

Far Out

Sailing into a Disappearing World

BY

CORINNA WEYRETER

FAR OUT: SAILING INTO A DISAPPEARING WORLD

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ISBN# 978-1-907984-09-9

First published in Great Britain in 2012 by Boathooks Books
www.sunpenny.com (Sunpenny Limited)

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*For Gjalt,
and the family and friends
who shared our adventure*

Over 40 percent of the world's oceans are heavily affected by human activities, and few if any areas remain untouched.

– National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis,
February 2008

Not only are we already experiencing severe declines in many species to the point of commercial extinction in some cases, and an unparalleled rate of regional extinctions of habitat types (e.g. mangroves and seagrass meadows), but we now face losing marine species and entire marine ecosystems, such as coral reefs, within a single generation. Unless action is taken now, the consequences of our activities are at a high risk of causing, through the combined effects of climate change, overexploitation, pollution and habitat loss, the next globally significant extinction event in the ocean.

– International Programme on the State of the Ocean,
June 2011

STELLA MARIS

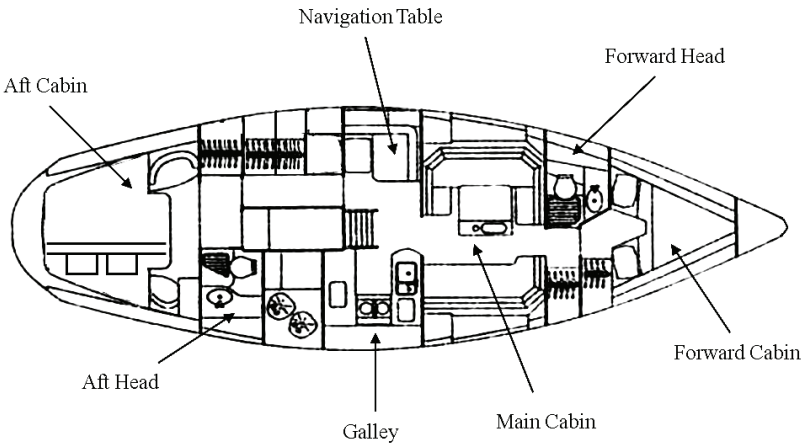
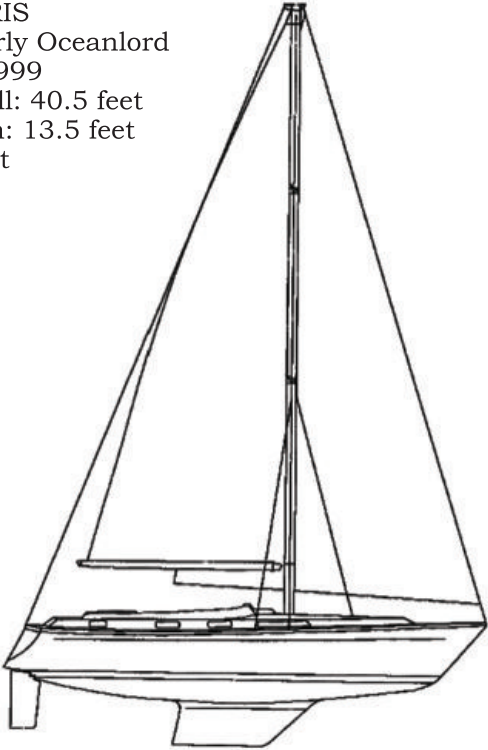
Make: Westerly Oceanlord

