

Chapter 2

And so it begins

Putting a project together was absorbing for Dean and Adam who planned meticulously. It was a matter of pride that their scraps of paper about what was needed and how everything would fit together, would eventually become the blueprint for the project. Major items formed the core of their original focus and then endless sub-lists of smaller components were added, those took the longest to deliver, but were essential for safety and plain sailing. Being perfectionists they always dotted the 'i's' and crossed the 't's' then, just to be sure, they crossed the 'i's' and dotted the 't's'.

Adam always joked that in the middle of the Atlantic only whales could hear the crew scream, and it was that detailed planning which had saved their lives in the past.

Each man knew what he needed to do, for Richard it was persuading Jayne and deputising people at work, drawing up lists and then sourcing the missing navigational charts and the electronic chips for the navigational array. He bought the required yachting almanacs with coastal and harbour information and began tidying up all the boat's hardware. Lastly, he cast an eye on what personal belongings he would need.

Adam's task was possibly the simplest and yet the most vital. All the major pieces were in place, but all the equipment had to be brought to a state of readiness which, as experience had shown, they would need. Miss Take would no longer be a lady of leisure, but one which meant serious business and had plenty of fight in her.

Humdrum personal tasks, ensuring his credit card payments would continue, and battles with officialdom bored Dean. Civil servants were

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usually anything but. They could not see any logic in his requests to cancel his road tax and then immediately to buy it back again, while he also had to organise the MOT three months early and, finally, insure the vehicle. By the end of the week, he was beginning to wonder whether the venture was worth all the head-banging, plus Adam had given him his clothing list and Richard had volunteered him to accompany Jayne to buy food and supplies.

Ken's progress was being hampered by his daughters who lectured him on the dangers, the madness at his age and how mother would disapprove. He had only asked them to collect the post and to mow the lawn occasionally. The higher their decibels of disapproval the more committed he became and the thought of being alone on an empty ocean grew more appealing each day.

Although separated, the four worked as a team and lists of what needed to be done seemed to grow, not shorten. Back at the marina, Adam was on the pontoon examining every fitting he could see on Miss Take and if it moved he took it apart, polished or oiled it and put it back together again. He had to carry out exacting work which amateur sailors would not even dream of doing. The prospect of honing Miss Take into a lady of the High Seas banished the emptiness within him more than any women or drink could. The detailing of a potential ocean-going boat was what actually aroused his passion and his skill in that field lifted him above also-rans to give meaning to his life.

If he, Dean and the unknown quantities of Richard and Ken were going to cross an ocean, then fighting a gale would be almost obligatory and when things were needed they would be wanted in a hurry. Adam had experienced what people call the 'teeth of a gale', but both he and Dean had known the real 'bite'; among men who had survived that 'bite' there was a unique understanding and unspoken respect for each other and what they had achieved.

When Adam entered the saloon Richard stopped tidying up and reached for the wine, but was taken back when it was declined and the offer of food accepted. Amazed and impressed at Miss Take's emerging

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transformation he quickly gave Adam the go-ahead to purchase whatever was needed and then wrote down a 'to do' list for himself before disappearing to spend time with his family.

Four days later Richard returned in a 4x4 stuffed with charts, books, electronic equipment, clothing and a box. His son Andy was squashed in the back while Jayne sat in the front. Adam introduced himself to the short, plump brunette and then helped her on board, Richard stood on the pontoon examining the boat which had undergone a subtle, but noticeable change.

There were simple toggles on the catches and closures on the safety wires; one Bowie knife was strapped to the helm post and another to the mast. Their leather sheaths were greased to stop the sharpened blades from corroding and were ready, at a second's notice, to be used to cut lines or rig and not, as on many boats, left uselessly in the bottom of a locker. In the engine room the hull fittings were greased and fully functional; shelves had been cleared for the stowage of life-jackets near to where they would be used; the life raft had been taken apart, correctly re-stowed and fastened to the deck so that it could be deployed in seconds. The list went on, Adam had put many hours into the finer details and many hundreds of seemingly insignificant jobs had all been done.

"The boat looks great!" Richard said in awe.

"It should do! I've only got off to go to the chandlery and to have a shower. I haven't even been to the pub," Adam replied in disbelief. "It's the longest I've been without a drink for years!"

"Well, I'm going to buy you dinner tonight as our boat has never looked better," Jayne laughed, thinking he was joking.

Having achieved what he wanted Adam slipped back into his more usual womanising role. Looking Richard's wife straight in the eyes he smiled. "I'm really looking forward to having dinner with you."

"Hey!" A plaintive voice pleaded from behind the boot of the car. Andy had become fed-up with struggling to bring in the boxes on his own. "Are you lot going to give me a hand, or what?"

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Relaxing in the club later Adam sat opposite a disconcerted Jayne and began to replenish his rosé levels. He gazed directly into her eyes at every opportunity and occasionally reached out to hold her hands. Plain, but warm, friendly and outgoing, Jayne was not used to being flattered, Richard's friends usually ignored their womenfolk and talked about IT security, virus and software. She felt that she was being cased by a cat-burglar who was determined to find her weak points. The more she smiled, the more questions Richard threw at Adam and the more Andy glared at the interloper who was trying to dominate his mother's goodwill. Boats still came first so Adam supplied the answers in considerable detail and made suggestions regarding the ship's food and drink. The evening ended in polite silence as Adam walked back to the boat alone while Richard hurried Jayne to the car.

