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NEAR DEATH ON THE  
HIGH SEAS

TRUE STORIES OF DISASTER  
AND SURVIVAL

**CECIL KUHNE**

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# NEAR DEATH ON THE HIGH SEAS

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TRUE STORIES OF  
DISASTER AND SURVIVAL

EDITED BY  
CECIL KUHNE

VINTAGE DEPARTURES  
*Vintage Books*  
*A Division of Random House, Inc.*  
*New York*

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**NOTES ON THE CONTRIBUTORS**

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## PREFACE

*Slamming into the teeth of an ocean swell* has a way of instantly transforming even the largest and most stable sailboat into a very small one. Which may explain why maritime literature seems to produce more than its fair share of robust adventure tales. In the end, the sea is a great leveler, and stories about its encounters reach the depth of human emotion precisely because they rouse that most basic of fears—death by drowning.

Launching a boat into the open sea has sometimes been compared to being propelled into the vastness of space. The water is very dark out there, and unfortunately, there are no handholds. The howling wind first begins, causing the sails to flap and the mast to creak a little. Then the roiling gale grows louder and louder, and soon your boat becomes a wild pendulum out of control. Before you know it, you are left with only viciously cold waves and strange creatures lurking below the churning surface. What started off as a grand adventure in a beautiful craft on a sheet of glass with spectacular sunsets has become a fight for survival. And unless you are fortunate indeed, there is rarely anyone around to help you.

The modern essays collected in this anthology were chosen because they were the finest writing I could find, and because they cover such a wide span of ocean experiences. Some of those who write here were heading out for a short pleasure cruise when things went horribly wrong. Others were engaged in dramatic round-the-world races that lasted months. The crafts in which these various mishaps occurred ran the gamut from the most sophisticated vessel imaginable to a simple balsa wood raft with a sail on top.

Some of the sailors were forced to abandon their sinking craft in order to take refuge in small inflatable life rafts. They often faced that most helpless of situations: they spotted large ships—which could have rescued them but didn't see them—slide slowly out of view and disappear forever. Those who stayed with their boats held on for dear life as they were buffeted by high winds and crashing walls of water. Many survived, but others died tragically. And often they perished in horrifying numbers when a storm hit as their flotilla raced toward the finishing line.

The authors assembled in these pages are gifted individuals, being as talented with pens as they are with mainsails. And they all possess two other characteristics in common—a great love of and deep respect for the power of the sea. It is important to note that those who survive the ordeal almost always return, proving true Richard Henry Dana's words almost three hundred years ago that "there is a witchery in the sea, its songs and stories, and in the mere sight of a ship."

*Cecil Kuhne  
Dallas, Texas*



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# FOREWORD

*William F. Buckley Jr.*

*The best explanation I ever heard* for man's compulsive race to get to the moon was offered by a shrewd and attractive lady, wife of a law school don at the University of Indiana. "Don't you understand?" she asked after the company had worn each other down with elaborate scientific explanations. They wheeled toward her. "Boys will be boys."

The rhetoric, of course, can be escalated without difficulty, making the statement read: "Men will be men." That takes the hint of mischief out of it all, but it is much better with the mischief left in. Because there is a bit of mischief in adventure, and men who go off grandiloquently to meet their destiny often feel a trace of the excitement a boy feels when he goes out for the first time on an overnight hike. There is, of course, no fun at all in the pursuit of adventure if, as so often is the case, you die en route. No fun at all, when you feel fear and loneliness and helplessness. It is man's capacity to expose himself to the certainty that he will be lonely and afraid that makes possible great adventures of the human spirit.

And it takes a boyish zest for adventure for staid and middle-aged men to engage in such a dazzling adventure as Robert Manry's aboard *Tinkerbelle*, the 13 ½-foot converted dinghy in which he crossed the Atlantic Ocean, covering 3,200 miles in eighty days. The chances of surviving such a voyage were less than the chance our astronauts will survive their orbits around the planet, covering, in one-tenth the time, a distance 1,000 times as long. The astronauts convince us that heavenly rendezvous are possible between assorted flying objects and that man's body can endure eight days of weightlessness and immobility. Mr. Manry proved that a few planks of wood, none of them more than 13 ½ feet long and strips of cloth, put together by a single carpenter of moderate skill, can, using only nature's power, transport a man across the most treacherous ocean in the world.