Year Built: 1999

Length overall: 40.5 feet

Main breadth: 13.5 feet

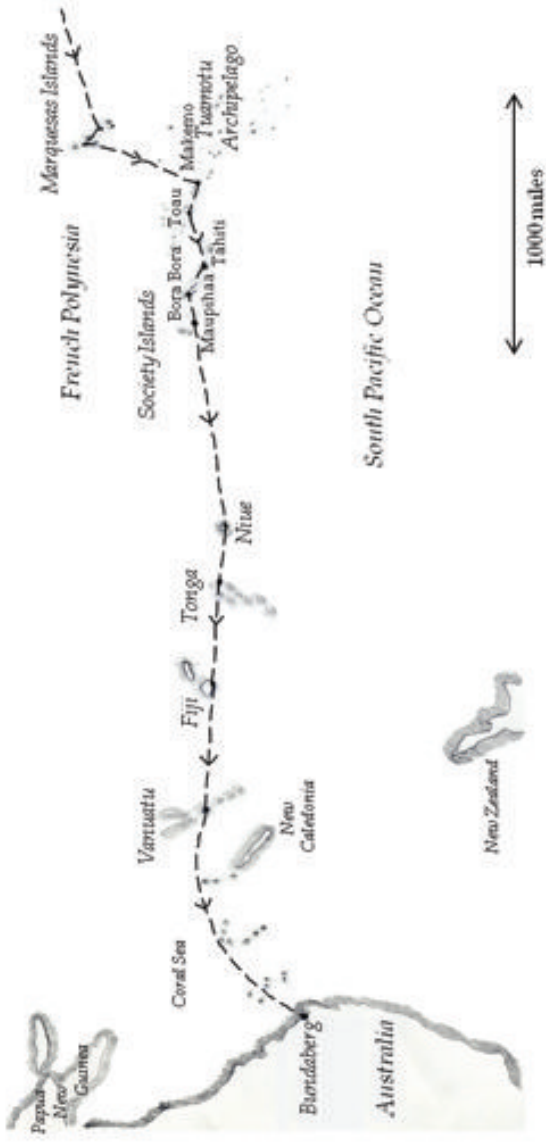
Draft: 5.5 feet



ROUTE FROM TEXAS TO THE GALAPAGOS ISLANDS THROUGH THE WESTERN CARIBBEAN AND THE PANAMA CANAL



ROUTE ACROSS THE SOUTH PACIFIC FROM THE MARQUESAS ISLANDS
TO AUSTRALIA



Prologue

I'd held out for as long as I could, but desperation finally forced me below deck. I had to leave behind the fresh air and predictable motion of the cockpit, both of which prevented me from feeling sick. Nausea was waiting for me at the bottom of the ladder, and the moment I stepped off the fourth and final rung, it struck. The main cabin, normally a cosy haven of warm oak and comfortable seats, now seemed airless and in need of an exorcism as it lurched erratically in unpredictable directions. I urgently needed to get to the toilet in the forward head, a mere four strides away, but one wrong move and I'd be taking a close look at the teak floor.

The weather conditions during the first two days of our week-long crossing of the Gulf of Mexico were identical to those of every training trip we'd made on that particular stretch of water: relentless head winds screaming over deck, steep waves biting at the bow like rows of razor-sharp shark teeth, and a heavy blanket of ominous grey clouds threatening worse to come. The simplest tasks were irksomely demanding: dressing, undressing, walking, cooking, washing-up, and going to the toilet in particular, all strained my temper and tested my conviction that sailing wouldn't always be like this.

I braced myself and set off across the cabin, moving from one strategically placed handhold to the next like a monkey swinging between trees. The movement exerted strange gravitational effects on my body, adding weight to my stomach and removing it from my head. I felt as though I'd swallowed several litres of molten lead and my brain had been replaced with air. I had to sit down before I fainted and collapsed into the regurgitated contents of my own stomach.

I opened the door to the head, pulled myself into the room that was roughly the size of a narrow wardrobe, and quickly closed the door again before it started slamming back and forth on its hinges. I plonked down onto the toilet with a certain relief at having made it that far, although I was acutely aware that the worst was yet to come. My skin felt hot and clammy as I embarked on the next stage of an

operation that on dry land would have been 'piss easy': getting undressed.

As it was the middle of December, when even in Texas temperatures plummet (that year it snowed in Houston just before Christmas), I had several layers to peel away. Whenever my hands were busy unzipping or removing a particular article of cold weather gear, the boat would invariably crash into a wave and I'd be hurled against a hard surface. By the time I eventually landed on the seat with the requisite amount of clothing removed, I was frustrated to the point of despair. I immediately pushed my hand against the door to stabilise myself, closed my eyes, and rested my head on my outstretched arm to quell the growing urge to vomit. Going to the toilet was such an ordeal that I always put it off until I simply couldn't wait any longer, but that didn't mean relief was just around the corner.

The only window in the forward head was a small hatch in the ceiling, so every violent plunge into the choppy waves came as a shock. All my muscles instantly tensed up as I fought to stop myself from slipping off the seat. Sailing upwind taught me an interesting fact about water: in order to pass it, each muscle involved in the process has to be completely relaxed. It sometimes took more than half an hour of focussed meditation to coax my body into cooperation, by which time the pressure on my bladder had become so painful I was close to tears. It was at times like these that I really didn't like sailing.

Gjalt was oblivious to these basic struggles, thanks to a piece of marine equipment he'd bought called 'Little Johnny'. This was essentially a plastic bottle with a long neck that ballooned out into a handy catchment area. It had a flat base in case you wanted to let the contents stand around and mature and a convenient carry handle in case you didn't. This simple receptacle allowed Gjalt to relieve himself in the cockpit, where he was able to anticipate every boat movement and so avoid both nausea and frozen bladder plumbing.

Although I was jealous of Gjalt's ability to urinate in the open air, I couldn't complain that the makers of Little Johnny had ignored the plight of the female sailor when manufacturing their device. At no extra cost, they supplied an intriguing blue attachment that slotted easily into Little Johnny's red neck. Shaped like a dust mask (but made

of non-porous material, obviously), it was essentially an unusually shaped funnel. Unfortunately, the apparatus didn't come with any operating instructions – a simple sketch would have been handy, not to mention amusing – and although it was clear where to position the dust mask, I wasn't sure if it was supposed to be used like a urinal or a toilet. I couldn't picture myself standing in the cockpit with my trousers around my ankles and the dust mask in my hand even at the best of times, let alone in adverse conditions. My muscles would have contracted with every abrupt pitch and roll, and I was almost certain to fall over at some point during the process; and as for sitting down, a similar lack of dignity and potential for leakage overshadowed any benefits the attachment offered. In both cases, there was the added hygienic aspect of having to clean the adapter after each use to consider.

Gjalt was sympathetic to my predicament, so before we set off he constructed his own version of an outdoor toilet for my personal use. The best inventions are often simple, and his was certainly that, comprising mainly – it has to be admitted – of a bucket. But this wasn't just any old bucket: it was 'Homer's All-Purpose Bucket', a fact Homer had proudly emblazoned on its bright orange exterior, and it had a soft rim that Gjalt had fashioned from a long piece of pliable foam. I doubt even Homer had envisaged just how all-purpose some people thought his bucket could be, and I'm not sure how proud he would have been had he known, but Gjalt took him at his word. Still, although I did appreciate Gjalt's efforts, I didn't find his home-made portable toilet any more dignified than Little Johnny's dust mask, and as awful as it was to go below deck to the head, it was the best option I had.