Back in Surrey, Dean and Sal were enjoying a romantic meal alone with less talking and much hand touching. She had, after seeing him so excited, become infected by his enthusiasm. His departure would be a double-edged sword; she would miss him passionately, but a part of her knew nothing about his seagoing life and the journey would, she hoped, strengthen their relationship and help him to accept that, at his age, he ought to be shore-based.

In his home Ken sat down to a takeaway. He did not want to listen to any more recriminations and had refused the offer of dinner from both his daughters. Except for a few clothes he was ready, indeed the house could be safely left as his sons-in-law would ensure the inheritance was secure. He had become more at ease with his lack of experience. The Azores seemed to be the place from where all real sea adventures started, although they might well be where his would end. The closest he had been to the islands was the holiday the girls had insisted on taking in Lanzarote in the Canaries when they were teenagers; he and Kate had hated the noise, the crowds and the whole package, but it kept the family peace.

Ken met up with Dean called a 'girlie day' shopping that Monday, and soon realised how inadequate his clothing would be. He had

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already bought thermal underwear, winter gilets with a quick-dry, breathable, micro-fleece lining, spray tops and trousers from an internet site with a next day delivery promise, now their shopping included such items as hoodies, sweatshirts and trainers.

“I would have to say this is more complicated than going to the Everest Base Camp. I’m sure I didn’t need so many clothes then,” grumbled Ken who detested bustling High Streets where people pushed and customer service was non-existent.

“You must have a change of clothes when you need them, being bloody sodden is fucking miserable if you can’t get dry!” Exasperated Dean, who also hated shopping, snapped. “I’ll ram your whining down your throat if you dare to complain about being cold and wet once we’re out at sea!”

They still had some purchases to complete, but Ken led Dean into a pub as liquid refreshment appeared to be a medicinal requirement. After a swig of beer Dean unwound.

“Sorry mate, but it's important to get things right. The art of good sailing is ensuring that everything on board will be seaworthy throughout the voyage and that includes the crew. We need clothes for two different climates – wet, damp UK and hot, sunny Caribbean! The right gear will not only make lonely night watches a bit more comfortable, but could save your life. Survival comes down to being totally prepared.”

The rest of the shopping trip was carried out without further incidence, but with no great enthusiasm. They rang the others after they had completed their tasks. On the boat Richard and Adam were also ready so, bringing their plans forward, they agreed to come over on the Wednesday.

Ken had refused all attempts to be dragged by Dean into the food expedition with Jayne on the following day.

“Not me, I buy my stuff online. By the way, I like bangers and mash and English food generally.”

Bad-tempered, dragging his feet and shoving the trolley Dean

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behaved almost like a truculent teenager, he knew what was wanted and that was not foods that needed long-winded cooking times or effort. Women, he felt, did not understand what long-distance sailors needed.

“Dean! You’re worse than Andy!” Jayne retorted. “Look at the sell-by dates! You’ll have food that’s passed its best when you’re in the middle of the ocean! You must get the food right if you want a good voyage with happy, focused sailors.”

“Where did you find that info? All sailors want are their bacon butties, tea and some biscuits.”

“From the internet, I’d rather do some research than trust you lot! Not one of you has really grown up have you? Tough love time. I am shopping, and you are pushing. If you throw a tantrum I’ll tell the skipper. He doesn’t like people being mean to his girl and he might not let you play with his Najad!” She usually had a soft spot for one of her husband’s rare friends, but she was concerned about Richard’s well being.

“Yes ma’am,” Dean said with a meekness that both of them knew belied the way he felt. He thought supermarkets were absolute hell! The aisles were full of people stopping, starting, picking things up and putting them back, they got in his way, they pushed, they shoved, they snarled at him, their kids and anyone within range. Give him the sanity of an open sea any day.

“I know what Richard, Ken and Adam want, now other than bacon butties what can I get for you?”

“Nothing with fish. I have done a deal, I don’t eat them and they leave me alone. It’s worked so far.”

Chips, bacon, sausages, fish fingers, southern fried chicken, bottles of tomato sauce found their way into the trolley. Dean looked a little happier. Then came the lasagnes, ready meals – OK, so there were some curries there – part-baked rolls, fresh rolls, bread, cheese, more cheese. Then a wide variety of protein bars, tins, powdered milk, toilet paper, kitchen rolls, cleaning stuff.

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"That wasn't too painful was it? Is there anything else we need?"

Dean shook his head, but then thought for a minute. "Baby wipes!" Jayne looked puzzled.

"Essential to prevent sores in delicate places and also very useful in wiping salt encrusted rain off your face." They brought a dozen packs. Dean noted some of the key aisles as he would slip back later for more bacon, sausages and alcohol.

When they arrived at Miss Take, Richard whisked Jayne off for a meal before Adam had a chance to speak with her and left Dean to unload. They discarded as much packaging as possible. Using waterproof marker pens they wrote the contents on each naked tin and defrosted frozen meal from which sleeves had been ripped off. Insects usually enjoyed hiding in and eating cardboard boxes so those too were thrown away after their contents had been poured into plastic containers. The tinned products were sorted by contents and lined up in the cupboards like soldiers in rows. As professional sailors the crew would not throw anything into the sea which they had not eaten or could not eat and any other rubbish would be stowed for disposing on land.

