PACIFIC CROSSING

The ocean will not tolerate errors nor will it remit any of the penalty which attaches to them. To hope that when something has been overlooked or left undone aboard a vessel at sea, the fullest penalty will not be exacted is merely to delude oneself, and perhaps the hardest part of voyaging is to make the necessary switch in thinking from that of a landsman to that of a seaman. On land whatever may happen to us there is always help available. At sea, the only help is self-help; the only supplies those that are carried aboard. He who voyages on a small vessel at sea must be a rigger, carpenter, electrician, blacksmith, mechanic, navigator, and above all an improviser of wide imagination and the strongest tenacity. – author unknown

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Sunday, May 9th, Mother's Day. The four of us are pinned down in the cabin as a full gale of more than 50 knots, now in its seventh hour, roars through the boat. The sails are reefed and furled to avoid destruction; only a tiny wedge of foresail is left exposed to keep us pointed forward. Regardless, the boat pitches sideways, first 45 then 50 degrees, water pours over the deck, and the rudder shudders under the force of the waves, driving us farther into the storm. The sun, visible for only a few moments as we crest a wave before plunging back down into a deep valley of darkness, is setting. Soon, it will be gone and we will be alone in the empty black of the North Pacific.

The last weather forecast we received by shortwave radio predicts that the storm will continue to worsen through the night. More than a week from the nearest point of land, we huddle around the helm, each considering the hours ahead, agreeing in solidarity that we will share watches throughout the night to give one another rest, though no one really expects to sleep. John, our captain, takes measure of our boat's endurance against the wind and waves, evaluating his own work on building this 55-foot craft. His wife, Joanne, having marked off eight years of ocean crossings, stoically braces herself in the

corner. Keith, my fellow crewmember and usual source of levity, grows noticeably quieter in proportion to the increasing rage of the storm. The ocean thrusts in all directions around us, first 12, then 15 feet into the air, before the wind shears off its edges.

Another series of waves slams into the port side of the boat, sending shudders through the hull as we plunge sideways down into another valley filled with slabs of angry, black granite. The boat pitches sideways, and pots, binoculars, and charts crash all around us. Holding fast against the various forces pulling us, we can only watch as everything slides across the floor. At the bottom of the trough, another wave plows over the deck and submerges the cabin, the weight of the water felt all through the boat. Lines and blocks strain against the deck, and the mast moans. As we emerge from under the water and the boat rights itself in preparation for the next assault, I look over at Joanne, who I estimate will most likely admit the truth. Measuring her eyes with a steady gaze, I ask:

"Are we going to make it?"

Joanne is slow to speak, deliberate, and no one interrupts her response.

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Our voyage began 12 days earlier from the port of Hilo on the "Big Island" of Hawaii. Our destination: Victoria, British Columbia, 2,500 nautical miles north and east across the Pacific Ocean, the distance separated by wind, water, and time.

While distance between continents is measured in hours by air, crossing the same distance in a small craft under the power of sail requires a commitment of weeks and a willingness to test one's skill, fortitude, and fortune. The reward? The opportunity to press against the thinnest layer of the membrane separating man from nature, life from death, and the history of exploration from the present. Apart from perhaps space travel, only the desolation of the open sea offers the possibility of touching this membrane, and maybe even passing briefly into the other side.

Before leaving, I knew little of what to expect. My sailing experience was limited to little more than a year of weekends sailing a small, 19-foot, two-man boat on White Rock Lake, a small inner-city waterway a few miles from my home. The mechanics of a multi-week ocean voyage remained largely a black box. I avoided attachment to the idea of going, as too often in the past life's many constraints conspired against taking leave of my daily routines for more than a few days. Yet as the date grew near, what began as a daydream started to gradually take focus. Only then did I reveal my plans to others.

Invariably, my disclosure led to a series of questions: How big is the boat? How many people will be on it? How do you know them? The recited answers became rote: 55 feet; there will be four of us (the captain, his wife, me, and another crewmember); and we connected through the Internet. Notices posted many months earlier at marinas along the West Coast under the sections of "crew" and "crossing" had generated four or five responses, but the captain and his wife presented the first credible prospects, as they had verifiable credentials and reassuring feedback from former crewmembers who presumably had survived the experience.

But then, people would ask me the why—why was I was doing this? It was a natural question, even an obvious one, but I was ill prepared to answer it. My stated reasons vacillated between "for the challenge" and "to get away for an extended vacation," but neither felt completely honest. In return, most people nodded and smiled vaguely, as if suddenly realizing they'd encountered someone living slightly at odds with the normal world, like the co-worker who organizes her weekends around Renaissance fairs. A few recounted their own sailing experiences of summers off the coast. Others offered advice ranging from the banal, "wear sunscreen," to the ominous, "remember there ain't nothing in the ocean that don't have teeth."

In truth, I wanted a break from life, and sailing away from everything sounded like a relief. The flaw in the plan was that I have always feared the ocean. And why shouldn't I? All the evidence suggests danger prowls at the intersections between the lives of city dwellers and the ocean. Who hasn't seen the movies?

Act One: the beginning of a dreamy vacation drenched in sunlight and filled with sand, surf, and the promise of fiery romance.

Act Two: our new friends go surfing, snorkeling, or scuba diving.