One feels nothing but admiration for the astronauts. Theirs is, above all, a mission to press their fragile bodies against the unknown and in an experiment so mechanized that they are left with little to do except to obey the signals they hear. It must put a special tax on the spirit to be left with so little latitude. Mr. Manry, by contrast, had great latitude. He could point the nose of his boat in any direction he chose, except in the direction the wind was coming from, and he could leave both sails up or take down one of them, or take down both of them, or trim one or both, or drag his sea anchor. An almost infinite number of possibilities. And if he made a serious mistake, he would drown. And he might have drowned anyway, because a truly determined sea will not respect the right of so frail a challenger to claim safe passage across the haunted area.

Mr. Manry, who was almost fifty and made his living as a copy reader in Cleveland, knew enough

of the literature of the sea to know that for every sailor the sea is the enemy, that it must be treated as the enemy, and that the enemy is formidable enough to have wrecked whole navies in her time. And the astronauts know that nothing in the world is more mysterious than science, that the most fastidious preparations, projections, and calculations are sometimes confounded by utterly inexplicable scientific back talk or because someone didn't turn the screwdriver hard enough.

Even so, boys will be boys, and some boys have the makings of heroes: Astronaut Gordon Cooper has reported that "once, in the middle of the night, at an altitude of over 150 miles, over the middle of the Indian Ocean," he prayed. Mr. Manry may have had room in his cluttered dinghy for the Thirtieth Psalm: By the word of the Lord, the heavens were established, and all the powers of them by the spirit of His mouth. Gathering together the waters of the sea, as in a vessel, laying up the depths as storehouses.



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Sailing single-handedly in a regatta from Spain to Antigua, Steve Callahan was just west of the Canary Islands when he realized that he had a serious problem—his boat was sinking. Fortunately, he did have on board a five-foot life raft and a survival manual. The fight for his life had begun.

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## ADRIFT

### *Seventy-six Days Lost at Sea*

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STEVEN CALLAHAN

### *Log of Napoleon Solo*

**I**t is late at night. The fog has been dense for days. *Napoleon Solo* continues 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 among 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

dream, but also how to fulfill that dream. Manry had done it in a tiny boat called *Tinkerbelle*. I did in *Solo*.

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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's 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 uncanvassed ship in a swell. Beneath a gray tangle 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, 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 ha

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'd sure go to hell for a pastime."

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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, the 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 skippers' meeting. Whether the race will start on time or not has been a matter of speculation for days. The last couple of days' gales that swept through had edged up to hurricane force. "Expect heavy winds at the start," the 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 louder. 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. Some are waving, weeping or laughing. They will soon return to the comfort of their warm little houses.

I yell "Cheerio!" as *Solo* is towed out between the massive steel gates, which are opened by the harbor master 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 are maneuvering about the starting line, making practice runs at it, adjusting our sails, shaking our arms. I 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 circle 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. *Solo* 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'. *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 radioed 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 stiff. *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 wind to 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 Coruña, 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 on 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 a 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 Coruña 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 long 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 Pouzet. I needed someone to steer. Catherine's only previous ocean experience was on a boat that was dismasted 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 Coruña 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 *riás* modern machinery consists of donkeys pulling oxcarts 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 pinecones 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 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, it’s my whole house.”

The old man gestures toward his lower abdomen with cupped hands as if holding gigantic organs. 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, a time-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

*I am experiencing a rare time* for a sailor, a week of peace. With uncharacteristic gentleness, the sea and wind wrap my boat in a motherly caress that sends her skipping toward Antigua. I am comforted by the sea yet am continually awed by her. Like an old friend she is always familiar, yet she is always changing and full of surprises. I recline on the afterdeck and feel the regular files of waves approach, lift my ship three or four feet as they roll under her, then ease her down gently as they rush on, slipping into the horizon ahead. The breeze rustles the pages of my novel while the sun browns my skin and bleaches my hair.