None of this unpleasantness would exist on the 'warm route', Gjalt often assured me. We were heading for the Pacific, where friendly trade winds would push us along like a fluffy cloud floating through a blue sky: no thermal underwear, no upwind sailing into hostile seas, no cramping bladder muscles; nothing but sunshine, crystal-clear water, and palm tree-lined beaches on tropical islands.

Once we'd crossed the 700-mile Gulf between the United States and Mexico, the most difficult part of our trip to Australia would be behind us, I was told. It was my belief in this promise that got me through the bad times.

CORINNA WEYRETER



CORINNA AND GJALT BESIDE STELLA MARIS IN TEXAS

1.

Independence Day

The dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico, now the world's second largest, covers 21,000 square kilometres, an area the size of New Jersey. Dead zones are areas where the dissolved oxygen levels are so low that no marine life can be sustained (other than micro-organisms). Moreover, these biologically dead areas are expanding due mainly to high nutrient pollution levels brought in by rivers and streams and washed off coastal land. Since the 1960s, the number of dead zones around the world has doubled every decade.

– Peopleandplanet.net, 2011

The trouble with work is that it dominates your life and all the things you'd rather be doing have to be squeezed in around it. With your schooldays finally over, you leap into a career at twenty, pause briefly to take stock at forty, and then carry on regardless until you hit sixty, when you retire. Sitting in your comfortable armchair, grey-haired and worn out, you look back on your life and try to work out where it went. Too late you realise that at some moment you failed to notice at the time, the years began to accelerate and run into each other. They disappeared in a blur while you haplessly sleepwalked through them, oblivious to how precious they were. And now you find that the slippers fit your feet so snugly they're impossible to take off, and the only dream you might still have energy to fulfil is the planting of an herbaceous border in the back garden. This was the grim future we feared would be ours if we didn't break free at the taking-stock stage. For Gjalt and I this stage arrived as we neared the end of a four-year posting working for Shell in Houston, Texas. By then we'd spent a combined total of thirty-three years with the company and that felt like quite long enough for both of us.

If I could have had the job I'd really wanted when I left university, I would have become an astronaut. Had I been born in America, I would probably have given it a go, but as I wasn't the only chance I ever got was to be the first Briton in space on a Russian mission. Along with around 13,000 others, I answered an advertisement that read: 'Astronaut wanted, no experience necessary'. It appeared in 1989, just as I obtained my degree in astrophysics from the University of Birmingham (perfect timing, I thought), but another woman, Helen Sharman, got the job instead. (She worked for Mars, the chocolate company – an inter-planetary connection that possibly gave her an edge.)

Having lost out on the astronaut job, I had to come up with something else. I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I was sure I didn't want to sit at the same desk in the same office for the next forty years. A desk like that seemed too much like a coffin to me; one day the lid would open, I'd be pulled inside, and that would be that. Instead, I sought another job that promised excitement, one I wouldn't have to compete with 13,000 other people to get. I found it when I picked up a Shell recruitment brochure at university and saw pictures of offshore drilling rigs and people working in sunny climes, their office windows offering exotic vistas. A quick investigation revealed that oil industry salaries weren't bad either. Here was a company prepared to pay me to fly in helicopters and work abroad. I knew nothing about oil or how people went about getting it, but I was prepared to find out. *If I don't like it, I can always quit*, I thought.

But it turned out that I did like it. Shell whisked me offshore to the unseen world of North Sea oil exploration and showed me what it took to drill for oil. I spent two exciting years working two weeks on, two weeks off. What better way to ease into the rigours of working life than having a fortnight's holiday every month, especially when I loved being on the rig so much that I rarely wanted to get off? I was gradually transformed from an astrophysicist into a petrophysicist, someone who analysed data from inside the earth instead of from outer space, someone who could determine the porosity and permeability of rock and how much oil, if any, was in it. Postings to Holland, Oman, Norway, and America followed, and fifteen years passed before I felt the time had come for me to move on to the next adventure. By then I'd reached a point in my

career when I was expected to start slowly climbing up the long managerial ladder, away from the well site, but I just wasn't interested in doing that.

If Gjalt could have had the job he really wanted, it would have been as a solo sailor. His father had taught him to sail when Gjalt was just a young boy, first in a small boat and then in a Mirror dinghy he built for Gjalt and his two brothers. As a family, they progressed to a thirty-foot yacht, building experience on the lakes of their native Friesland, in the northern Netherlands, before moving on to the IJsselmeer and then the Waddenzee, a 430-mile long intertidal zone in the southeastern North Sea that seemed as vast as an ocean to the young boys. Gjalt was fascinated by the tales of such sailing adventurers as Bernard Moitessier, Robin Knox-Johnston, and Bill Tilman. Like them, he wanted to sail across oceans to magnificent and remote places without anyone but himself to rely on. When he was seventeen, sailing alone through Friesland one evening, he was struck by the thought that nothing could ever really get him down because he could always go sailing.

Even today, the prospects for becoming a professional sailor aren't good, but back then they were unheard of. Besides, Gjalt had been raised to make the most of his education – not to pursue his favourite pastime as a career – so he had search elsewhere for adventure that came with a salary.

This quest began in the Mining Engineering Department of the Technical University in Delft. He had planned to study mathematics, but veered from this path when he discovered it would probably land him behind one of those coffin-like desks I dreaded. Mining engineers, however, tended to join Shell, the Anglo-Dutch oil giant, and spread throughout the world, moving to a new country every three or four years.