Act Three: something goes wrong, terribly wrong; our friends are left behind, isolated from help.

Act Four: enter the sharks, octopus, or giant squid.

You know what's coming—you've seen the trailer. The signs were all there in act one, but you were distracted by the scenery. But by act four, the message is clear: the ocean is cold, wet, and hungry for your life. Regardless, I wanted to go, whatever the risk, real or perceived.

The preceding 18 months had provided a trifecta of psychological stressors: a career change, my mother's battle with cancer, and the implosion of my marriage. There were days I could barely get out of bed, the blankets of anxiety, sadness, and failure too heavy. Low points beget fantasies of painless death: an overdose on pills or maybe a collision with a bridge abutment at lethal speed. Paradoxically, a perverse fear of failure hovered over my fantasies of ending it all—what if I couldn't even get that right? Living a life cloaked in pity represented one of the few imaginable existences worse than living through so much suffering. Any fears of drowning, creepy Internet people, or even sea monsters paled in contrast to so many preceding dark hours. In a sense, I felt drawn to the sea and its darkness.

The final days of last-minute details compressed into a blur, then the wheels of the plane withdrew and a sense of decompression began to take hold. Seeking solace, I slipped on the headphones as the music started: "She packed my bags last night pre-flight. Zero hour, nine a.m." I drifted into the void between the earthbound piano and the voice floating above it: "I miss the earth so much, I miss my wife. It's lonely out in space . . . ."

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As the taxi noses into the port's security checkpoint a new reality begins to unfold. The word "crew" lingers in the air as the officer for the Department of Homeland Security confirms that my name appears on the *crew list* for the Western Grace, a Canadian-flagged sailing vessel. "Crew list" implies work. Responsibility. The crew in those glossy brochures distributed by fancy cruise lines all wear uniforms, work 20 hours a day, and sleep in bunk beds somewhere between the engine room and the anchor. The façade of the dreamy vacation from act one begins to collapse as the officer escorts the cab through a maze of Lego-like stacks of containers toward the harbor.

As we approach the water, the green-hulled sailboat pictured from the website takes form in three dimensions in the background. It is at once more tangible and smaller than expected. Like so many famous vessels of years past, its physical size is disproportionate to the prominence of its impact on history.

Apparently on the lookout, John, our captain, scrambles onto shore. With his loping walk, John closes on us quickly. He looks like a man purpose-built for the sea: compact, joints wrapped in sinuous muscle, and a strong nose leading to a face worn soft from a life lived face to the wind. But his compassionate eyes and quick smile give away a man possessing the inner warmth of a Greek fisherman. He speaks without hesitation. "You must be Rugger," he says, extending his hand and gripping mine. I trust him immediately.

We proceed down a ladder attached to the seawall, cross the dinghy serving as a floating bridge, and scurry up the back of the boat onto deck. Everything gleams glossy white and stainless in defiance of the corrosive elements. John immediately begins an appraisal of the boat. "This is the standing gear: the mast, the static supports, and the rigging . . . . This is the running gear: the lines, the sheets, the winches . . . ." He covers the safety procedures for abandoning the boat in the event of an emergency, including where to find the emergency grab-bag and how to deploy the inflatable raft. I file this information away under both "important" and "things to avoid."

As we climb below deck, the palette darkens. Every surface is constructed of dark cherry wood hardened under thick varnish. John waves toward the galley and the three small cabins as we pass through the pilothouse, en route to the engine compartment. We stay on task for a complete checkout of the engine, then review the procedures for maintaining the generator. More instructions follow:

"We need to travel an average of 150 nautical miles a day . . . a knot is 1.1 land miles . . . water is rationed . . . no one takes a shower unless we declare a shower day, and then we all take showers . . . if you take a shower, it's navy-style, like this"—John mimes rubbing soap about the critical areas—"then a *brief* rinse . . . if you need to use the commode or head, turn on *this* pump, and use *this* foot press, then put paper in *these* bags to throw overboard . . . ."

Back to the pilothouse, with its small communal table, and then to the helm, for a review of controls and navigation aids. Above the electrical panel, John points to the watch schedule. My name is attached to three shifts a day: 0600–0800, 1100–1400, 2200–0000. John continues:

"On watch, we all follow orders. Monitor the wind speed, apparent direction of the wind, and our track—the direction we have traveled. Continuously adjust our course—the direction we are traveling toward—and the trim of the sails, and visually watch for traffic, particularly freighters. They may not even see us, and if they do run us over, they *will not* stop. Periodically check the radar, not only for traffic, but also for squalls. Routinely check the bilge pumps, electrical power, and navigation lights. And, at the end of each watch, you must record everything in the logbook in the following format. Oh, and if the wind gets up above 20 knots, call the captain. That's me. I'm the captain . . . ."

As the words begin to wash over me, I struggle with even the simplest reference points. Left, right, front, and back no longer exist, now replaced with port, starboard, fore, and aft. Onboard less than an hour, I feel overwhelmed in newness and confusion, but I keep this to myself.