An age ago oceanic greyhounds—great clipper ships, whalers, and fast cutters full of slaves—plied this route from the Canaries to the Caribbean. Trade winds filled the cloudlike sails that hung from their towering spars: stuns’ls, tops’ls, royals, all set. The rattling of *Solo*’s spars and the hum of her auto pilot mix with the running wind and blow into my ears a fantasy of tapping feet in a hornpipe, danced to the song of a concertina.

*Solo* smoothly cuts westward with twin jibs spread from her bow. Her bubbling trail curls across the waves astern. When not reading, I scratch out stories and letters, scribble pictures of sea serpents with bow ties, and waste inordinate amounts of film, shooting the sea, boat maneuvers, sunsets. I stuff myself with fried potatoes, onions, eggs, cheese, and grains—bulgur, rolled oats, millet. I exercise—pushups, pullups, and yoga—thrusting, twisting, and stretching in rhythm with the rolling boat. The spidery, animated maze of mast, boom, struts, and poles dips, rises, and spreads the sails to catch the wind. In short, I and my ship are in fine shape, and I am having a wonderful and leisurely sail. If good fortune continues, I will reach my destination before February 25.

On February 4 the wind rises and begins to whistle through the rigging. A gale begins to sweep in. ~~blanket of clouds races overhead. Seas build and begin to crash down all around us. I want to return~~ peaceful sailing. I speak to the sky. "Come on, hit me if you must, and then go quickly."

My little boat continues to slice across undulating foothills that are rapidly growing into small mountains. The water that was sparkling clear now reflects the dark, threatening sky. Waves froth and spit at us as we carve around them toward the sinking sun. *Solo* is kept more or less on course by the electric automatic pilot. Its motor hums a fatiguing song as it constantly works overtime. Despite the occasional waterfalls that cascade across the deck, I am not too uncomfortable. I joke in front of my movie camera, gnaw on a greasy sausage, and belch in a Long John Silver croak: "Aargh, matey, as you can see, we's havin' just fine weather. Course we could do with a bit o' wind." I crawl up on the foredeck and stuff one of the jibs into its sack. Cold water runs down my spine and up my arms.

The sky grows darker as dusk approaches. When *Solo* slides into the wave troughs, the sun dips below the horizon. Dip, dip, and it finally drowns in the west. *Solo* slashes on into the night. The waves and wind seem to grow fiercer at night. I cannot see the waves far off—and then suddenly they are here, breaking and rushing down on us. Then they scurry away again into the shadow of the world almost before I am aware that they have struck.

For over ten thousand miles and one and a half Atlantic crossings, my ship and I have kept each other company. She has seen worse, much worse. If things significantly deteriorate, I can adopt storm tactics: reduce sail, and either heave to or run downwind. The pilot chart promises infrequent gales of minor intensity for this part of the south Atlantic and time of year. The wind can pipe up to force seven or so, enough to muss one's hair and guarantee a bathing on deck, but not enough to loosen one's dentures. In about two weeks I will be lying in the baking sun of the Caribbean with a cold rum punch in hand. *Solo* will be placidly anchored with sails furled beneath some palm-studded beach.

Fortunately I rarely have to be on deck, only to reef the sails or to change jibs. I have provided the boat with an inside steering and central control station. I sit beneath a Plexiglas hatch that looks like a boxy jet canopy. From here I can steer with an inside tiller, adjust the sails by reaching out through the open washboard to the cleats and winches beside the hatch, and keep watch, all at the same time. In addition, I can look at the chart on the table below me, chat on the radio beside me, or cook up a meal on the galley stove, all without leaving my seat. Despite the acrobatics of the sea, the cabin remains relatively comfortable. Save for an occasional drip of water feeling its way through the crevices of the hatch, my surroundings are dry. The air hangs heavy with the dampness of the coming storm, but the varnished wood of the cabin glows warmly in the soft light. The shapes contained in the wood gradually become animals, people, companions. They calm me. The small amount of coffee that I manage to transfer from my lurching cup to my mouth warms me and props my eyes open. My stomach, made of some noncorroding, inexplodable, and otherwise nonimpressionable alloy, does not yearn for a dry biscuit diet; instead, I eat heartily and plan for my birthday dinner two days from now. I can't bake a cake, having no oven, but I will have a go at chocolate crêpes. I'll stir a tin of rabbit I've saved into my curry, ignoring the French superstition that even the slightest mention of *lapin* assures a crew the most wretched luck.