Having specialised in geophysics, Gjalt began his career looking for oil through the acquisition and interpretation of seismic data, the reflections of sound waves sent through the earth that, when processed, provide maps of the subsurface. Basically, his job was to decide where to drill, while mine was to say whether he'd been right to drill there. His career started as adventurously as he'd hoped, with brief assignments to Argentina, Eastern Turkey, and

Abu Dhabi, followed by postings to Burma (now Myanmar), Oman, Scotland, and then America. Over time, he shifted away from the technical side of the industry into economics and then into developing new business for Shell. It was a shift he enjoyed until the company procedures for approving projects became so cumbersome and protracted that they hampered his ability to close deals. Sailing away from it all became increasingly appealing.

Although Gjalt and I met in Oman, we only moved in together four years later, in America. From Oman I was sent to Stavanger in Norway, and since there were no jobs there for Gjalt, he ended up in Aberdeen, Scotland. After years of flying across the North Sea every fortnight to spend the weekends together, we wanted to be posted to the same country. Arranging this, however, proved to be a challenge.

This was because Shell had recently replaced its colonial model of simply sending staff wherever it thought best with a modern one involving a certain amount of personal choice. This sounded like progress in theory, but for couples needing two jobs in the same place at the same time, the process was a nightmare. Just finding an operating company with a simultaneous requirement for both an economist and a petrophysicist was difficult enough, but for each of us to then independently get those jobs proved nigh on impossible. The old godfatherly role of a central staff planner had been thrown out with the proverbial baby and its bath water, and no one was interested in helping us. Finally, after many phone calls, a lot of persuasion, and six long months, we both got jobs in Houston. It wasn't an experience we were prepared to go through again and for the first time we considered leaving our jobs to go sailing.

What stopped us back then was an innate tendency to be sensible. We were both brought up by sensible parents who guided us through our educations and into sensible jobs. Although we did look at a few yachts in Scotland during those six months, we knew that buying one quickly and setting off ill-prepared and ill-equipped would not be wise. At that point, my sailing experience with Gjalt amounted to a two-week bareboat charter in the British Virgin Islands and one week in Croatia – not nearly enough to embark on a Pacific crossing. We needed more financial security, more time to choose the right boat, and

more time to get the vessel and its sailors ready for long-distance cruising. Some people are eccentric, they do set off on a whim, but we aren't whimsical types. Being sensible might be more dull, but it's generally less hazardous.

It's the easiest thing in the world to slip into the American dream. We rented a large house with a double garage for our two cars and a swimming pool in the back garden. It was in a suburban neighbourhood so immaculately manicured and in such glorious Technicolor it almost didn't seem real, as if we were living on a Hollywood film set. We soon discovered that this pristine perfection was ensured by the iron fist of the neighbourhood's Garden Committee. This shadowy group patrolled the streets undercover, looking for the first signs of dereliction of duty. At the merest hint of a weed gaining ground in a flowerbed, you'd get a warning letter in your mailbox advising you to take corrective action or face the consequences. When our jobs took us abroad for stints that were too long for us to maintain our property to their required standards and we received a second warning letter (gardens need a *lot* of attention in Houston), we knew we had to get help. We turned to Alberto, a congenial Mexican who subsequently came every week to make sure our front garden never fell foul of the Committee again.

We saw as much of the States as we could during our vacations and were gradually seduced by its unique grandeur. Everything was big, bigger than anywhere else: the landscape, the sky, the buildings that scraped it, the cars, the highways, the fast food portions, even the people. Modesty and moderation were alien concepts. You could get anything you wanted and too much that you didn't, and most of it was cheap, that sly accomplice of temptation. It was easy to settle into the human melting pot that is Houston, a place where practically everyone comes from somewhere else.

Still, Gjalt's desire to go sailing was not suppressed by any of this. Two pivotal things happened the year we bought our boat. The first was a trip to San Diego, California, where it seemed to Gjalt that every single resident had their own yacht. While I enjoyed the ideal climate, the ocean, and the laid-back atmosphere, Gjalt sank into a deep depression. As far as he was concerned, his boatless status meant his

life was as good as in the toilet. The second thing happened one morning in our glorious Technicolor neighbourhood. As Gjalt was taking out the garbage (a chore known to upset men's testosterone levels), he glanced down the street and saw a staggeringly rotund man on the outer limits of middle age doing exactly the same thing. For Gjalt it was an epiphany: he had looked into the future, and the future was bleak. He was sure that if he didn't act soon, he'd be taking out the garbage in suburbia for the next twenty years, steadily gaining weight in the process. At that very moment, all his disparate frustrations merged into a full-blown crisis, and as he lowered the lid onto the dustbin, he decided to buy a yacht.

We found her for sale at Clear Lake, an hour's drive south from Houston, on the Fourth of July 2001; Independence Day. She was a forty-one-foot Westerly Oceanlord, a yacht distinguished in sailing magazines as 'a pedigree blue-water cruiser'. Since it was a British design foreign to the U.S. market, she'd waited months for a buyer and as a result, the asking price had fallen dramatically.

We both fell in love with her at first sight. Gjalt was drawn in by her beautiful hull shape, her strong lines, sturdy mast, teak deck, and centre cockpit. She was solidly built to withstand heavy weather, he could see how well she would cope with big seas. Just standing behind her steering wheel, simply gazing at her winches, took him to those places he'd always dreamt of going: across oceans, to uninhabited islands, completely self-sufficient.

Down below, her interior was similarly prepared for adventure. The chart table was immediately to the left of the stairs, it was broad and solid, we could sit behind it securely, even in the roughest conditions. On the other side was the galley, a compact space we could cook in safely while the boat coursed through the waves. The main cabin had handholds in all the right places, so we could move about without falling over. And hidden from view was a fifty-four horsepower engine and tanks that could hold 500 litres of fresh water and 320 litres of diesel. This was a yacht designed to venture far beyond the marina.