Then there is the matter of taking in the others on the boat. Formal introductions to Joanne, then Keith, follow. Joanne is petite, dressed comfortably, and, in contrast to John, reserved. Regardless, in a crowd you would immediately pick her out as John's wife. They both exude a certain practicality and kindness. As we exchange our hellos, she reveals that this is their eighth and final crossing of the North Pacific. Two grandchildren have entered the world since their last trip home, and she looks forward to life back on solid ground. Keith, my fellow crewmember, emerges from his cabin with a welcoming smile. This is his third leg across the Pacific with John and Joanne, having travelled with them to both Mexico and Tahiti. Keith is on furlough from the tech world in Silicon Valley. He is maybe 50, tall, expressive, and wears the beard and relaxed bearing of a man long on vacation. Before settling in, John suggests that Keith and I go to town to stock up on any essentials for the voyage. We interpret this to certainly mean liquor and chocolate, and we head back to the checkpoint to locate a cab.

En route, Keith explains that Hilo is a favorite of cruisers. The city center consists simply of a few strips of shops anchored to a farmers market offering just-picked pineapples, ripe mangos, and avocados the size of ostrich eggs. Hilo remains largely unaffected by tourism: no t-shirt huts, tiki bars, or Tommy Bahama outlets. Unlike other parts of Hawaii, the locals don't punctuate their sentences with "mahalo," a term nominally meaning "thank you" or "gratitude" but in the context of invading tourists easily substitutes for "a-hole."

> Welcome to paradise, *mahalo*.
> Sure, it would be my pleasure to bring you another piña colada, *mahalo*.
> Of course, just show me where to push the button on your camera, *mahalo*.
> Thank you for visiting our islands. Please come back soon, *mahalo*.

Now dark, the specialty shops along the strip are closed. Small groups of high school kids congregate in the parking lot around pickup trucks, their doors open, music spilling out. Only a few greasy restaurants and the local supermarket remain open. We stock up on rum, vodka, and cheap chocolates, then catch a cab back to the boat.

The following morning, we take our last showers in the port's communal bathroom and begin the process of getting underway. Below deck, Joanne quietly organizes and stores everything in its place. Above deck, John bounds around like a feral cat, spitting out orders: "tie this up, tie that down, coil that line, store this in the forward hold . . . ." We fire the engine, work the anchor loose, then motor out into the harbor. Sailless, the boat lumbers awkwardly from side to side.

As we near the mouth of the harbor, the wind reaches in from the sea. Without speaking, we all take our positions to raise the sails. In synchronized order, we release line brakes, grind in the winches, and steer off the wind. The slack rigging grows taut and the sails ascend into the sky, then unfurl under the pressure of the rushing wind. Energy from the sails begins to transfer into the movement of the boat.

Volcanoes form a wall along the coast, like spectators witnessing our boat gathering strength and stepping onto its field of competition, the ocean stretching before us. Waves begin to slap against the bow. Water draws across the beam. A cool breeze electrifies the skin. Bumps erupt on every inch of my exposed body, as if connecting to a source of energy older than even the earth: the wind, the stars, the heavens. By lunch, every bearing along the compass points toward the ocean. As far as the eye can see, only the boat separates the tropical blue sky from its mirror, the water. By suppertime, we begin settling into our routine of life aboard, a routine we would follow each day for weeks to come.

Anthropologists studying new cultures often maintain two journals: one to document their surroundings and one to capture their own experiences. Our log of the voyage, recording our position, track, and the weather conditions contrasted with my own observations from our first few days at sea reads as follows:

> Ship's Log, Day 1: We have traveled 149 nautical miles since noon yesterday, matching our goal of 150 miles a day or about 6 knots an hour; waves measure 8 to 12 feet; sporadic squalls overcome the boat, drenching us and impeding visibility.
> *Wearing a patch behind my ear for seasickness. No nausea, but feel unbalanced, tired, and have slight headache. The boat remains heeled over between 15 and 30 degrees as I*

began my first watches at the helm. I keep asking if this is as bad as it will get, but John remains noncommittal. "It could get better, it could get worse" is all he says. Wind speed typically measures 22–28 knots; a "small craft advisory" is in effect. Back in the harbor, red pennants warn against these conditions, and yet we continue to sail farther out to sea. Secretly I keep asking myself: "How much can I pay these people to take me back to land?"

Day 2: 170 nautical miles; average wind speed 20–27 knots; waves 8 feet; more squalls as we remain on a starboard tack.
Seasickness patch has lost its adhesion and migrates at will; Keith asked about the "Band-Aid" stuck to my neck. Rolling waves rock the boat continuously. Crossing the deck requires the skill of a trapeze artist, swinging from one handhold to another. Making regular contact between the softer parts of my body and the harder parts of the boat. Bruises impending. I really don't want to be here but feel we are now too far away to turn back.

Day 3: 189 nautical miles in near gale conditions with gusts to 28 knots.
Seasickness patch has gone AWOL. Found in shirt, then lost again, point of reattachment unknown. Throwing away remaining patches.

Alone again at the helm on night watch, everyone else sleeps. The ocean is pitch black; nothing is visible beyond the bow. The wind is almost directly behind us. Before heading into his cabin, John said we must stay on course to avoid jibing. If the wind sweeps around the boat to the other side of the sail, the boom will cross the boat in response and jibe, potentially tearing apart the rigging, perhaps breaking the boom, or even bringing down the mast.