Though I feel secure in my floating nest, the storm reawakens my caution, which has slumbered for a week. Each ten-foot wave that sweeps by contains more tons of water than I care to imagine. The



wind whistles across the deck and through the rigging wires. Occasionally *Solo's* rear is kicked, and she brings her head to wind as if to see the striking bully. The jib luffs with a rustling rattle, then pulls taut as *Solo* turns off to continue on her way. Visions of a rogue wave snap into my mind. Caused by the coincidence of peaks traveling in different directions or at different speeds, a rogue can grow four times the average wave height and could throw *Solo* about like a toy. Converging wave troughs can also form a canyon into which we could plunge. Often such anomalies flow from different directions, forming vertical cliffs from which seas tumble in liquid avalanches.

Six months ago *Solo* fell with a thunderous bang in just such a cascade off the Azores. The sky disappeared and nothing but green was visible across the deck hatch. The boat immediately righted and we sailed on, but it was a hard knock. My books and sextant leaped over the tall fiddle rail, smashing on the chart table and splintering its moldings. If they had not hit the table, they would have landed in my face. I was lucky that time; I must be more cautious.

Disaster at sea can happen in a moment, without warning, or it can come after long days of anticipation and fear. It does not always come when the sea is fiercest but may spring when waters lie as flat and imperturbable as a sheet of iron. Sailors may be struck down at any time, in calm or storm, but the sea does not do it for hate or spite. She has no wrath to vent. Nor does she have a heart of kindness to extend. She is merely there, immense, powerful, and indifferent. I do not resent her indifference, or my comparative insignificance. Indeed, it is one of the main reasons I like to sail: the sea makes the insignificance of my own small self and of all humanity so poignant.

I watch *Solo's* boiling, phosphorescent wake as it dissipates among the somersaulting waves. "Things could be worse," I muse. Then voices from the past speak to me. "Each time you have chanted that phrase, things have inevitably gotten worse." I think of the pilot chart figures, which are averages taken from ships' data. There might be some truth to the idea that charted estimates of gale strengths tend to be low. After all, if a captain hears of bad weather, he doesn't usually head his rust bucket for the center of it in order to get some fresh air. No doubt I will be a bit uncomfortable for a few days.

I check my gear over and make sure all is as secure and shipshape as a floating fool can make it. I inspect the hull, deck, bulkheads, cabinetry, and all of the joints that hold my wooden jewelry boxes secure. The kettle is filled for coffee or steaming lemonade. A lump of chocolate is at hand beside the radio. All essential preparations have been made.

It is about 22:30 Greenwich Mean Time. The moon hangs full, white, and motionless, undisturbed by the tempest and the tumultuous sea. If conditions continue to worsen, I will have to head more southerly. For the time being, I can do nothing more, so I lie down to rest. At 23:00 I get up and undress. I lie down again clothed only in a T-shirt. A watch circles my wrist, and around my neck is a slab of whale tooth on a string. It is the most I will wear the next two and a half months.

My boat slues around the rushing peaks, her keel clinging to the slopes like a mountain goat, her port side pressed down against the black, rolling ocean. I lie on my bunk, slung upon the lee canvas hanging as if in a hammock.

BANG! A deafening explosion blankets the subtler sounds of torn wood fiber and rush of sea. I jump up. Water thunders over me as if I've suddenly been thrown into the path of a rampaging river.

Forward, aft—where does it come from? Is half of the side gone? No time. I fumble with the knife sheathed by the chart table. Already the water is waist deep. The nose of the boat is dipping down. *Solo* comes to a halt as she begins a sickening dive. She's going down, down! My mind barks orders. Free the emergency package. My soul screams. You've lost her! I hold my breath, submerge, slash at the tie-downs that secure my emergency duffel. My heart is a pounding pile driver. The heavy work wrings the air from my lungs and my mind battles with my limbs for the opportunity to breathe. Terminal darkness and chaos surround me. Get out, get out, she's going down! In one rhythmic movement I rocket upward, thrust the hatch forward, and catapult my shaking body onto the deck, leaving my package of hope behind.