Four plastic boxes were packed with emergency rations, things which could be eaten when battling a heavy sea without any time to grab a meal and there was the night-watch treat box which offered comfort food for the lone helmsman! The galley's freezer was packed carefully and all the duty cook needed to do was to grab the top meal and shove it into the gimballed gas cooker which could stand a force ten gale if necessary.

Ten days after their handshake they met up again at the boat. Sal was at a meeting, but she and Dean had said their intense goodbyes the night before. He had rung Mary, his ex-wife, and Rachel, their daughter, but his brother David, having told him to grow up, put the phone down on him.

Ken was the last to arrive and looked like an ex-marine with his short back-and-sides haircut and clean shaven face.

"New life, new adventure, new me!" He explained.

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Once the boat was stowed and ready they went to the marina restaurant with Jayne and Andy for a last civilised dinner. It would be the last time they would leave Miss Take for many days. Growing excitement obliterated any decision about an early night, and the three men remained in the cockpit long after the family had gone to bed. Ken was keen to know how the watch system worked; Dean kept checking with Adam if they had this or that, until, one by one they turned in. The crew was woken by something that would happen every day, Richard listening to the 5.55am shipping forecast. Adam and Dean made their way out on deck into the cold, damp morning air.

“The boat looks great Adam; you’ve really done a great job.” That high praise from Dean was deeply appreciated.

“I know it’s early, but I am sure you want to cast off,” said Jayne as she presented them with mugs of tea. Adam gave her a kiss on the cheek and helped her off the boat; Andy shrugged off his helping hand. Richard turned round and glared as he walked them to the car; he kissed Jayne, hugged Andy, and asked the teenager to look after his mother. The two watched as Miss Take motored into the middle of the river, Richard waved goodbye and then turned to focus on the journey ahead.

More mugs of tea reappeared, once the lines and fenders were stowed, and to any bystander it would have looked as if the four middle-aged men were setting out for an early autumn sail – no fanfare, no band, no hoards of well wishers, just a bunch of guys motoring down the river. It was a quiet start to their much craved for voyage.

Dean was comfortable, he was home once more; Richard thought, with some satisfaction, that he was finally going to cross an ocean; Ken also felt a similar glint of anticipation, but it was tinged with sadness that the adventure would be without his beloved Kate and Adam was just happy, and to be on that voyage was a real bonus.

The sea exit was still some miles away, but the excitement was intoxicating. No-one wanted to miss a single second of the departure so breakfast duties fell on Dean.

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"How many days of bacon sarnies do you think we have?" He shouted in exasperation as four dishes quickly disappeared. He then found the yellow grab bags and placed passports, money, credit and debit cards, the ship's registration and insurance documents in them, as well as additional flares and thermal protective suits. The life raft was well equipped, but the additions in the bags could make the difference between life and death and, once rescued, should make their return home easier. The bags were placed in the deck locker that had been set aside for emergency items.

The mouth of the river had widened to become the seaport of Harwich container base, Miss Take had reached the invisible start line, the line from where Richard had begun his calculations, the course to the Azores, on to the Caribbean, the Caribbean chain of islands and then back to the south coast of England. Everything started from the line they were now crossing.

As the river opened up, Dean and Adam went forward to loosen the sail ties while Ken, on their command, pressed the button on the electric mainsail winch to raise its sail with the engine now turned off Richard steered Miss Take to the correct heading, all of which had occurred in less than one nautical mile from Harwich, now there was only one thousand, four hundred and forty-eight more.

"Isn't it a bit too early even for us," Richard grumbled, hardly wanting to drink the stuff when Adam appeared with two glasses of Rosado, he felt inadequate and was jealous of Adam's laid-back social skills and charismatic way with women.

"Not for you mate. For Neptune. for a safe passage. The god needs an offering as you're first timers at crossing oceans."

Each man took a small sip and then emptied the contents of their glasses overboard.

"Superstitious nonsense," said Richard, thinking it was going to be a tough few months travelling with an obvious airhead who had designs on his wife.

"You geeks can't talk! How come there is no version 13 for your

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computer programs," Adam smugly retorted as he disappeared with the empty glasses.

Unable to believe what he had heard, Richard handed Dean the wheel.

"Adam's not just a pretty face!" Dean grinned. "He knows things too!"

Thinking he had possibly underestimated the man Richard went to make the first entry in the ship's navigational logbook. It was a task he enjoyed and was meticulous; many sailors did not bother to fill in the log when out playing with their boats on day trips, but on ocean voyages it was a must and an update at the change of every watch could become very necessary.

"Here we go then," Dean said as he followed the course given at the changeover.

"So how far is it again?" Ken moved closer to the wheel and stared at the ship's log which reporting its speed through the water while the GPS gave it over the ground.

"Call it one and a half thousand miles."

"The log said 6.5 miles per hour," said Ken and did a quick calculation. "That's 156 miles per day; nine and half days; two watches per day that equals 19 by three-hour watches for each man, that's if we continue at this speed."

"Slow down! Nothing's definite at sea; you literally have to go with the flow, where wind shifts, poor helming and weather take you." Dean shook his head. "Distances are greater and travel's much slower. Navigationally speaking you come up with a course, but it's rarely followed, it's like when Neil Armstrong went to the moon."