With a meagre three weeks of sailing to my credit, I was captivated by her other, more superficial qualities. The first of these was the colour of her hull; shallow, but

true. “Look, they’ve got a blue one,” I said to Gjalt when we arrived at the brokerage.

She was also brand new, which was incredibly appealing. I wouldn’t have to scrape charred remnants from the cooker, or sit on a toilet with a long history of unknown, salty backsides. I loved the idea that we would be her first owners, that she would truly be ours.

I felt at home the moment I stepped onboard. When I sat in the cockpit, I could picture us anchored in tropical waters. Her interior was inviting, a warm blend of oak cupboards and dark blue upholstery. There was a double bed in the aft cabin and not just one head complete with shower, but two; I wasn’t going to have to rough it. When Gjalt said she was a safe boat to take to sea, it seemed like a bonus, but of course it was her beauty and homeliness that were bonuses to her seaworthiness, something I would come to appreciate soon enough.

She was the best boat we had looked at by far, and a bargain at the reduced price. Even so, she was expensive.

“We can afford it if we each pay half,” I said, which took Gjalt by surprise. As sailing across the Pacific was his dream, the most he’d hoped for was that I would go with him; he hadn’t expected me to chip in financially.

But it was an easy dream to share, and I was happy to buy into it. Besides, our posting had three years left so if I decided I hated sailing, we could just sell the boat. Having spent our working lives abroad, however, moving to a new country every three or four years, travel had become part of our lives. We were modern-day nomads, and we grew uncomfortable if our surroundings stayed the same for too long. It seemed cruising would fit us perfectly and might even help me achieve a dream of my own.

I’d always wanted to be a writer – the real kind whose books got published, since I was already one whose books didn’t. After two novels were turned down (for good reason, I realised in hindsight), I began to write short stories instead. As these were far less time-consuming, rejection was somewhat easier to take. But I did win a major competition called the Bridport Prize, had a second story published, won a smaller competition, and was runner-up in another. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to make me wonder if I could write a worthwhile book, if only I had the time. It wasn’t easy to be creative after a long day in the

office, and weekends were filled with other things. Sailing across the Pacific appealed to my sense of adventure, but I also hoped it would give me the time and inspiration to write. I didn't want to get to the end of my life and regret not having tried.

After as much careful deliberation as prospective parents give to naming their baby, we called our boat *Stella Maris*. Gjalt's surname is van der Zee, which means 'from the sea' in Dutch, and I had studied the stars, so we chose 'The Star of the Sea', expressed more poetically in Latin.

We spent time getting to know her on the shallow, protected waters of Galveston Bay before we ventured further out onto the adjacent Gulf of Mexico. As an avid racer, Gjalt was overjoyed to discover that, despite her being a solidly built thirteen-and-a-half-ton cruising boat, she was also fast. He loved the in-mast furling system but had to get used to the shape of the mainsail, the outer edge of which was slightly concave so it could fit inside the mast. With the genoa on a roller furler, both sails could be handled from the cockpit – a safe design for rough weather.

Meanwhile, I became accustomed to the motion of the boat, to the fact that it was possible for her to heel over in strong winds and not capsize, something I doubted at first. On sunny afternoons, there was a peacefulness that came with gliding effortlessly across the bay, the rush of water past the hull the only sound. In time we ventured along nineteen miles of the Houston Ship Channel to pass between the Galveston Jetty breakwaters and into the Gulf of Mexico. The Gulf would prove to be a hard taskmaster, exposing us to conditions we didn't expect to encounter in the Pacific. If we and *Stella Maris* could cope there, we'd be well prepared for what lay ahead.

We were tested the first time we spent the night away from the safety of our berth at Kemah. The weather was good when we dropped the anchor in a sheltered spot beside the Galveston Marina, close to the Jetties and the Gulf. We watched the sun go down and enjoyed being at anchor, away from houses and cars, away from people. A cold front was forecast for the following afternoon, but we intended to be in Freeport by then, the next safe haven along the coast, some forty miles southwest.

But the front followed a different schedule, arriving twelve hours early at three in the morning, with enough

force to rip our anchor out of the mud. Gjalt woke up instantly and rushed on deck while I remained fast asleep. The wind had shifted 180 degrees and put us on a lee shore. Gjalt shouted for me to get on deck and raise the anchor. I hurried up the stairs and ran forward, my pyjamas whipping around me in the strong wind, getting drenched by heavy rain as I operated the electric winch on the bow. As the chain wound around it, I glanced up and saw a huge freighter crossing in front of us on its way into port; behind us, the monstrous concrete wall of the marina was waiting for us to drift onto it.

With the anchor safely up, we motored into the marina and found an empty berth directly behind the concrete wall. We slipped in, tied up, and made ourselves a couple of very stiff rum-and-Cokes. As we watched sea spray fly over the wall – which looked a lot better from this side – the realisation of how close we'd come to disaster sank in. If Gjalt hadn't woken up immediately, if the engine hadn't started, or if either of us had panicked, we could have lost *Stella Maris* that night. We'd been wrong to trust the accuracy of the weather forecast, but it wasn't to be the last time we were caught out by the unpredictable arrivals of cold fronts.

On our next trip, we sailed overnight for the first time to reach Matagorda Island, 110 miles southwest of Galveston. The night sky was so clear and decorated with such a glittering array of stars that we stayed up together for too long enjoying it. Gjalt needed to be alert when we made landfall the following morning, so I finally sent him to bed for a few hours. The weather was calm, and I felt confident to stay on watch alone.