At around 11:30, a squall, propelled by gale-force winds, overtakes the boat. The "autopilot," a hydraulic steering assist that maintains the rudder position, increasingly groans under the strain of the opposing forces of wind and waves. As the duration of the groans increases, I sense something is going wrong but try to manage my rising level of fear. Then, with a final groan and a clapping sound of an electrical circuit shorting, the autopilot gives way. The warning light flashes: "Rudder Failure."

The wheel spins clockwise at a dizzying speed. I grab the wheel, attempting to right the course, but the rudder does not respond. As the boat swings wildly out of control, I yell out in the direction of John and Joanne's darkened cabin: "I'm getting 'Rudder Failure'!" Awakened by my voice, John pounces out of the cabin and onto the helm, screaming, "Oh, shit!" as he grabs the wheel. Together, we crank the wheel counterclockwise as the sails pop and snap above us. We have only seconds. We are about to jibe.

The boat crests a wave, and for a moment the rudder catches. John bolts toward the gangway, shouting "hold course" as he leaps out onto the deck. The only hope is to reef the mainsail to depower the boat and, in turn, reduce the strain on the rudder. Otherwise, we will lose control again. I struggle to hold the boat off the wind, wrestling against the

sea as the boat bucks against the waves. Minutes pass as John lowers the mainsail and then scrambles below to the engine compartment to find the breaker box and reset the circuit. Clack! and the hydraulic assist re-engages.

Emerging from the engine compartment, John joins me at the helm, and we stand staring into the curtains of darkness surrounding us. Neither of us speaks as we survey the sounds of the wind, the sails, and the ever-present thudding waves. John gauges that we are through the worst of it for now, then heads below to get some rest. I am left shaking.

Day 4: 174 nautical miles; wind speed averaging 16–20 knots; the amplitude between waves increasing.

Longer waves make for smoother sailing. Now patchless, feeling better. No nausea and the tired feeling has abated. We have now traveled north 12 degrees in latitude, from 19N to 32N. Both the ambient air and the water attest to our progress, each dropping more than 1 degree in temperature for each degree of northern progress. Piloting skills improving, but still dread being alone on watch at night.

Day 5: 194 nautical miles. Throughout most of the day, our average speed exceeds 9 knots an hour, more than 50% faster than our average speed for the trip and nearing a daily record for the boat.

We are now three days ahead of the boat's previous fastest voyage across the North Pacific. Note for further consideration: the difference between sailing on a lake and making a crossing is the difference between taking Spanish classes at the local community college and joining the Peace Corps.

Day 6: 163 nautical miles through a dense fog.

Inventory of small injuries includes: bruises on shoulder, left hip, right hip, and left forearm; deep cut over left ankle, likely infected; and painful knots on the head, increasing in number in proportion to frequency of contact with the cabin wall at the speed of falling. The badges of experience continue to be awarded.

Day 7: 37 nautical miles. Wind slowing as we enter the gyre, the vortex of the ocean's rotating currents.

Every ocean has a gyre, but the North Pacific's is unique. At its epicenter lies the "great garbage patch," an area larger than the state of Texas. Millions of tons of degrading plastic and chemicals form a column of toxic soup that nature alone cannot recycle. Bits of refuse can be spotted floating on the surface, but most of it lies unseen, suspended beneath. This is the "away" we refer to when we say we are going to throw something away. Evidently, it doesn't really go away; it just goes out of sight.

As the first week draws to a close, I begin feeling a sense of confidence piloting the boat as our schedule takes on a natural rhythm. Each morning, we set fishing lines baited for mahi-mahi, tuna, or salmon, agree on the daily chores to complete, then spend the rest of the day studying whatever catches our fancy: navigation, cartography, knot-tying, and the like. Weather, in particular, provides fertile ground for inquiry. Take Admiral Beaufort.

In the early nineteenth century, naval officers regularly observed the weather, but lacking a standard scale, their measurements proved subjective. Enter Sir Francis Beaufort, an admiral in the British navy who dryly observed that one man's "stiff breeze" might be another man's "soft breeze." With some effort, Beaufort succeeded in standardizing a scale of grading winds by the effect of their forces. The Beaufort Scale has since served as the standard for measuring wind for more than two hundred years. The Beaufort Scale measures from force 0, denoted as calm, to force 12, a hurricane. A particularly important aspect of the scale is that an increase of each degree of force, say from 4 to 5, or 5 to 6, translates to a *100% increase in wind pressure*.

When not studying seamanship or the weather, we slip into and out of conversations on politics, economics, animal husbandry, and our own admitted shortcomings, such as Keith's antipathy toward his wife's horse or my obsession with gadgets. Our few long-running debates center on how long it would take to paddle the dinghy to San Francisco from our current position, the exact moment we will cross into other time zones, and whether parties with ice sculptures are better than parties without. More often than not we quickly resolve any differences or find common footing. After only a day of deliberation, we agree that there are those who gravitate to parties with ice sculptures and then there are the rest of us.

Mindful of our mutual dependence, the labors of the boat being too great for any one person, and our shared intimacy—our physical proximity so close that we hear the breathing of the others trustfully sleeping while one stands watch—we maintain peace. Unlike reality shows that thrust people together, then poke and prod until they spew venom as the cameras roll, we never express anything negative about anyone, on the

boat or off. Moreover, our lives ashore remain suspended in time. Little about our past is shared, apart from where we are from, marital statuses, and maybe some other trivia. John and Joanne moved from their native Holland to Canada 30 years ago, when they were in their 20s, to start a pig farm. They later sold the farm to fulfill their dream of building the boat. Keith lives near San Francisco, manages projects for software companies, and misses his wife and their dog, Toby.