Less than thirty seconds have elapsed since impact. The bow points toward its grave at a hesitating low angle and the sea washes about my ankles. I cut the tie-downs that secure the raft canister. Thoughts flash about me like echoes in a cave. Perhaps I have waited too long. Perhaps it is time to die. Going down. . .die. . .lost without trace. I recall the life raft instructions: throw the bulky hundred pounds overboard before inflation. Who can maneuver such weight in the middle of a bucking circular ride? No time, quickly—she's going down! I yank. The first pull, then the second—nothing, nothing. This is it, the end of my life. Soon, it will come soon. I scream at the stubborn canister. “Come on, you bastard!” The third pull comes up hard, and she blows with a bursting static *shush*. A wave sweeps over the entire deck, and I simply float the raft off. It thrashes about on the end of its painter. *Solo* has been transformed from a proper little ship to a submerged wreck in about one minute. I dive into the raft with the knife clenched in my teeth, buccaneer style, noticing that the movie camera mounted on the aft pulpit has been turned on. Its red eye winks at me. Who is directing this film? He isn't much of a lighting but his flair for the dramatic is impressive.

Unmoving and unconcerned, the moon looks down upon us. Its lunar face is eclipsed by wisps of clouds that waft across it, dimming the shadow of *Solo's* death. My instincts and training have carried me through the motions of survival, but now, as I have a moment to reflect, the full impact of the crash throbs in my head. Never have all of my senses seemed so sharp. My emotions are an incomprehensible mix. There is a wailing anguish that mourns the loss of my boat. There is a deep disappointment in myself for my failures. Overshadowing it all is the stark realization that what I think and feel will not matter much longer. My body shakes with cold. I am too far from civilization to have any hope of rescue.

In the space of a moment, myriad conversations and debates flash through my mind, as if a group of men are chattering within my skull. Some of them joke, finding comic relief in the camera's busily taking pictures that no one will ever see. Others stoke a furnace of fear. Fear becomes sustenance. It feeds energy feeds action. I must be careful. I fight blind panic: I do not want the power from my pumping adrenaline to lead to confused and counterproductive activity. I fight the urge to fall into catatonic hysteria: I do not want to sit frozen in fear until the end comes. Focus, I tell myself. Focus and get moving.

I see my vessel, my companion, my child, swallowed up like a crumb too small for the deep Atlantic to taste. Waves bury her and pass. *Solo's* white decks emerge. She's not going down, not yet. Wait until she goes before cutting the painter. Even though I have added canned water and other gear to the raft's supplies, I will not live long without additional equipment. Wait and salvage everything you can. My body shakes even more with fright and cold, and my eyes sting from the salt. I must get

some clothes, some cover, anything. I begin hacking off a piece of the mains'l. Don't cut the raft, be careful, careful. Once cut, the sailcloth rips off easily. The raft flips about as I pull the horseshoe lifeline, preserver and man-overboard pole off of *Solo's* stern. Foam and sea continue to sweep across her, but she rises each time. My mind coaxes her. Please don't go, not yet, please stay up. The watertight compartments that I designed and installed have combined with pockets of air trapped inside of her. She fights back. Her jib snaps with loud report. Her hatch and rudder bang as the ocean beats her. Perhaps she will not sink after all. Her head is under but her rear hesitates like a child at the shore, unable to make the final plunge.

I ache with cold; the stench of rubber, plastic, and talc fill my nostrils. *Solo* may sink any moment now, but I must get back inside. There isn't much time. I pull up to the side of the boat, climb aboard, and stand for a second, feeling the strange sensation of being in the sea and on deck at the same time. Waves rear up and bury the boat, but time after time *Solo* struggles to the surface. How much more battering will she take before water feels its way into the few remaining air spaces? How many moments are left before she will disappear for the last time?