The instruments on the navigational table showed Richard where they were and where they were going, but he had no way of knowing if Miss Take would follow his marks; all he really knew was that he was finally off on a voyage into the unknown and not just hugging coastlines. It had been many years since Adam had been on a long-distance voyage, but he knew the process and was now sprawled out

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on a settee. The day would be filled with people getting used to the boat, its motion, the routine and each other. Once that was established the crew would then work as one to ensure that Miss Take went where they wanted, hour after hour, day after day.

A half-forgotten memory of someone with whom Dean had once raced had advised him to 'do it while you can, do it with the wind', so he zipped up his jacket and gripped the wheel for the next three hours. The land moved back into the horizon as Miss Take made her way along the coastline avoiding ships, large containers and other vessels which crossed her track to go to the Thames some way off to starboard.

"It's such a different world, and one I can now truly say I am a part of," Richard muttered. Miss Take's arrival in his life had helped him to deal with the notion of teamwork and to improve his communication skills. "No people, no deals, no boardroom squabbles, just me, the boat and nature." He heard the laughter. "And the lads, of course!"

After three hours Dean had one eye on the ship's clock and was ready to give Ken the helm when, at the change, Richard appeared with the obligatory mugs of tea.

"What's going on in navigation then Richard?"

"Well, I made the tea!"

"Seriously, we will be off the northern coast of the Channel Islands in about 24 hours and then we will need to sail on out to sea for another 12 hours before pointing her to the Azores."

"The weather looks as though it's going to be blowing force three to four with a smooth to moderate sea state for another three days and the nights could be fairly chilly," Richard said, proving he was more techie than tea-boy. "No hassle! Plain sailing and a good watch are all that we need."

That was all the information available at present, but on the fourth day Miss Take would be approaching the Bay of Biscay; the area was no worse than anywhere else, but, in reality, it was a turbulent milestone which had to be passed. The trouble was that journey would take Miss Take and them at least two or three days.

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Noting that Ken was not only confident at the helm, but really enjoying it, Dean went below leaving Richard to gaze back at the disappearing coastline.

“There you go Adam, off on another adventure.”

“Let’s hope we have as much fun as we did last time.”

Dean removed his jacket which also encompassed his life-jacket, and put his feet up on the settee.

“What are we going to do for ten days then?”

“Personally I’m going to top up my Rosado levels and relax. Then, I might help Ken to chill and Rich to get in touch with his feminine side!”

“Lay off them! They’re good guys and don’t need any assistance from you. Focus on your own R&R!”

Dean knew that in a tight jam his friend would be the first on deck and, occasionally, he could be very irritating, but the last thing anyone needed was a mutiny. The two men sat back as though it was only yesterday and not eight years since they had sailed together.

At the allotted time Richard slipped under the spray hood and took over from Ken who made his way below still brimming with enthusiasm.

“Nice one Ken, I’ll put the kettle on and find us a bit of lunch,” Adam said getting up.

“Only eighteen more watches to go!” Ken calculated and flopped down on the vacant seat.

Unlike his crew who had enjoyed steering the boat manually, Richard settled at the helm and just pushed the button on the auto-helm. He still could not believe that he was going to cross an ocean, but, they had to reach the Azores first. The fact that they would not be sailing down the coast of France, Spain and Portugal pleased him. Stopping every few days would have delayed arriving at what he thought was the real starting point, Horta.

The coastline changed once the Thames estuary had been crossed, Richard had done that leg often and knew exactly where they were, but soon there would only be miles of water with no landmarks. He had

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not been in that position before, but had every confidence in the boat and his friends; his only concern was the strong possibility of him being seasick.

Deciding to make a 'one pot' cook-up Adam opened tins of beef stew, carrots, peas, potatoes and oxtail soup and brought the mixture to boil in a single pot. At any other time dish would have been rejected, but, on a boat and in the fresh air, it tasted great. Several large dollops of stew and big chunks of bread were ladled into a blue plastic dog bowl which Adam took to the helm.

Miss Take was now nine hours into her venture. Richard went to update the log; Dean dozed on the spare bunk in Adam's cabin out of everyone's way prior to his extended evening watch, he planned to keep Ken company during his first night duty.

"How are we doing?" Dean asked Richard at the navigation table. He was wearing his sea jacket and thick track suit bottoms ready for his night watch.

"Fine, right on course."

Jayne had given everyone strict instructions to use up the chilled food in the fridge first so Ken pulled out two four-portion packs of moussaka which he knew was Greek, but could never tell the difference between that or lasagne and stuffed the packages in the oven. Get rid of them as quickly as possible and then eat what everyone liked, pub grub he thought. Salad and chunks of baguette were added to the three plates on the table and also placed in the bowl for Dean.

"Wow! That looks good, I could smell it even with the cabin door closed," said Richard. He stumbled out of his cabin still somewhat drowsy. "Thought I'd be too keyed up to sleep." He glanced at the navigation radar. "Watch out for the ships, there's a few out there," he shouted up to the helmsman.

"Hi, what are you up to?" Dean stepped into the cockpit with a dog bowl filled with food.

"Oh, you know, just sailing!" Adam sat behind the wheel with one foot up on the cockpit side and the other dangling down. The evening

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was already a deep shade of midnight black, but above a canopy of uncountable stars held the promise of a smooth passage.

“Funny isn’t it? There are more stars in the universe than there are grains of sand on all the beaches on our planet, and just a few miles over there the English can’t even see this sky and a few miles over there the French can’t see it either. God! It’s good to be out here again.”

