to build a forty-footer; by 1974 I had begun a boatbuilding career and was living aboard; by 1977 I was designing boats and venturing offshore as far as Bermuda; by 1979 I was designing and teaching design full time. All along Manry

and *Tinkerbelle* lurked in the back of my mind and served as an inspiration, a way to pull everything together and give my life a focus.

In 1980 I sold my twenty-eight-foot trimaran and put all of my resources into the creation of *Napoleon Solo*, a small cruiser. I relied on a great deal of aid from my ex-wife, Frisha Hugessen, my good friend Chris Latchem, and a host of others. The design was unusual, though not at all radical. We took pains to create a handsome, meticulously constructed cold-molded craft, excellent in light airs and well-balanced and forgiving in heavy weather. *Solo* became much more than a boat to me. I knew her every nail and screw, every grain of wood. It was as if I'd created a living being. Sailors tend to feel that way about their boats. Chris and I gave *Solo* a harsh thousand-mile shakedown cruise from Annapolis to Massachusetts through late-fall gales. By the spring of 1981, I was ready to follow in Manry's wake.

I was not interested in setting a record as Manry had done. *Solo* was just over twenty-one feet long. There weren't many boats of her size that had made the crossing, but there had been a few as small as twelve feet. For me the crossing was more of an inner voyage and a pilgrimage, of sorts. It would also serve as a measuring stick for my competence as a seaman, a designer, and a craftsman. I figured that if I made it to England safely, I'd have accomplished every major goal I'd ever set for myself. From England I would continue south and west, measuring *Solo*'s performance in a single-handed transatlantic race called the Mini-Transat. That would carry me to Antigua. In the spring I would return to New England, thereby completing a circumnavigation of the North Atlantic. To qualify for the Mini-Transat, I had to sail six hundred miles alone in *Solo*, so I entered the Bermuda 12 Race and sailed from Newport to Bermuda. From there I would make the crossing to England with Chris.

When I departed the United States, it was with everything I owned, except for some tools. Few insurance brokers had wanted to talk to me, and those who did set such exorbitant premiums that it would cost less to buy materials for a second boat. I decided to take the risk. I told people that the worst that could happen was that I'd be killed, in which case I wouldn't be worried about collecting any insurance money. The second worst thing would be to lose *Solo*. It would take a while to recover, but I would. I knew plenty of other people who had lost their boats and recovered.

Many of my friends still couldn't understand why I wanted to undertake such a voyage, why I couldn't test myself without crossing the Atlantic. But there was more to the crossing than simply putting myself to the test. From the first time I ventured from the shore in a boat, I felt that my spirit was touched. On my first offshore trip to Bermuda, I began to think of the sea as my chapel. It was my soul that called me to this pilgrimage.

One friend suggested I write down my thoughts for the benefit of those who thought I was mad. While waiting for Chris in Bermuda, I sat beneath a palm tree and wrote the following: "I wish I could describe the feeling of being at sea, the anguish, frustration, and fear, the beauty that accompanies threatening spectacles, the spiritual communion with creatures in whose domain I sail. There is a magnificent intensity in life that comes when we are not in control but are only reacting, living, surviving. I am not a religious man per se. My own cosmology is convoluted and not in line with any particular church or philosophy. But for me, to go to sea is to get a glimpse of the face of God. At sea I am reminded of my insignificance—of all men's insignificance. It is a wonderful feeling to be so humbled."

The Atlantic crossing to England with Chris was exhilarating—gales, fast runs, whales, dolphins. It was the stuff adventure is made of. And as we approached the coast of England, I felt I was ending the whole experience that had begun at my birth, and beginning a new one.

LOG OF NAPOLEON SOLO



IT IS LATE at night. The fog has been dense for days. *Napoleon Solo* continues to slice purposefully through the sea toward the coast of England. We should be getting very close to the Scilly Isles. We must be very careful. The tides are large, the currents strong, and these shipping lanes heavily traveled. Both Chris and I are keeping a sharp eye out. Suddenly the lighthouse looms on the rocky isles, its beam high off the water. Immediately we see breakers. We're too close. Chris pushes the helm down and I trim the sails so that *Solo* sails parallel to the rocks that we can see. We time the change in bearing of the lighthouse to calculate our distance away—less than a mile. The light is charted to have a thirty-mile range. We are fortunate because the fog is not as thick as it often is back in our home waters of Maine. No wonder that in the single month of November 1893 no fewer than 298 ships scattered their bones these rocks.