We sailed relatively close to shore, over oilfields and amongst the hundreds of small, unmanned platforms that were busy extracting crude from beneath the sea. This made the Gulf a very good place to practice another important aspect of blue-water cruising: night watches. If we wanted to cross oceans, we'd have to sail at night, and that meant keeping a lookout for ships. The deadliest of these would be monstrously bigger than *Stella Maris* and significantly faster. A tanker sighted on the horizon and moving at a speed of twenty knots could run over us within twenty minutes if we were on a collision course. It would be complacent to rely on the ships' crews seeing *Stella Maris*.

We knew we were responsible for our own lives and so at least one of us was in the cockpit at all times keeping watch.

Early the next day, we left the Gulf waters through a channel beside uninhabited Matagorda Island. We tucked behind its eastern end, dropped anchor, and went straight to bed. Despite a few hours of snatched sleep, we were both shattered. That afternoon we moved a few miles in to a more protected and picturesque part of the island called Lighthouse Cove, where we were the only yacht anchored in the shallow waters. Since it was a wildlife refuge and state-designated natural area, there were no houses, no cars, no roads, and no lights. We spent a peaceful night there, but we had an unexpectedly rude awakening the next morning when another early cold front tore our anchor out of the mud once again.

We began drifting just after dawn, so at least it was light. Nevertheless, I found the situation daunting, but with the soft, muddy bottom the only hazard, Gjalt calmly motored into the howling wind and rain towards the island's small harbour. Unsure if the water there was deep enough to accommodate *Stella Maris*, Gjalt sent me down below to check the cruising guide. With the harbour approaching fast, I wanted to give him a quick answer and rushed to the stairs, but slick with rain they'd become as slippery as ice. My feet shot out in front of me, leaving me dangling by my right arm as my fingers gripped the handhold at the top of the companionway. Unfortunately my right shoulder wasn't up to the job of holding me there, having been in the habit of dislocating since I was fifteen. With the ball well and truly out of its socket, I instantly let go and plummeted onto the cabin floor a few feet below. I'd already been unnerved by the morning's events, but this latest incident seemed an injustice too far. I began to sob and feel incredibly sorry for myself, because I knew I had to get my shoulder back in its rightful place quickly so I could help Gjalt berth *Stella Maris*. I forced myself to get on my knees and felt quite heroic as I shouted up the stairs, "I'm okay! Don't worry about me. I don't need any help," although quite frankly help was the last thing I wanted.

I'd mastered the technique of popping the ball back into its socket the third time I dislocated it, inspired by a doctor's threat to have me sliced open and repaired the second time I'd gone to hospital seeking professional help.

It was something I had to do alone; I was terrified of good Samaritans arriving on the scene wanting to help. I braced myself the way you do before ripping a plaster from your skin, then quickly stretched out my arm and twisted it from side to side until I felt the reassuring jerk of the ball joint slipping back into place. I knew the soreness would come the next day, but at that moment the instant fix at least allowed me to be useful again. I was able to throw the mooring lines to the three people we unexpectedly found standing on the shore, while Gjalt manoeuvred *Stella Maris* into the small harbour.

Gjalt told me later that he didn't even realise I'd dislocated my shoulder, nor heard me shout because the wind was so loud.

"I couldn't have helped you anyway," he said. "I had to take care of *Stella*."

Charming, I thought, but of course he was right.

Gjalt wanted us to make a long-distance trip before we committed ourselves to sail to Australia, so a year after buying the boat, we intended to sail 700 miles across the Gulf of Mexico to the Florida Keys. But the October weather didn't cooperate with our plan, and the prevailing winds forced us to sail southwest again, this time to Brownsville on the Mexican border.

As we filled up at the fuel dock, I wasn't desperately keen to head out to sea beneath a sky that was so menacingly grey, and I'd probably have resisted had I known that thunderstorms were in the forecast. Fearing this Gjalt kept the knowledge to himself; he wanted to see how well we and *Stella Maris* would cope in rough conditions. In those early days I really was just the idiot along for the ride, happy to leave everything to Gjalt: the weather, the route planning, the navigation. Practically the only contribution I made – besides companionship – was keeping watch. And this latest trip, which involved more than one night at sea, was supposed to give us the opportunity to test our watch schedule, to see how many hours we could each comfortably stay awake so the other could get a decent chunk of sleep.

But the weather was so bad – even worse than Gjalt thought it would be – that *we* were the ones tested, not the watch schedule. From the start, we had very strong following winds, and *Stella Maris* raced along under reefed

sails, riding the waves with ease, unlike me. I felt seasick and unnerved by the heavy blanket of bulging grey clouds that stretched across the sky. On one occasion we sailed too close to a manned oil platform, and a sudden gust sent us speeding towards it. It was huge – a steel monster that looked especially grotesque in the miserable gloom – and, to make matters worse, a hostile standby boat chased us away. Down below I was unbalanced by every wave *Stella Maris* charged through. It was October, it was cold, I wore several layers to keep warm and each took a concerted effort to add or remove whenever I went to the toilet, or got in or out of bed. When Gjalt woke me up for my second night watch I snapped. “This might be your idea of fun, but it’s not mine,” I shouted. “You didn’t tell me it would be like this. You said it would be fun, but it’s not, it’s horrible. I hate sailing. I want to sell the boat!” And Gjalt knew that I meant it.