“I guess this is why we keep coming back when really we should be in the pub!” Dean agreed. “Grub’s up,”

“You’re in charge now. Food? Great, that means the bar’s open!” He inched his way around the wheel and quickly disappeared.

Having checked the auto-pilot, Dean took a good look around and saw some ships' lights in the distance and then glanced up. There had been times when he thought that he would never see a night seascape again, but there it was, and it was just as glorious as ever. He could see the lights of planes and spied something that he had always looked for, but rarely saw - a bright, purposeful light, moving speedily on its designated course - a satellite. The sight always pleased him, being alone in the middle of nowhere surrounded by a sky peppered with stars always made him feel that he was about to navigate to some new world and he often thought that astronauts had to have the same temperament as long-distance sailors, able to cope with anything while not being scared of being truly alone and out of reach of so-called civilisation.

He ate the moussaka, it was tasty, but had a bit too much garlic; he would not be able to stomach that in gale force winds! However, the bowl was empty when Richard retrieved it. Ken was in the galley scraping what little remained of the food into Dean’s bowl which would be emptied overboard. The plates and cutlery were rinsed in the sink under the third tap from which poured sea water and then washed under the first tap which spewed out hot water. The plastic packagings were cleaned in the sea water and thrown into a bin liner. Adam saw Richard and Ken’s puzzled look.

“Three days out and what's on those packages will rot. Not nice. Not

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nice at all. Cleanliness is most important on a boat." He ambled up to the deck and waved a bottle. "Rosado! I've invited a few friends to a party!"

"This is the life," Richard still wearing his favourite floppy hat, had replaced his shorts with jogging pants.

"It surely is!" Ken nodded energetically.

All the sayings from Dean's past were coming back to haunt him, another one flashed up. 'It's a funny thing during the first night at sea nobody wants to go to bed!' He must be getting old. "So Adam just how many bottles of this stuff have you got down there?"

"Look I'm not stupid! It's ten days to the Azores, three bottles a day equal 30 bottles! I got three cases which gives us six bottles just in case we find Rich boy can't navigate."

"As usual Adam impeccable thinking. I'll have another splash." Dean took a swig of the chilled wine, the night was cold and the drink made him shiver. Now that he was used to it once again, he found the slightly tart taste refreshing.

"Thanks, you know this is superb," complimented Ken.

"So it should be at £3.55 a bottle!" Adam had to turn the comment into a joke, but that was not what was meant and everybody knew it.

After a small swig, and a hidden grimace, Richard went below to get Miss Take, or more precisely, the galley ready for the night sail. He filled a large flask with boiling water and tied it over the sink so if the night watch wanted a hot drink he could simply get it as well as grab some biscuits before returning to the helm. An hour later, having taken a moment to check the navigational systems, he found that the second bottle of rosé was already opened and everyone was gazing at the night sky. Taking a deep breath he picked up his laptop and went to work on deck rather than remain aloof in his cabin.

"Hey Rich boy what gives with the computer?" Adam asked.

"I've a couple of projects which I need to complete so I thought I'd do it during quiet times," he bit back a sarcastic retort. "After all how busy can it be on a small boat in the middle of the Atlantic?"

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“Just wait and see! “ Adam burst out laughing and turned to Ken. “And have you any projects?”

“There are several books I have always wanted to read so I've bought a Kindle and downloaded a stack of e-books, plus I have a rather full MP3 player.”

“Be interested to know how much work Rich boy does and how many books you've read by the end of the trip!”

“Listen, lover boy! I'm capable of multi-tasking after all my brain is in my head not my pants,” snapped Richard.

“Children! Children! Play nicely,” Dean decided to step in before the ambience of the boat took a battering if not a certain crew member. “Adam shut up or you'll be sent to bed without any Rosado. Richard try to ignore him.” He poured a drink for everyone, by the end of his watch peace, if not harmony, had been restored.

Boat life started to settle down – on watch, eating, dozing, sleeping, chatting and on watch again. The lights of the French coast, then the northern coast of Alderney, came and went into the distance as dawn came up and Miss Take headed out into the deep sea. Watches, like meals, came and went as the men melded together to become 'the crew'. Richard, offered to serve up another meal of chilli, but was berated for his lack of cooking abilities.

“Jayne did all that. On the odd nights she was away I rustled up chilli con carne for Andy and me or got a takeaway.”

“Four pizzas then Rich boy, do you want to order or shall I?” Adam handed him a mobile phone. “Do they deliver? Oops! Mobile phones only work for a couple of miles out to sea. We don't need an expensive satellite phone. Ken would just get grief from his kids while Dean's and your girl would check on us. Out of sight and out of mind is best. Right chef your kitchen awaits.”

“OK! OK! I promise no chilli tonight. There are, however, some pizzas in the freezer. When we get back don't any of you dare tell me you've a little computer problem that needs fixing!”

The three men laughed as Richard tried to disappear down the hatch

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with all the dignity he could muster, but in his hurry his hat fell off and the guffawing grew louder. He was not used to being the butt of anyone's joke and, like the Rosado, it was something he would have to accept as there was no way he would hide in his cabin when the tough got going.

Life took on a different prospective; time and the motion of the boat gelled together as they rolled. On the third day Dean saw Richard at the navigation table looking at the weather predictions.

"Keep your eye on it and wait for the shipping forecast. We'll talk then," he suggested.