Between towering crests that wash over me, I lower myself into the hatch. The water below is peaceful compared to the surrounding tempest. I duck into the watery tomb, and the hatch slams shut behind me with a crack. I feel for the emergency bag and cut away the lines that secure it. Waves wander by, engulf us, and move on. I gasp for air. The bag is freed but seems to weigh as much as the collected sins of the world. While struggling in the companionway, pushing and tugging to get the gear on deck, I fight the hatch, which beats against my back. Heaving the bag into the raft requires all the strength I have.

As it tumbles into the raft, I turn to reenter the hatch. My hand turns aft and finds a piece of floating cushion wedged against the overhead. Jerking at it, I arise for a gulp of air. There is none. In that moment I feel as though the last breath in the galaxy has been breathed by someone else. The edge of the sea suddenly rips past. I see the surface shimmering like a thousand candles. Air splutters in, and I gasp as the clatter of *Solo* becomes muffled by the coming of the next wave.

I tie the cushion to the end of a halyard and let it float about while I submerge to retrieve my belongings. Bundling up my wet sleeping bag is like capturing an armful of snakes. I slowly manage to shove it out, pull, and roll the bag into the raft. With the final piece of cushion, I fall in behind. I have successfully abandoned ship.

My God, *Solo* is still floating! I see her slowly rolling farther onto her side as I gather up items that float out of the cabin one by one: a cabbage, an empty Chock Full o' Nuts coffee can, and a box containing a few eggs. The eggs will probably not last long, but I take them anyway.

I am too exhausted to do any more. I will not part from *Solo*, but should she want to leave I must be able to let go. Seventy feet of  $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch line, tied to the end of the mainsheet, allows me to drift weathervane downwind. *Solo* disappears when we dip into the waves' troughs. Great foaming crests of water grin at their way toward us. There is a churning up to windward like the surf on the shore. I hear it coming, I hear the clap and bang and snap that are *Solo's* words to me, "I'm here." The raft rises to meet the head of the wave that rushes toward me. The froth and curl crash by just to port.

The entrance fly on the tent-type cover snaps with a ripping sound each time the Velcro seal is blown by the wind. I must turn the raft or a breaker may drive through the opening. While on a wave peak, I look aft at *Solo's* deck mounting on the next swell. The sea rises smoothly from the dark, giant sitting up after a sleep. There is a tight round opening in the opposite side of the tent. I stick myself through this observation port up to my waist. I must not let go of the rope to *Solo*, but I need to move it. I loop a rope through the mainsheet which trails from *Solo's* deck and lead it back to the raft. One end of this I secure to the handline around the raft's perimeter. The other I wind around the handline and bring the tail through the observation port. If *Solo* sinks I can let go of this tail and we will slip apart. Wait—can't get back in. . .I'm stuck. I try to free myself from the canopy clutching my chest. The sea spits at me. Crests roar in the darkness. I twist and yank and fall back inside. The raft swings and presents the wall of the tent to the waves. Ha! A good joke, the wall of a tent against the sea, the sea that beats granite to sand.

With a slipknot I tie *Solo's* line to the handhold webbing that encircles the inside of the raft. While frantically tying all of my equipment to the webbing, I hear rumbling well to windward. It must be a big wave to be heard so far off. I listen to its approach. A rush of water, then silence. I can feel the rising over me. There is a wrenching rubbery shriek from the raft as the wave bursts upon us and my space collapses in half. The windward side punches in and sends me flying across the raft. The tent collapses and water shoots in everywhere. The impact is strengthened by the jerking painter, tied to my ship full of water, upwind from where the sea sprang. I'm going to die. Tonight. Here some 45 miles away from the nearest land. The sea will crush me, capsize me, and rob my body of heat and breath. I will be lost, and no one will even know until I'm weeks overdue.

I crawl back to windward, keeping one hand on the cord to *Solo*, the other hand clutching the handline. I huddle in my sodden sleeping bag. Gallons of water slosh about in the bottom of the raft. I sit on the cushion, which insulates me from the icy floor. I'm shivering but begin to warm up. It is time to wait, to listen, to think, to plan, and to fear.