At times we enjoy the company of marine life. John sights a surfacing whale. Dolphins surround us, jumping and playing. Lazy sea lions drift by as we pass, then turn and lope along beside the boat. Magnificent albatross, keen-eyed shearwaters, and beguiling puffins appear in turns, and with more frequency in the evenings and early mornings. We take all our meals together: breakfast at sunrise, lunch during the noon hour, and supper at sunset. The food is simple: a bowl of granola and sliced fruit, an egg sandwich and a mug of soup, or a fish fillet and steamed vegetables. Somehow though, Joanne always adds a little something extra, a touch of spice or slices of fresh Hawaiian pineapple, to make it all taste good, really good. However, in deference to the continuous and unpredictable motion of the boat, we take all our meals in a single bowl, often creating unexpected combinations of flavors, such as curried rice and coleslaw. Each evening, just as the sun descends in the west and Joanne announces supper, John leads us in prayer, always beginning “Dear Heavenly Father,” then giving thanks for all that has been provided, in particular the food before us. On the stormier nights, he petitions the Lord for safe passage, sometimes adding that a prevailing northeast wind of about 15 but no more than 20 knots would really be appreciated.

Later in the evening, at 3 p.m. Greenwich mean time, Keith switches on the shortwave radio for roll call, a boat-tracking registry maintained by a network of volunteer ham radio operators. The self-described “hamsters” monitor the progress of, depending on the season, up to 20 or more sailboats at large in the Pacific. After establishing the network of available radio relays, the lead radio operator calls out each boat by radio sign and name. Boats with names like Blue Bottle, A Cappella, Kiopa, Whirlwind, and Fire Water queue in order of their duration on the list and report longitude and latitude, the bearing of the wind, the height of the waves, barometric pressure, cloud conditions,

and so forth. The greater the number of days at sea, the higher the boat climbs on the list, the exception given to single-handers—sailors sailing solo—who are always called first.

In our second week, we have progressed up the queue from the 21st slot to the 6th or 7th as boats ahead of us make land and fall from the list. Other boats just beginning their passage fill in slots behind us, though we remain the only boat in the North Pacific. As we wait for our turn, reports roll in from Spike, Betty, and Helmut, fellow cruisers on the other side of the equator destined for the Marquesas, Vanuatu, or Christmas Island. Though we may never meet these other members of our extended community, we feel relieved to hear their voices, sometimes in accented English, the lingua franca of the shortwave network, to know they are safe.

Periodically, a breakdown or medical emergency brings uninvited drama. We listen in as weather or electrical problems disable boats, sending them limping into the nearest ports. In one sickening episode, we sit helplessly and follow the attempted rescue of a sailor struck in the head by a swinging boom. His brain is swelling and he is losing consciousness. The radio operators set up an emergency relay to the Coast Guard, the man's only hope, so far from land. A day passes and the man's condition continues to deteriorate, time and distance working against him. By the third day, the Coast Guard reaches the boat. Another day passes before the radio operator reports that the injured man reached a hospital and should survive. We breathe a collective sigh of relief.

Apart from a deep devotion to the needs of the boat and meals, we dedicate our days to plotting the course of our travels. Each morning, for the better part of an hour, the National Weather Service's forecast buzzes and hisses over the shortwave fax modem from Hawaii. Line by line, the three pages appear: today's weather forecast, the 24-hour forecast, and finally, the 48-hour forecast. Most days, the daily forecast looks something like a loosely echoing palm print, touched up with a few arrows drawn here or there describing the direction and speed of the wind. The corresponding 24-hour forecast offers additional insight. The 48-hour report, however, generally lacks any reliability. In fact, without explanation, it rarely matches the succeeding day's 24-hour forecast. Keith

and I begin to suspect that the weather service, faced with staffing cutbacks, now relies on sketch-by-numbers drawings solicited from third-graders. ". . . and today's 48-hour weather forecast comes to us courtesy of Abigail McAdams from Millard Fillmore Elementary . . . ."

May 7th. We have accrued more than 1,500 nautical miles, yet another 1,000 lie between us and land. As the first lines of the 48-hour report begin to dribble in, the top edge looks as if the fax has jammed in the machine. The lines appear thick and contorted. Something is wrong. We watch on curiously over the next 15 minutes as the full picture emerges. The previous day's soft palm print is crushed on its left side by an angry fist of dense ridges tattooed with pennants and daggers, signaling winds of 35 to 40 knots. Our position remains in the soft belly of a low-pressure zone, but the high-pressure zone is closing in rapidly. The angry fist, powered by a full gale, will broadside us within a day. Keith and I begin to summon jokes about Abigail's drawings taking a naughty turn, but John cuts us off. "Respect the weather," he says firmly as Keith and I smirk at each other. Silently, I hope Abigail is wrong.