The next morning, *Solo* eases herself out of the white fog and over the swells in a light breeze. She slowly slips into the bay in which Penzance is nestled. The sea pounds against the granite cliffs of Cornwall on the southwest coast of England, which has claimed its own vast share of ships and lives. The jaws of the bay hold many dangers, such as the pile of rocks known as the Lizard.

Today the sky is bright and sunny. The sea is gentle. Green fields cap the cliffs. After our two-week passage from the Azores with only the smell of salt water in our lungs, the scent of land is sweet. At the end of every passage, I feel as if I am living the last page of a fairy tale, but this time the feeling is especially strong. Chris, who is my only crew, wings out the jib. It gently floats out over the water and tugs us past the village of Mousehole, which is perched in a crevice in the cliffs. We soon glide up to the high stone breakwater at Penzance and secure *Napoleon Solo* to it. With the final neat turns of docking lines around the cleats, we conclude *Solo's* Atlantic crossing and the last of the goals that I began setting for myself fifteen years ago. It was then that Robert Manry showed me not only how to dream, but also how to fulfill that dream. Manry had done it in a tiny boat called, *Tinkerbelle*. I did it in *Solo*.

Chris and I climb up the stone quay to look for customs and the nearest pub. I look down on *Solo* and think of how she is a reflection of myself. I conceived her, created her, and sailed her. Everything I have is within her. Together we have ended this chapter of my life. It is time to dream new dreams.

Chris will soon depart and leave me to continue my journey with *Solo* alone. I've entered the Mini-Transat Race, which is a singlehanded affair. I don't need to think about that for a while. Now it is time for celebration. We head off to find a pint, the first we've had in weeks.

The Mini-Transat runs from Penzance to the Canaries and then on to Antigua. I want to go to the Caribbean anyway. Figure I'll find work there for the winter. *Solo* is a fast-cruising boat, and I'm interested to see how she fares against the spartan racers. I think I have a shot at finishing in the money since my boat is so well prepped. Some of my opponents are putting in bulkheads and drawing numbers on sails with Magic Markers in frantic pandemonium before the start. I indulge in local pasties and fish and chips. My last-minute jobs consist of licking stamps and sampling the local brew.

It is not all fun and games. It is the autumn equinox, when storms rage, and within a week two severe gales rip up the English Channel. Ships are cracked in half and many of the Transat competitors are delayed. One French boat capsizes and her crew can't right her. They take to their life raft and manage to land on a lonesome, tiny beach along a stretch of treacherous cliffs on the Brittany coast. Another Frenchman is not so lucky. His body and the transom of his boat are found crumpled on the

Lizard. A black mood hangs over the fleet.

I make my way up to the local chandlery for final preparations. It is nestled in a mossy alleyway and no sign marks its location. No one needs to post the way to old Willoughby's domain. I was warned that he talks a tough line, but in my few visits I have warmed up to his cynicism. Willoughby is squat, his legs bowed as if they have been steam-bent around a beer barrel, causing him to walk on the sides of his shoes. He slowly hobbles about the shop, weaving back and forth like an uncanvased ship in a swell. Beneath a gray touse of hair, his eyes are squinted and sparkly. A pipe is clamped between his teeth.

Turning to one of his clerks, he motions toward the harbor. "All those little boats and crazy youngsters down there, nothin' but lots of work and headaches, I can tell you." Turning back to me he mutters, "Here to steal more bosunry from an old man and make him work like the devil to boot, I bet."

"That's right, no rest for the wicked," I tell him.

Willoughby raises a brow and twirks the faintest wrinkle of a grin, which he tries to hide behind his pipe. In no time he is spinning yarns big enough to knit the world a sweater. He ran away to sea at fifteen, served on square-riggers in the wool trade from Australia to England. He's been round Cape Horn so many times he's lost count.

"I heard about that Frenchman. Why you fellas go to sea for pleasure is beyond me. 'Course we had some fine times in my day, real fine times we had. But that was our stock in trade. A fella who'd go to sea for pleasure sure go to hell for a pastime."