As my raft and I rise to the crest of a wave, I can see *Solo* wallowing in the following trough. Then she rises against the face of the next wave as I plummet into the trough that had cradled her a moment before. She has rolled well over now, with her nose and starboard side under and her stern quarter fairly high. If only you will stay afloat until morning. I must see you again, must see the damage that I feel I have caused you. Why didn't I wait in the Canaries? Why didn't I soften up and relax? Why did I drive you to this so that I could complete my stupid goal of a double crossing? I'm sorry, my poor *Solo*.

I have swallowed a lot of salt and my throat is parched. Perhaps in the morning I can retrieve more gear, jugs of water, and some food. I plan every move and every priority. The loss of body heat is the most immediate danger, but the sleeping bag may give me enough protection. Water is the first priority, then food. After that, whatever else I can grab. Ten gallons of water rest in the galley locker just under the companionway—forty to eighty days' worth of survival rations waiting for me just a hundred feet away. The raised stern quarter will make it easier to get aft. There are two large duffels in the aft cabin, hung on the topsides; one is full of food—about a month's worth—and the other is full of clothes. If I can dive down and swim forward, I may be able to pull my survival suit out of the forepeak. I dream of how its thick neoprene will warm me up.

Waves continue to pound the raft, beating the side in, pouring in water. The tubes are as tight as teak logs, yet they are bent like spaghetti. Bailing with the coffee can again and again, I wonder how much one of these rafts can take and watch for signs of splitting.

A small overhead lamp lights my tiny new world. The memory of the crash, the rank odor of my surroundings, the pounding of the sea, the moaning wind, and my plan to reboard *Solo* in the morning roll over and over in my brain. Surely it will end soon.

I am lost about halfway between western Oshkosh and Nowhere City. I do not think the Atlantic has emptier waters. I am about 450 miles north of the Cape Verde Islands, but they stand across the wind. I can drift only in the direction she blows. Downwind, 450 miles separate me from the nearest shipping lanes. Caribbean islands are the closest possible landfall, eighteen hundred nautical miles away. Do not think of it. Plan for daylight, instead. I have hope if the raft lasts. Will it last? The sea continues to attack. It does not always give warning. Often the curl develops just before it strikes. The roar accompanies the crash, beating the raft, ripping at it.

I hear a growl a long way off, toward the heart of the storm. It builds like a crescendo, growing louder and louder until it consumes all of the air around me. The fist of Neptune strikes, and with it a blast the raft is shot to a staggering halt. It squawks and screams, and then there is peace, as though we have passed into the realm of the afterlife where we cannot be further tortured.

Quickly I yank open the observation port and stick my head out. *Solo's* jib is still snapping and her rudder clapping, but I am drifting away. Her electrics have fused together and the strobe light on the top of her mast blinks good-bye to me. I watch for a long time as the flashes of light become visible less often, knowing it is the last I will see of her, feeling as if I have lost a friend and a part of myself. An occasional flash appears, and then nothing. She is lost in the raging sea.

I pull up the line that had tied me to my friend, my hope for food and water and clothing. The rope is in one piece. Perhaps the loop I had tied in the mainsheet broke during the last shock. Or the knot perhaps it was the knot. The vibration and surging might have shaken it loose. Or I may have made a mistake in tying it. I have tied thousands of bowlines; it is a process as familiar as turning a key. Still, . . . No matter now. No regrets. I simply wonder if this has saved me. Did my tiny rubber home escape just before it was torn to pieces? Will being set adrift kill me in the end?

Somewhat relieved from the constant assault on the raft, I chide myself in a Humphrey Bogart fashion. Well, you're on your own now, kid. Mingled with the relief is fright, pain, remorse, apprehension, hope, and hopelessness. My feelings are bundled up in a massive ball of inseparable confusion, devouring me as a black hole gobbles up light. I still ache with cold, and now my body is shot through with pain from wounds that I've not noticed before. I feel so vulnerable. There are no backup systems remaining, no place to bail out to, no more second chances. Mentally and physically, I feel as if all of the protection has been peeled away from my nerves and they lie completely exposed.