Unfurling the maps, we begin to contemplate our course. No matter the direction, we cannot escape it. We can only hope to avoid its more lethal edges. Should we continue pressing northward? Or should we run east in hopes its energy will dissipate over time? Piecing together the limited information available, we plot a course to the east, hoping to find the "squish zone," the diaphanous, neutral area separating the high pressure zone and the low pressure zone like the thin line of batter that forms between two blades of an electric hand mixer. If we can correctly predict and sail into the squish zone, it will slingshot us north and east toward Canada, the direction we want to go. If we miss it, the high-pressure zone will overtake us and blow us off course and east toward California.

By sunrise the following day, we are anxious to study the 24-hour forecast. The news is worse. The angry fist from the west is closing in on us and growing stronger. We go about our routines in silence. The radio too is quiet. Commercial traffic, the cargo ships and fishing vessels we hear from time to time, using their powerful engines, evacuate the

area in all directions. By afternoon, John begins directing us to clear the decks. We empty the jugs of emergency water, then double-reinforce every line and knot. John locates the air pump for the leaking dinghy and audits the emergency grab-bag. Evening roll call confirms we are the only sailing boat within hundreds of miles, and a pall enshrouds the boat. We are alone.

May 9th. The sun is rising just to starboard of the bow, our course northeast, though the squish zone is receding. Wind speed: 16 knots, a force 5 on Admiral Beaufort's scale. Sails full up, we run from the storm as it forges an anvil of black clouds behind us, just off the stern. Waves, a portent of what will follow, begin to roughen.

10 a.m. The wind speed averages a force-6 21 knots. The sails strain against the rigging. The increasing wind speed begins to overpower the boat and rudder. To compensate, Keith steers off the wind to reduce the force against the sail as John and I take positions on the deck. The sail has three built-in reef points. The first one decreases the sail area by a third. The second will decrease the area again by half. The last reef point will reduce the mainsail to less than a third of its original size.

John climbs onto the boom to gather the descending mainsail, as I work the halyard line holding the mainsail aloft. The wind pulls at our bodies and the pitching deck is slick with seawater. To avoid disorientation, I concentrate only on the tasks in front of us as we synchronize our efforts through a yelled call and response:

"Ready."
"Ready."
"Check the brake.
"Break set on the halyard line, line wrapped to the winch"
"Ok, release line."
"Line released."
"Keep 'er coming, keep 'er coming, keep 'er coming."
"Hold! Hold!"

As the mainsail descends, the bottom collapses to the first reef point, and John ties it off. I rewrap the halyard line to the winch, cinch up the remaining slack, and set the line brake. We have set the first reef.

Next we must partially furl the foresail to protect it from tearing through its seams. John climbs out of the boom and crosses the deck to the port side, while I reposition to a winch further toward the edge of the deck on the starboard side. Crouching into position, I wedge my feet into the outer edge of the cockpit and press my butt into the lifelines that form a perimeter around the deck and extend into the plane separating the boat from the sea. Back to the waves and arms now free, I grind at the winch as John pays out the line holding the foresail extended, the sail winding around its stay into itself. We double-check the lines then withdraw below deck.

Noon. The wind now measures more than 30 knots. In the past two hours, its force has doubled, then doubled once more. It is my watch at the helm, so John and Keith add the second reef to the mainsail, then the third. Breaking waves wash over the bow of the boat. John's face looks tense, as he paces from one part of the boat to the other. Joanne has grown quiet. Keith and I nervously exchange jokes. Anything with a rabbi, duck, or talking dog is fair game.

2 p.m. We abandon any hope of penetrating the squish zone. Our efforts are now directed toward preserving the boat. Wind measures more than 40 knots, a force-9 strong gale. On land, cars would be forced from the road, trees would be dismembered, and buildings razed. On the open sea, waves crest and roll over, releasing dense foam and spray to blister the boat. Harnesses must be worn while on deck.

6 p.m. A full gale. Overwhelmed by the opposing pressure of 45 knots of wind and the rolling waves, the rudder's hydraulic assist shorts its breaker. The boat lurches out of control under a thunderous sound of churning water. Instinctive hands jab for the nearest holds to mitigate the trauma of bodies colliding with hardened surfaces.

Joanne, responding to the needs of the boat, makes for the engine compartment with a flashlight in her hand. In the interval between waves, John pounces to Keith's side, barking directions: "Pull 'er back! Pull 'er back! We are going to jibe!" Together, they lean into the wheel, attempting to point the bow downwind, but the confused gauges provide no point of reference. The course can only be established by feel. Once back on track, John yells to Joanne, "Switch the breaker!" She does, and we collectively hold our breath as the hydraulic steering re-engages.

Silently, I keep asking myself, "How can this get worse? How?" But it will. Within an hour, the rudder will fail again. And the brunt of the storm will continue to close in on us.

7:30 p.m. In silence, we gather together and watch the weather as she takes her toll on the ocean, the boat, and our bodies. Our nerves, sympathetic to the boat's overwhelmed systems, begin to fray. The horizon can now only be glimpsed in snatches. Clouds marble the blackened sky. Walls of waves tower two stories or more above the deck. Riding up the leading edge of each wave, the boat arches 12 feet into the air before plunging down the trailing edge into a 25-foot trough, then 15 feet up and 30 feet down. At intervals, waves surging diagonally catch the boat in a trough and roll us sideways. Water overtakes the hull, temporarily burying the boat so that only the mast sticks up above the waves, marking our location like a gravestone. In the brief intervals between the swells, the weight of ballast rights the boat in time for us to take on another series of waves.