I can tell the old man has a big space in his heart for all nautical lunatics, especially the young ones. "At least you'd have somebody to keep you company then, Mr. Willoughby."

"It's a bad business I tell you, a bad business," he says more seriously. "Sorry thing, that Frenchman. What do you get if you win this here race? Big prize?"

"No, I don't know really. Maybe a plastic cup or something."

"Ha! A fine state of affairs! You go out, play tag with Neptune, have a good chance to end up in old Davy Jones' locker—and for a cup. It's a good joke." And it is, too. The Frenchman has really affected the old man. He cheerily insists on slipping a few goodies onto my pile, free of charge, but his tone is somber. "Now don't come back and bother me any more."

"Next time I'm in town you can bet on me like the plague, or the tax man. Cheers!"

A little bell jingles laughingly as I close the door. I can hear Willoughby inside pacing to and fro on the creaking wooden floor. "A bad business, I tell you. It's a bad business."

The morning of the race's start, I make my way past the milling crowds to the skipper's meeting. Whether the race will start on time or not has been a matter of speculation for days. The last couple of gales that swept through had edged up to hurricane force. "Expect heavy winds at the start," a meteorologist tells us. "By nightfall they'll be up to force eight or so."

The crowd murmurs. "Starting in a bloody gale ... Quiet, he's not finished yet."

"If you can weather Finisterre you'll be okay, but try to get plenty of sea room. Within thirty-six hours, all hell is going to break loose, with a good chance of force ten to twelve and forty-foot waves

"Lovely," I say. "Anybody want to charter a small racing boat—cheap?" The crowd's talk grows loud. Heated debate breaks out between the racers and their supporters. Isn't it lunacy to start a transatlantic race in these conditions? The talk subsides as the race organizer breaks in.

"Please! Look, if we postpone we might not get off at all. It's late in the year and we could get locked in for weeks. We all knew it would probably be tough going to the Canaries. If you can get past Finisterre, you'll be home free. So keep in touch, stay awake, and good sailing."

The quay around Penzance's inner harbor is packed with people gawking and snapping pictures, waving, weeping or laughing. They will soon return to the comfort of their warm little houses.



NAPOLEON SOLO

~~I yell "Cheerio!" as *Solo* is towed out between the massive steel gates, which are opened by the harbormaster and his men pacing round an antique capstan. *Solo* and I are as prepared as we can be. My apprehension gives way to high spirits and excitement. The seconds tick by. My fellow racers and I maneuver about the starting line, making practice runs at it, adjusting our sails, shaking our arms to get the butterflies out of our stomachs. Those prone to seasickness will have a hard time. Warning colors go up. Get ready. Waves sweep into the bay; the wind is already growing, a rancorous circus sky flies in from the west. I reign *Solo* in, tack her over. Smoke puffs from the starting gun; its blast is blown away in the wind before it reaches my ears. *Sob* cuts across the line leading the fleet into the race.~~

At night the wind is stiff and the fleet fights hard against rising seas. I can often see the lights of the other boats, but by morning I see none. The bad conditions have abated. *Solo* slices quickly over the large, smooth swell. I spot a white triangle ahead, rising up and then disappearing behind the waves. I shake the reef out of the jib and one of the reefs out of the mains'l. *Solo* races on to catch the other boat. In a few hours I can see the white hull. It is an aluminum boat that was rafted next to me in Penzance, sailed by one of the two Italians in the race. Like most of the competitors, he's a friendly guy. Something seems slightly wrong. The foot of his jib, which has been reefed, is flogging around and bangs on the deck. I yell across, but get no response. I film the boat as I pass, then go below and radio him several times. No answer. Perhaps he's asleep. As night falls, I hear one of the other racers talking to the organizer on the radio. The Italian has sunk. Luckily he has been picked up. When I radio by him, he was probably in trouble and trying to keep the leak contained.