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**Postscript: Steve Callahan eventually spent seventy-six days at sea. Emaciated from lack of food and scorched by the sun and salt water, he fought off sharks with a makeshift spear and watched nine ships pass by without noticing. His raft developed a hole after forty-three days, but amazingly, he was able to control the leak until his rescue twenty-three days later.**

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Gordon Chaplin and Susan Atkinson first met when she married his college roommate. Twelve years later, when both of their marriages ended, the two became romantically involved and decided to sail through the Marshall Islands in the Pacific. A fearsome typhoon hit them one night, and some critical mistakes were made. His story of their ordeal is a frightening one indeed.

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## DARK WIND

### *A Survivor's Tale of Love and Loss*

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GORDON CHAPLIN

### Paradise

On November 9, just before sunset, we dropped anchor in the lee of one of the little islets strung like pearls along the encircling barrier reef of Wotho atoll, in the northwestern Marshalls. I could see the anchor lying on white sand fifteen feet below the boat as if I were looking down through air. Terns and frigate birds were floating like fish in a golden liquid element around the palms overhanging the little beach, while surf from the open ocean where we'd been an hour earlier broke blue and white on the reef outside.

Susan shut down the engine, walked up the deck, and joined me on the bow. The boat was eerily steady and quiet. From what seemed a vast distance came the trafficky sough of the surf and the high wild cries of the terns.

As the light deepened and the colors intensified, Susan whispered, "This is paradise. And you made it possible."

Any decent spiritual travelogue will tell you that you don't find paradise on purpose. If you're living right, it just happens. One day you look around, and you're there.

We'd made our first landfall in the Marshalls at Bikar, as planned, but the current in the narrow pass had been too strong to risk an entry. We'd heaved to for the night, waiting for slack water, and trailing jib sheet had fouled the prop. It froze with a heart-stopping crash, yanking the shaft back several inches, loosening the stuffing box, and even bending the engine mounts.

We were taking water through the box, though the bilge pump could handle it, and after I cut the rope away (not easy in ten-foot seas), the prop was still functioning. We needed to get somewhere to make repairs, and since the current was still too strong through the Bikar pass, Wotho—about 27 miles south-west—was one of the closest along our route. From the chart and the pilot, entry looked easy enough, and there were some nice protected anchorages. In 1962, according to the pilot, the population of Wotho was 56. Our tourist guide reported that in the old days Marshallese royalty had favored it as a vacation spot.

Wotho Lagoon is a rough oval, about eight miles across at its longest point. We entered through the southern pass and anchored at the far end from Wotho Island, where the village is, because we wanted to indulge a feeling that this atoll, like Bikar, was uninhabited. The village was well out of sight. We were alone.

I hung the swimming ladder, stripped off my clothes, and dove over the side. The water was cooler than the humid air, with a silkiness I hadn't felt before anywhere. About ten feet down I opened my eyes. The evening sun made the water peach-colored, like the sky.

Still underwater, I swam to the anchor chain and hung there, holding on. I felt no need to come up as if I were absorbing oxygen directly from the water around me like a frog can. The silk played around every part of my body.

I let go finally and rose to the surface without swimming. Susan was at the rail, smiling down at me.

“You look like a fish. In your element.”

“Jump in. There's something amazing about this water.”

“What about sharks? Don't they come in at sunset?”

“Do you see them eating me? This is paradise, don't forget. You live forever.”

“Do you just get older and older? That sounds awful.”

“Of course not. You stay any age you want.”

“Okay. I'll settle for twenty-eight.”

“You've got to get in the water, though. It only works if you're in the water.”

Almost shyly she stepped out of her shorts. Still in her T-shirt, she reached through the wheelhouse window for a barrette. When I begged her not to pin up her hair, she put the clip back and pulled the jersey over her head. Her breasts always surprised me. They looked like Marilyn Monroe's—cheerleader, Hollywood, 1950s breasts.

It was now the 1990s, and we were both middle-aged. But boat life is better than Elizabeth Arden. Joshua Slocum was fifty-four when he finished his epic single-handed round-the-world voyage in 1898 and wrote:



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