I seek comfort in reason and hope but feel overwhelmed by the contradictory information assaulting my senses. Fear courses through my body. I want to get out. I want to leave. I don't want to be here, imprisoned in this place, in this moment. I feel trapped. And I am terrified that we will die, that we will die right here tonight. I don't want to die, but the fear is paralyzing.

I look over at Joanne. After living on this boat for eight years, this is her final voyage. She's returning to her grandchildren, including the two she has not yet held. She has

every motivation to make it home. And even more than the truth, I long for someone to say we will make it, and ask her the question. When she says "I think so," I want to believe her, more than anything.

9 p.m. Our course is now due east, the only direction the wind is permitting. The mainsail is down and only a small triangle of the foresail now remains unfurled to keep the bow pointed downwind and provide some control over the boat without overpowering the rudder. I decide to try to rest for an hour before my watch begins again at 10. Retreating to my cabin, I lie down to rest muscles exhausted from straining against the endless, pounding waves. Supine, I slip on headphones to escape into a track of guided relaxation, the volume on max to cut through the howl of the storm. The disembodied voice starts in: *Your mind is becoming stiller . . . feel the parts of your body that are in contact with the ground . . . this will have a stabilizing effect on your mind . . .* .All the while, my mind, freed from any prescribed labors, now only races faster.

Another wave blasts the side of the boat. The bed shudders and then drops away. Fatigued muscles grip at anything to hold onto as everything on the lipped shelves above the bed rains down: flashlights, blankets, bottles, rolls of toilet paper, the Bible. The next blast of waves unhinges the cupboard doors, spilling clothing and gear across the floor of the cabin. Corralling one of the flashlights rolling across the bed, I identify the heavy and harmful pieces, stuff them under the mattress, and leave the balance of the debris to roll free in the bed and across the floor. The remainder of the hour passes in guarded turbulence as the unaffected voice drones on from a safe distance: *As you become aware of each muscle, you can begin to relax . . . .*

10 p.m. It is my turn to stand watch. Making my way from handhold to handhold to the helm, I find John alone in the dark, two wild-eyed gauges measuring our course and speed staring up at him. His hair stands on end, a life jacket cinched around his chest. John reports that the wind is gusting at more than 40 knots and the barometer is still dropping. The high-pressure system is still advancing into the low-pressure system. He says he will stay in the pilothouse but needs to lie down for some sleep.

"Are you OK?" he asks, and all I want to do is say, "No, I can't take *this*. *This* is too much." I feel overwhelmed by fear. What more can we take? When will we capsize, de-mast, or drown in the bitterly cold water? But John looks drained from the last two hours at the helm, Keith is sleeping and needs rest, and Joanne has braced herself in the galley close to the engine compartment, waiting for the rudder to fail again. Regardless, I don't want to be in charge and, more importantly, I don't want to make a mistake that will endanger all our lives. I want to say "I can't do it," but I hear myself say "I'm OK." John nods. "She's all yours," he says as we grapple around each other. I take the helm, and he slips away.

For the next two hours, I must hold the bow upwind to prevent the rigging from tearing away, to avoid de-masting, or worse. Mountains with black, overhanging crests surround us. The boat slides sideways then back again, righting itself to no more than 30 degrees between waves. As we heel over, the side of the boat faces into the ocean and water rides up onto the deck. Fear and logic wrestle, then draw a brief truce. There are three potential outcomes: we survive, the boat intact; we survive, but the boat is taken; or we are buried alive at sea. But making a break for it via dinghy in the frigid water seems improbable. The three possibilities quickly narrow to two: the boat must survive, or we will not.

Suddenly another breaker snaps. But this time it's in my mind, and a realization sets in: from somewhere behind the fear, determination emerges. I may have no control over the ocean or the weather, but my decisions and actions in this moment may dictate my—our—destinies. To survive, I must overcome the debilitating fear. And I rise. Stepping from the pilot's chair, I take a stand at the wheel and point the bow downwind as we charge into the waves of a force-10 storm.

Throughout the long night, Nature's angry fist pounds us with more than 50 knots of near-hurricane strength wind. Rain and spray lash at the boat from every direction. The hull moans in misery and the rigging shrieks. Lines slap against the deck, then break

away. Waves roll across the boat as we are buried and resurrected over and over again. But by sunrise, the worst, mercifully, is over.

The wind has fallen to 30 knots, and a golden glow emerges on the horizon, bringing with it a new sense of hope. After more than 20 hours, the storm is passing. We gather once more around the helm as if in communion, faces softened by dehydration and exhaustion, muscles limp, relieved from adrenaline. I want to hug everyone.

A few minutes pass in quiet celebration before we survey the damage to the boat. The mast and rigging have survived, but the exposed portions of the foresail are torn. Tangled lines crowd the deck, some spilling over the sides and dragging in the water. Above us, the maple leaf of Canada is shredded. Inside, books, clothes, maps, and kitchen supplies litter the floor. Quietly relieved, we attend to the needs of the boat, take in a meal, then, in turns, sleep.