The following day, conditions deteriorated. We decided to give up on Brownsville and head for Port Aransas instead; a destination that still required us to spend a second night at sea. On my watch, close to midnight, I sat in the cockpit, calmly watching the lightning display up ahead become increasingly dazzling. In my naivety, I thought nothing much of it, although I was careful not to touch anything made of metal in case I got electrocuted. It was only when one particularly bright flash of lightning made me think I’d seen a huge tanker very close to us that I woke up Gjalt. Before that, I’d been convinced that the lights I was keeping a watchful eye on belonged to distant fishing boats, but suddenly I was afraid they were actually on either side of a scarily wide and dangerously close tanker. Gjalt came topsides and agreed that the lights were as far away as I initially judged them to be, but he decided he didn’t like the look of the lightning. He went back down below to check the size of the storm on the radar.

After too long waiting for his assurance that all was well, I pushed open the companionway hatch. “Is everything okay?” I asked.

“No, it isn’t.”

This was not what I wanted to hear.

An unbroken patch of black covered half the radar display, and it was just a few miles ahead of us. Gjalt tuned the VHF radio to the weather channel, and we heard a calm male voice announcing the approach of a severe

thunderstorm. The man advised all listeners to move away from any windows and take shelter under the nearest table until he gave the all-clear. Although the idea of hiding under the table did hold a certain appeal, it wasn't a very useful suggestion in our particular situation. The eye of the storm was bearing down on us, and it was too big and moving too fast for us to sail out of its way.

I retreated below deck while Gjalt went into the cockpit to bring in the sails before the strong winds reached us. I was shocked to see him illuminated almost constantly by eerie bluish-white light. I desperately hoped he wouldn't be struck dead by lightning, leaving me alone in that dark night at the mercy of the elements. I was a complete beginner; I didn't have a clue what to do in such dire conditions, and with a grilled captain lying in the cockpit I would be reduced to a gibbering wreck. Thankfully, for Gjalt as well as me, obviously, he survived unscathed and joined me down below to see what the storm had in store for us.

I felt quite numb as I sat perched on the edge of a seat in the main cabin, knowing there was no escaping this nightmare. I considered praying, but it had been a good few years since I'd asked any favours of God, and I'd since convinced myself that He did not exist. Even though I could hear Death howling towards me, I knew it would be unethical to suddenly hedge my bets and pray to be saved just because I found myself in a tight squeeze.

So instead, my thoughts turned to the sentient being closest to God, as far as I was concerned – my mum. She had warned me against sailing and told me, "It will only make you feel sick, sick, sick!" She was right, as always, although the sickness in the pit of my stomach was fear and had nothing to do with the motion of the sea. While outside the wind grew steadily stronger, I wondered why I hadn't kept my feet firmly on dry land as my mum had told me to. It sounded terrifying as it tore through the rigging, whipping stays and halyards in a frenzied assault that reached a screaming climax when the storm passed right over us.

Gjalt sat at the chart table looking at the instruments but turned away from the wind speed indicator when it registered sixty-three knots. He didn't want to see it go any higher than that; the noise was bad enough without knowing any cold, hard facts.

Despite being bombarded by the wind and the torrential

downpour that came with it, *Stella Maris* was unfazed and remained steady in the water. Gjalt couldn't resist sticking his head out of the hatch to witness the storm's power. It was too brief to kick up any real waves, and the rain was so hard it literally flattened the surface of the sea, ironing out any potential ones. Although Gjalt was fearful of a direct lightning strike to the mast, which had the capacity not only to burn out the instruments but to sink the boat, he also thought, *This is as bad as it's ever going to get, and we're coping fine.*

After an hour, the wind had dropped to gale force, a mere stiff breeze compared to the preceding fury. It almost seemed calm.

"You know, sailors can go their whole lives without ever experiencing weather like that," Gjalt said, smiling proudly.

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" I asked, incredulous.

"Well, at least you have to admit that *Stella* was a star," he persisted.

While that was certainly true, I was in no mood to admit to anything at the time. The trip had been traumatic enough before the storm, which had now blown away what had been left of my good will. "Well, you got us into this mess, so you can get us out of it," I said and proceeded to get into bed, where I stayed for the rest of the night.

My refusal to relieve Gjalt from the helm during the night left him completely exhausted the next morning when he steered us into harbour. I did eventually feel ashamed about this, although the guilt dissipated some months later when he admitted to having known about the forecast thunderstorms and kept quiet about it.

Safely berthed in Port Aransas, we discovered a knot in the genoa sheet so tight and complex it seemed that only a paranormal entity could have tied it; it took Gjalt an hour to unravel with his pliers.

The bad weather continued unabated for almost three weeks. I'd been promised a trip to Florida, and I got a Texan resort town out of season. It was wet, it was boring and the only way back to Galveston was via the Intracoastal Waterway. It wasn't pleasant, but with winds stubbornly persisting from the northeast, at least we managed to make it home.

Six months later, we decided to try again to reach the Florida Keys. If we could not only complete the 1,400-mile round trip but enjoy it too, we'd be ready for the 11,000-mile journey to Australia. It was May, almost summer, but the passage began as horribly as the last one. This time, though, we didn't turn away from the strong winds but sailed close to them, pounding into oncoming waves that were short, steep, and unforgiving. Seawater flew over deck with such persistence that the only way to keep moderately dry whilst on watch was to sit on the cockpit floor. Once again, I was seasick, and I only felt better when I could lie down. Gjalt stayed on watch as long as possible to spare me from the elements; he knew he had to thwart my threats of selling the boat.