On the third day, I see a freighter pass about a mile away. I radio to him and learn that he has seen twenty-two of the twenty-six boats in the fleet behind me. I'm greatly encouraged. The wind grows. *Solo* beats into stiff seas. I must make a choice, either to risk being pushed into the notorious Bay of Biscay and try to squeak past Finisterre, or to tack and head out to sea. I choose the bay, hoping for the front to pass and to give me a lift so I can clear the cape. But the wind continues to increase, and soon *Solo* is leaping over ten-foot waves, pausing in midair for a second, and then crashing down on the other side. I have to hold on to keep from being thrown off of my seat. Wind screams through the rigging. For hours *Solo* weaves and slips sideways, shaking at every punch. Inside, the noise of the sea pounding against the hull is deafening. Pots and cans clatter. An oil bottle shatters. After eight hours of it, I adjust. It is dark. There is nothing to do but push on. I crawl aft into my cabin, which is a little quieter than forward, wedge myself into my bunk, and go to sleep.

When I awake, my foul-weather gear is floating about in a pool of water. I leap through the pool and find a crack in the hull. With every passing wave, water shoots in and the crack grows longer. The destruction of *Solo* would follow like falling dominoes. As quick as a mongoose, I rip down the sails, cut lumber, and shore her up. For two days I guide her slowly to the coast of Spain.

Within twenty-four hours of my arrival in La Coruna, seven Mini-Transat boats arrive. Two have been hit by cargo ships, one has broken a rudder, others are fed up. It appears that *Solo* ran into some floating debris. Her hull is streaked with dents. Perhaps it was a log. I've seen plenty of them—even whole trees adrift. Over the years I've spoken with voyagers who have sighted everything from truck containers that fell off of ships to spiky steel balls that resembled World War II mines. One boat off the coast of the United States even found a rocket!

The race is finished for me. I speak no Spanish, so it is difficult to organize repairs. I can't find

Frenchman who will agree to drive over the rocky and pitted Spanish roads to retrieve *Solo*. I have little money. My boat is full of seawater, spilled cooking oil, and broken glass. My electronic self-steering is fried. Then I become ill, with a fever of 103°. I lie among the soggy mess, thoroughly depressed.

Still, I am more fortunate than others. Out of the twenty-five boats that started, no fewer than five have been totally lost, although luckily no one has drowned. Only half of the fleet will reach the finish in Antigua.

It is four weeks before I complete my repairs and put *Napoleon Solo* to sea again. I don't know if I have enough stores and money to reach the Caribbean, but I don't have enough to go home. Luckily the Club Nautico de La Coruna is kind. "No charge. We do what we can for the man alone." For four weeks gales daily ravage Finisterre. The harbor is full of crews waiting to escape to the south. We are all just a little late in the season. In the morning there is frost on the deck. Each day it remains longer before melting off. When *Solo* finally claws past Finisterre, I feel as though I've passed Cape Horn.

I've picked up one person to crew, a Frenchwoman named Catherine. I needed someone to steer. Catherine's only previous ocean experience was on a boat that was dismantled in the Bay of Biscay. In a panic they had radioed for assistance, were picked up by a tanker, and had watched their boat—the dream they'd worked years for—drift away. They had operated under the delusion that the tanker would save their boat, too. Catherine was not easily put off. She "auto-stopped" her way to La Coruna and there tried yacht-stopping for a ride south.

Catherine loves my little boat, and she is lovely herself, but I feel no desire for romance. I want only for past pain to melt away in the sun of the south. With Catherine's help, I expect to reach the Canaries in fourteen days.

For four weeks we crawl south to Lisbon. Between zephyrs we flop about on a mirrored sea. In my reflection in the glassy water, I get a hint that I am going nowhere, but I begin to fall into the slow pace of the cruising life. My disappointment at not completing the Mini-Transat begins to fade.

On the coast of Spain, ancient river valleys cut deeply into the country. In these rugged *rías*, modern machinery consists of donkeys pulling ox carts with wooden wheels and axles. Peasants collect animal bedding from the uncultured grasses of mountainside clearings. Women gather at community basins to beat clothes clean on rocks or concrete. In one port the officials pore over our entry forms, carrying them from office to office, like children trying to decipher hieroglyphics. We are the first yacht to anchor in their waters in over a year.

We proceed along the coast into Portugal, cutting through dense fog and dodging freighters, which on a clear night appear like strings of Christmas tree lights, sixteen or seventeen visible at any time. To one side of us is a coast of rocky teeth and seething seas, on the other the *drum, drum* of heavy engines. When the sails hang lifeless, we row. Often we make only ten miles a day.