* * *

The following day, the weather service forecasts another storm, but it turns away as if acknowledging we've had enough. The wind slips up into the mid-20s, just as it had as we left Hawaii. The boat still heels over and waves still broadside us without warning, but my sense of fear has been squeezed out by the storm. The sunrises and sunsets have never looked so beautiful. The sun feels warmer too, and the water more benevolent. Sea life returns. Dolphins appear, laughing and playing.

Not so many more days pass, and one morning John yells out, "Land ho!" A line of clouds hangs on the horizon, and in the distance, snow-capped mountains edge the shoreline. A familiar smell seeps into the air: earth. It is dark, rich, and slightly moldy, an organic smell reminiscent of walking through a gardening store or passing a freshly plowed field. Still citizens of the Pacific, we begin to feel the bittersweet approach of the border between the sea and land.

By sunset, we enter the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the waterway separating British Columbia and the United States' northwesternmost point. Great stone pillars off Cape Flattery to the south and Carmanah Point to the north guard the mouth of the strait like the mythical Scylla and Charybdis. And over the next eighteen hours we negotiate shipping lanes, currents, and tides before entering Victoria.

A walkway forms an arc around the harbor. John contacts the harbormaster by radio, and he directs us to a floating pier for a customs inspection, then a dock in the city's historic district. We tie off in front of the Empress Hotel, a beloved dowager to the high tea set. And for the first time in weeks, we touch land.

A little disoriented, we cover the sails, connect to the water supply, and wash down the boat. After docking is complete, the four of us find ourselves back at our communal table in the pilothouse. Having shared more than 2,500 nautical miles and almost three weeks on the ocean together, our village of four prepares for a collision with the larger world around us. We agree to fortify our determination with a few midday belts of vodka and orange juice, something never done at sea.

Climbing the steps separating the pier from the street, I find the city emerging. Everything comes rushing in—people, traffic, signs, noise. Walkways crowd with teenagers in noisy packs and seniors in sun visors disembarking from cruise ships. Stretching my legs, I walk down the block to the nearest intersection to cross the street. As I wait for the light to change, on the opposite corner stands Darth Vader playing a violin in front of a Starbucks.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once observed, "The end of the human race will be that it will eventually die of civilization." Seeing Darth Vader busking for change, one can only wonder how close we must be. And then the news begins rushing in. In our time away, the Greek banking system has collapsed, a "flash crash" has roiled the stock markets, an oil well named "Deepwater Horizon" has erupted in the Gulf of Mexico, and now thousands upon thousands of barrels of oil gush uncontrollably into the sickening Gulf.

I already miss the smell of the ocean, the aching sounds of the boat, the continuous luffing of the sails, the irregular, heaving waves. I miss the freedom from phones and email. I miss the company of the blue whales, white-sided dolphins, and black-footed albatross. I miss standing on deck alone with Drago, Leo, Lyra, and Virgo. I miss the excitement of shower day, the sweetness of rationed chocolate, the beautiful desolation of the sea and its subtle sameness. But I also miss friends, a full night's sleep, doorways that accommodate a six-footer, and the convenience of an "at will" lifestyle. Onboard, even the simplest tasks require a certain perseverance.

Returning home, I share a deep appreciation of others drawn to the sea. It offers a sense of singularity in purpose coupled with immediate sensory response. All your efforts are dedicated to getting safely from point A to point B as if your life depends on it, and along the way there is no filter to the experience, no hyperbole about the future. The wind is just the wind. A wave is just a wave.

* * *

Friends sometimes ask what I learned from the experience. It is this: the true purpose of the voyage was to confront my fear, nominally a fear of the ocean, but more so a fear of lack of control, or more precisely, a loss of the known. What I now understand is that fear is a scary story about the future that takes over our minds, then our bodies. But we don't fear the unknown as much as we think we do; we fear loss of the known. That's what keeps us from really letting go. Only by letting go can we live in the moment, and by living in this moment, determine the course of our future.

The night of the storm, I found a break from the darkness of my fears. I could not change the weather, nor could I abandon my duties to the other crewmembers. What I could control was my relationship to the circumstances. By surrendering any illusory attempt to control the environment, my fear of the ocean was replaced with respect. The fear gone, I was able to concentrate on following the procedures to pilot the boat through the storm.

In the process, I discovered that the currents of my own life had formed a gyre of toxic thoughts in my mind. The accumulation of anxiety, disillusionment, and regret from the previous 18 months of my life all swirled just beneath the surface in that same vortex of fear. I see clearly now that learning to lean into the fear is where the real power to transform life begins. Returning to land with a new sense of responsibility for the future, I must begin to lean into the fears I left behind.

There is also another more practical lesson I took from the experience that is worth passing along: at all times possible, keep the lid on the commode closed. You just never know when the bathroom you're standing in will suddenly pitch sideways, sending your toothbrush bouncing off the counter to fall in. Some lessons in life you will always remember.

One final note to share about our experience: the day following the storm, we passed through a current that flows in one direction toward Alaska and in the other toward Asia. Near the center-point, I dropped a bottle over the side of the boat into the ocean. Someday it may be found on a distant shore. Inside the bottle is a note dated and stamped with the coordinates of its origin. The message, written in longhand, begins: "This note brings with it the hope and a wish for happiness—love, compassion, joy, and peace—for you and all others who receive it . . . ."

It is signed by the four crewmembers on behalf of the Western Grace.

Pacific Crossing