It was Richard's turn to cook lunch. He decided to throw together a spaghetti bolognese (chilli in disguise, but without the chilli), it was easy and could bubble away while he checked the charts. It might be their last hot meal for a day or so. Being amidships, the galley was situated in the most stable part of the boat, but, during a storm, it would suffer the same battering as the rest of Miss Take.

Richard emerged with four bowls and crowned each dish with a head of grated cheese and the last slices of the fresh loaves. Outside a freshening wind and the grey, overcast sky added to the gloom, Dean decided the auto-pilot was more than man enough for the choppier sea state while the large semi-balanced rudder maintained its firm grip on the water without any problems. The wind instruments told the story – force five now, with gusts over force six and the sea state told him the rest, it was choppy and confused, some larger waves were approaching the starboard quarter of the boat, but they were still on course. Miss Take was in for a battering. How bad? Only time would tell. He sat under the spray hood and waited for things to develop.

"I think I'll take a stroll down to the bow to stretch my legs," Adam carefully climbed out on the weather side of the boat, clipping his safety harness onto the rail as he cautiously made his way.

The motion of the boat made the cabin uncomfortable for Ken who came up on deck and looked around for Adam.

"Just gone for a refreshing stroll," was the cheerful reply.

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“Why?”

“He's checking the anchor's lashed down and is sorting the chain locker.”

Feeling that Adam was too exposed, Dean headed to the helm and rested his hand on the auto-pilot. He had seen people washed off a boat and it needed a focused head to recover the situation. Both men watched Adam being drenched as Miss Take dipped and rose in the turbulent seas; it took a good few minutes for him to make his way back. Soaked, shattered, yet exhilarated Adam announced that he was too old to do that again!

“All ready down there?” Dean asked.

“Everything's ready for the ride!” Adam went to dry off and to open the first bottle of the day, whichever one it was now!

“Gale coming,” Richard popped his head up.

“Go on! Tell us something we don't know, anyway we are ready,” grinned Dean. “You'd better fill both flasks. Make sure that everything is stowed away for a rough sea.” He reassured Ken. “Don't worry; we've been in plenty of gales and even a couple in Miss Take. Besides, why should I worry? You're steering next! Listen when we close all the hatches the body of the boat is watertight and becomes our floating bubble. Our six-ton keel is like a pendulum and while a wave will push it one way, gravity will ensure that it swings us back upright. One of the many strengths of a Najad is that they really give you confidence in a blow and this one ain't going to be up to much. Trust me I'm a sailor!”

The wind steadily rose over the next couple of hours and took the sea with it. The sails had been reduced to the minimum and they were fully dressed for the weather. Ken took over the wheel while Adam put the washboards in the companionway which made him feel even more uneasy. The 30-knot headwinds had heralded a change in the sea state, there was a three-metre swell and it looked like there were larger, waves – topped by smaller waves – which piggybacked onto the swell.

The constant noise took Ken by surprise; he had thought the open sea

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would be almost soundless, but the wind, the rigging and the sea were now shrieking at the little boat as she struggled to climb mountains of solid water. The yacht rolled from gunnel to gunnel and its pressure on the wheel shuddered through Ken's aching and exhausted arms and hands. Dean stepped in to show him how to steer with less impact. The yacht stayed on track, as its speed accelerated passed seven and then reached eight point five Ken's confidence grew; they were going to sail through it.

The ship's roll became more violent, and the noise continued to tear into them as night fell. A very uncomfortable Richard descended into the cabin to throw together some easy snacking food. The other three, wet and shivering, jostled together in the pitch black cockpit. Adam took over the wheel as Ken tried to find refuge under the spray hood which was failing to keep large amounts of water from flooding into the cockpit. The self-bailers and drains oozed away the sea for a few seconds until the next wave smashed in. Wave upon wave cantered onto the deck only to collapse against the structures and then, like some doomed cavalry charge, gathered their remaining strength to spew frothing anger over the spray hood and soak them in the cockpit. At times 50 percent of the boat appeared to be underwater at times.

Adam was singing, and steering, when the food and a bottle of brandy – not the usual tittle for a gale – arrived. Dean roused himself to put the washboards back to stop water from gushing below.

"Thought we'd celebrate your first gale watch!" Richard handed the bottle to Ken.

"Good idea!" Came a shout from the helm.

"Whew, that's warming!" Ken took a swig straight from the bottle and thought of the ten-year-old brandy which had been gathering dust in his sideboard at home for at least another ten. It seemed ludicrous that he had waited until he was in a deep sea gale before he touched the stuff.

"In that case hand it over," demanded Adam.

Bowls of southern fried chicken and chips were handed around.

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“Didn’t think it was a good time to have a posh sit-down meal, there’s tomato sauce and some salt in the carrier bag,” Richard added.

The men braced themselves against the roll of the boat as they snatched a drink and used their fingers to eat. They threw the chicken bones over the side, and the plates were hurriedly taken below as the gale’s roar lifted to multiple crescendos. No-one could see the next wave; they knew it was coming, but not from where or how big. An unseen force smashed a wall of water into Miss Take. As fast as she had risen she was dropped only to be hit by the smaller waves which soaked Adam and sprayed the men under the hood, within the maelstrom the brandy was passed around silently. Ken absorbed the experience; it reflected everything that was life – weird, frightening, uncomfortable, odd, but with crumbs of comfort and a large dash of wit!