It would have been simple to remain at anchor. Latin life and lazy weather are drugging. We begin to soak up tranquility like a sponge. Among the cruising community we make many friends traveling in the same general direction. Many are French. All planned to be into the Pacific by January, but their plans have been tempered. "Maybe we'll hole up in Gibraltar for the winter." But there is something inside of me itching to push on. It is more than the need to get to a place where I

can refill my purse. Catherine sometimes pouts, wishing I would open up to her more. "You are a hard man," she tells me, but I do not respond by becoming softer. I only become more resolved to reach the Canaries and then push on alone.

We sail from Lisbon in decent wind and reach the peaks of Madeira, pause there, and then proceed south to Tenerife. Our two-week voyage has taken six. I say good-bye to Catherine. My ship and I are at peace with one another once again.

Solo is well received wherever she goes. The local people, who would often steer clear of big, expensive yachts, flock to *Solo* like bears to honey. She is as small as their open coastal fishing boats. It is unbelievable to them that she has come all the way from America. In one small port, all of the fishermen and boatbuilders come down early each morning and perch along the quay, patiently waiting for me to wake up. They are eager for me to tell them more stories in my broken Spanish and convoluted sign language.

I come very close to mooring *Solo* for a winter. It has happened to many others, sailing in for a week's visit and staying for years. They make ends meet by making ships in bottles or collecting pine cones in the mountains. German tourists cover the beaches and buy anything with a For Sale sign. I might draw pictures, and I have some writing to do.

I need more than just looking on, playing tourist. I need to be productive, to create, and, of course, to earn money again since I have only a few dollars left and debts to repay.

I am caught in the sailor's inevitable dilemma. When you are at sea you know you must reach harbor, to restock and, you hope, rest in a warm caress. You need ports and often can't wait to get to the next. Then when you are in port, you can't wait to get back to sea again. After a few glasses of cold beer and a few nights in a dry bed, the ocean calls, and you follow her. You need mother earth, but you love the sea.

In most ports you can find a crew who wants to go in the same direction you do. But now most people who wanted to get to the Caribbean for the winter have left some time ago. I don't think that the trip will be difficult alone. One of my newfound friends on Tenerife has repaired my self-steering gear, and the pilot chart promises that there is only a 2 percent chance of encountering gales. The trade winds should be steady. It'll be a milk run.

I make my way to the sparsely populated island of Hierro. Steep cliffs rise from the Atlantic to the east, topped by lush hills and green valleys. The island slopes away to the west and ends with a moonscape of small volcanoes, rocky rubble, and hot red sand. I finish stocking in a tiny man-made port on the western end. On the final day my throat is dry and gravelly. I slap my last pesetas down on the bar. In fumbling Spanish I tell the familiar bartender that the coins will do me no good at sea. "*Cerveza, por favor!*" The beer is cold. The bartender sits down beside me.

"Where to?"

"Caribbean. Work. No more pesetas."

He nods, contemplating the length of the voyage. "Such a small boat. No problema?"

"*Pequeño barco, pequeño problema*. No big problem yet, anyway!" We laugh and talk while I finish my beer, bum a last cigarette, sling my provisions over my shoulder, and head for the quay.

One of the old fishermen stops me. "You come from America?" he asks as he slits open part of his catch, cleans it, and flops it onto a scale. A woman dressed in black pokes the fish, chattering away to herself.

"Yes, America." I wonder if her man was a fisherman lost at sea, like so many others.

"Ooh ho!" he says. "In such a small boat? *Tonto!*" Fool.

"It's not so small, its my whole house."

The old man gestures toward his lower abdomen with cupped hands as if holding gigantic organ. We laugh at his joke as I shake my head no, open my eyes wide, and shiver as if frightened. The woman grabs him by the arm, obviously telling him the fish is overpriced, and begins bargaining, an ageless custom as ritualized as the dominoes played by the men seated at a folding card table on the stony beach.

The night of January 29 is clear, the sky peppered with bright stars. Blocks squeak as I pull up the sails and glide out of the harbor. I thread my way through the offshore fishing fleet and point *Solo* toward the Caribbean. It feels good to be at sea again.

NERVES EXPOSED



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