Turning into the wind made it difficult to breathe, it was as if the air was being forced down the throat and up the nose and yet at the same time being sucked away. The wind, not satisfied with almost suffocating them, rushed into the crevices of their ears and added a disorientating whistling to the endless thunder that surrounded them. Their world shook and stuttered as it moved up and down and from side to side, there was no escape from the gale’s resolve.

The watches changed again and again, a patch of lighter night sky started to appear on the horizon every now and then. With her fighting spirit in full flow Miss Take continued to rise to each occasion. The sky got brighter, and the daylight improved the crew’s vision, but for miles all around there was chaos, rage and noise. Hills of water overshadowed them, white tops of crests were blown off by the wind and splashed into the cockpit as the empty bottle rolled around.

The men started to tire and Richard took the helm and hummed *The Ride of the Valkyries* with less gusto than usual.

Wide awake, Ken was fascinated by the sight of two people taking a nap and snoring contentedly, just as if they had just enjoyed a large Sunday lunch, but what captured the scene for him was the bottle, an

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empty reminder of the last few hours. The men had adjusted to their discomfort and had elected to remain on deck. Richard handed over his watch and, oblivious to the tossing, went below to make some lukewarm coffee, food was now the last thing on everyone's mind or stomach. He then stumbled into his dry, warm cabin, closed the door and, ignoring the noise and the rocking, collapsed on the bed and went to sleep.

Slowly the wind dial numbers made a small, but consistent, downwards move, but it would be quite some time before life would become bearable. Ken's elbow slid off the cockpit side and jolted him awake; he was not sure how long he had been asleep. The companionway hatch was now open so he decided to go and lie down. The saloon was a mess, bits and pieces were strewn everywhere with charts, cups and pillows rolling on the floor. Too exhausted to do anything he cleared a space on a seat and fell into a deep sleep.

At the wheel Dean pushed the auto-helm button to see how it would handle the gale. He knew the watch system would start to fall apart as soon as Richard lay in his bunk and fought his seasickness; he could see that Ken had passed out; Adam was asleep under the spray hood, but would not leave the deck until the worst was over. His immediate concern now was how much longer he could continue. It had been 33 hours since he came on deck and was now growing very tired. He decided to carry on for as long as he could and then wake Adam who, he hoped, would stay awake for a few hours to allow him time to recover. Bedraggled internally and externally, even his saliva tasted of salt, he was too shattered to think any further than that. His shoulder-length, greying hair hung in a miserable mess, sea water clung to his moustache and beard irritating his skin and the wipes had run out long ago.

The wind and the weather appeared to have steadied, and the waves were beginning to equal out, but Miss Take was still struggling up and down hills. The wind gauges continued to average a downward trend and the noise had quietened so much that Dean could now hear Adam

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snoring. Wanting a pee, he had two choices – go below to the head or get out of two pairs of trousers and do it in the cockpit.

“Time, tide and leaks wait for no man,” he muttered, and checking that everyone was indeed asleep, struggled to undo his trousers, but before he had even finished urinating the sea had flushed his small contribution away from the flooded cockpit.

The hours dragged heavily on and Dean was about to give Adam a shake when Ken appeared.

“Shall I steer?”

“Great! You're bloody welcome; she's on auto-pilot. Look, I've got to sleep. I think I'll be fine below now as the weather is steadier. Any problems wake Adam.”

“Go on, I'll take over.”

Dean went below, sat down then... He jerked upright, it took him some minutes to realise it was now dark, the motion of the boat was easier and he could hear the familiar voices. It had to be Rosado time. He climbed up into the cold night air and was offered a glass of wine.

“How was your kip then?” Richard asked.

“Fine, where are we?”

“Another day and a half to the Azores,” was the reply. “We won't need Adam's spare bottles after all!” He added with a smug smile.

The other team members were on deck and seemed refreshed. The gale was now a strong wind, but the sea was still lumpy, and Ken was at the wheel.

“Blimey! You were there when I left.”

“We've had a few watches since then.”

“Nine hours!” Adam halted the confusion. “What about another brandy? How did you manage to get the bottles passed Jayne?” Not waiting for a reply he disappeared.

“Rosé with a brandy chaser seems to be the team drink,” Richard said as he threw the contents of a couple of tins of Tikka Marsala, as well as rice and into a large pot. The mixture was going to be mashed together in their stomachs so he did not see any necessity to use several pans.

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Now at home with being on watch Ken took the same pride as the others in maintaining the boat on course and achieving at least 6.5 knots. He was becoming adept at ducking from the spray while watching the electronic aids and using the information to plough a course that would eventually lead to a landfall, but for now he ensured that Miss Take effortlessly sliced her way through the waves.

Each watch saw Miss Take swan 20 miles, or more, closer to their target, the Azores, a chain of Portuguese islands in the Atlantic. Richard studied the almanac and the islands became the main topic of conversation. With the reduction in wind strength a more relaxed atmosphere descended; the food came and went, the watches changed, the men took opportunities to sleep.

When dawn broke Adam knew exactly what he was looking for and strained his eyes towards the horizon and, he hoped, the island of Faial with its harbour, Horta; the electronic instruments were pointing towards them. Major adventures began and ended at Horta, Round the World boats went there, racing competitors called in; sailors headed there to start their crossings to the Americas or south to the great Capes. Horta was where skippers painted the names of their boats and crews on the harbour wall and pavement. He wondered if those he and Dean had painted as younger men would still be there or whether they had been covered over. Those years had once held the promise of so much; more than meaningless party time in Palma or being landlocked in suburbia. Sailing was the only passion in his life; it was what he did best.

The wind continued to drop so he released more sail and an urge which he had almost forgotten, the excitement of a new landfall, gripped him. Scanning the brightening horizon Adam was not prepared to allow the boat to slow down. On hearing the winches, Richard's head popped up and both men looked in the direction in which they believed the island to be.

"There! There it is!" Adam's excitement was as vivid and as fresh as his first sailing venture. Low on the horizon there was a dark stain, a

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long, thin lump, with bumps could just be made out. A lump that was still there every time the boat rose on the Atlantic roller, yes it was Faial and landfall was as evocative as it had always been to sailors down the centuries.

“I think we’ll have a landfall breakfast,” suggested Richard and returned to the saloon.

Adam fancied a bacon sandwich, but the man who only drank a few beers socially a few weeks ago passed up the brandy. Not bothering with glasses, cups or anything else, Adam swigged a mouthful and passed the bottle to Richard who copied him.

“Well, done Richard!” Adam patted him on the back and all the time the dark stain was growing.

Richard took the use of his full name as a sign of approval, he had grown to respect Adam as a sailor and was slowly beginning to accept him as a friend, albeit one that he would never have chosen back in London. Ken was astounded to see Richard taking a slug of brandy.

“What? You two drinking already?”

“What do you mean already? It’s late for us,” Adam retorted.

“Look,” said Richard and pointed.

“My god! Whales!” Spluttered Ken indicating in the opposite direction, where the grey-black backs of a mother and her calf were swimming slowly on the surface while four adults followed making clicking in their wake releasing an occasional blow. The men watched as a group of sperm whales circled while spouts of water vapour fountained as they interacted with each other; the land sighting was temporarily forgotten. Then, almost as if they were waving goodbye, they dived raising their flukes – tail fins – in the air before disappearing.

Early or late, Ken was not sure, but it was a double celebration and he took a swig as well and went to do a fry-up using the last of the eggs and bacon with the tins of tomatoes and baked beans. Jayne had packed some partly baked rolls; four went into the oven while the coffee was put on the boil.

He and the cooker swung in unison with the waves as the low rail

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fiddles helped to keep the pans stable on the hot plates. The seas were now calmer, but their natural state was a continuous chain of rollers causing Miss Take to rise and fall as she steadily followed the course Richard had set.

Having finished their celebration breakfast the crew began to spruce up Miss Take. Lockers were emptied, checked and tidied, the saloon cushions were brought up to air in the sunshine while the floor and furnishings were wiped down with lavender-scented disinfectant to banish any remaining hint of vomit and even the deck winches were cleaned of the odd gale-driven, regurgitated chilli bean which had found its way into them!

The island was now clearly visible. It was a completely new world one for Ken, one which he had only read about. It was now his turn for adventure, and the hairs on the back of his neck rose at the thought of it. By evening the boat had been tidied, the rubbish bagged and Miss Take, together with her crew, looked professional and purposeful. Each had celebrated by having a long shower to wash away the salt and grime, shampooed their hair – Adam used one of his boxes of hair dye – and shaved.

Night would herald the arrival landfall, firm ground, people and restaurants and they were going to make the most of it. As they closed in on the outer reaches of Horta harbour they could see swathes of blue hydrangeas cutting across the island and were greeted with a necklace of shining diamonds as the streetlights from the perimeter road twinkled, while around cluttered buildings a myriad sparkling colours of lights danced and held the promise of a warm welcome. Boats could be seen in the harbour while cars and lorries were clearly visible on roads. The scenery grew in size as they drew closer. At the navigation table Richard radioed Horta Marina, Dean was at the helm while Adam and Ken sorted lines and checked the rig for the landing. For the first time in days they could smell the scent of civilisation, diesel and petrol fumes, mingled with the aroma of cooking, hit them.

Miss Take berthed alongside the reception quay while her crew

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cleared customs and immigration and then headed for her allotted spot in the 300-berth marina, now somewhat quiet after the peak summer season. It was what every yachtsman dreamed of, pulling up on a warm, balmy evening at an exotic port to be met by a harbour master who was definitely foreign! Ten days and a gale after they had left Harwich they stood on a strange quay, one which they had all, in their different ways dreamed of and for Adam and Dean a place they both thought they would never see again.

Further up the quay, the buildings were brightly coloured and the intoxicating atmosphere of a lively, international harbour hit them. Boats were rafted three-deep along the wall; the marina also had pontoons which included finger docks.

Stepping onto the cobbled quay and each man made a grab for the railings. It would take a few minutes for their bodies to adjust to the stable surface. Civilisation was something they needed to get use to. The sounds of people, dogs barking and music exploding out from taverns blasted their ears; mouth-watering smells from restaurants teased their stomachs and minds and the gaudy fusion of colours almost blinded their senses.

They shook each other's hands and then, with a rolling gait, staggered their way to the nearby skips with half a dozen black bags. It was a time for celebration and the four made their way to the first bar on the quay – The Yachtsman – and that was just what they had become.

At the bar Ken asked for a bottle of rosé, a bottle of brandy and four glasses, amid cheers from his friends. Miss Take would have to wait until later in the morning for her scrub down.