But when conditions eased on the third day, we sailed into a different world. The angry sea became tranquil, a vast indigo carpet that rolled out to the horizon all around us. Away from land there was emptiness and solitude. During six days at sea, we only saw the odd ship in the distance and a smattering of unmanned oil platforms. We pretty much had the world to ourselves and, far from being bored, or lonely, we loved it.

Having spent many weeks on remote offshore drilling rigs, I wasn't surprised that I felt comfortable at sea; the yacht was just a tad smaller than the rig, that was all. We fine-tuned our night watches to three hours on, three hours off (two was too short, four was too long), and after a few days we'd grown used to the routine and no longer felt tired on that schedule. Then one bright, sunny morning, we arrived at Garden Key in the uninhabited Dry Tortugas, the westernmost islands of the Florida Keys. The tropical islet was dominated by Fort Jefferson, a massive hexagonal fortress that had been built in the nineteenth century to defend America's Gulf Coast.

As we dropped the anchor in the clear turquoise water, attracting a school of barracudas as it glistened in the sunlight on its way down, we realised Garden Key was just one of many fascinating places in the world that can only be reached by boat. We knew then that we wanted to sail to those places.

Gjalt was pleased that after six days at sea, neither of us felt the urge to escape the confined space of *Stella Maris* and rush to stand on dry land – nor were we starved for the

company of other people. He was proud we'd made it and knew that Australia wasn't beyond our reach. So we spent our fourth and final year in Houston completing preparations for what would be the biggest adventure of our lives.

It was strangely fortuitous that while our sailing ambitions grew, our satisfaction at work declined. When we had first arrived in Houston, our jobs were challenging and interesting. Gjalt worked on developing new business opportunities for Shell within the United States and worldwide, a job that took him to China and Abu Dhabi. I was the operational petrophysicist for exploration wells drilled in deep water off the coasts of Brazil and Egypt, a job that regularly took me offshore.

But as time went by, a raft of middle managers drifted into the organisation, clogging up the system. There was a wearisome increase in office politics, and a seemingly never-ending series of project reviews were introduced. We no longer felt as if our efforts were appreciated, and there seemed to be a growing company-wide addiction to rambling, unproductive meetings that did nothing but sap our energy. Elvis Presley expressed our thoughts perfectly when he sang, "A little less conversation, a little more action please."

In the last year of our posting, we often found our spirits in need of lifting. Both of us were keen swimmers, so sometimes the endorphins produced during a long swim would be enough. Often, a trip to our local Mexican restaurant for a frozen margarita served in a glass the size of a goldfish bowl would do the trick. But the guaranteed cure for our despondency was the film *The Big Lebowski*: no matter how close to the brink we found ourselves, it never failed to pull us back.

In the Coen brothers' 1998 comedy, Jeff Bridges plays The Dude, a middle-aged hippy "the square community doesn't give a shit about", whose only concern in life is ten-pin bowling. The Dude is a man who goes to the supermarket in his dressing gown and writes a cheque for a sixty-nine-cent carton of milk he's already sampled in the aisle. Watching him lead a life as far removed from the petty stresses of the rat race as it's possible to get was not only comforting, it was inspiring.

One morning, The Dude's landlord pays him a visit to carefully broach the subject of overdue rent. "Dude, tomorrow's already the tenth," he says.

Sipping his breakfast of a White Russian cocktail, our hero replies, “Far out.”

That was how laid-back we wanted to be; surely that was the attitude to have if we were to lead long and healthy lives. Deep down, we knew how insignificant those irritating work issues were, yet we took them all so seriously, we allowed them to upset us. Somewhere along the line we’d lost perspective, and the time had come to get it back. Life really is short, a mere blip on the timescale of the universe. Why waste it worrying about work? Nobody ever lay on their death bed wishing they’d spent more time in the office.

We didn’t know if we would enjoy the cruising life or if we could live on a small boat for an extended period of time without bloodshed. In the event that we hated it, hated each other, or - less likely - missed work, we thought it best to leave our options open and so we requested a one-year sabbatical from the company. After all, we reasoned, Shell had invested a lot of money in us over the years, and the oil business was going to need more people as it headed into its sunset years. Most of the oil still in the ground is inclined to stay there – it’s either hard to find, hard to get at, hard to get out, or all three – and extracting it will require skilled people. But despite support from our immediate bosses, somewhere up the long chain of command someone concluded that opening the golden cage doors for us would lead to a stampede by everyone else. Sabbaticals for studies? Yes. Sabbaticals for babies? Well, that was required by law. Sabbaticals for sailing? You must be joking! If we wanted a break to engage in such clearly frivolous pursuits, we had no choice but to resign.

This outcome disappointed and annoyed Gjalt, and he wasn’t mollified by a concession that allowed us to apply for jobs through the internal system within two years. He felt responsible for my resignation and wanted me to be able to return if things didn’t work out. I wasn’t surprised by the decision (Shell was rather conservative and hated setting precedents), and I wasn’t sorry, because I really didn’t believe that we would want to return after only one year of freedom. I was convinced it would feel like a sell-out to take such a big step – to actually sail halfway around the world – and then simply return to a life that we knew no longer satisfied us, as if nothing had changed.

Resigning wasn’t a brave choice; it was really the only

choice. Our expatriate life with Shell had been exciting and rewarding, but it had reached its natural end. In many ways, Houston was the high point of it all, and carrying on would only have taken us downhill; down to that armchair we dreaded, the one overlooking the herbaceous border in the back garden.

The list of things that needed to be done was extensive. Gjalt took on all the vital technical tasks required to turn *Stella Maris* into a blue-water sailing vessel. During the three years we'd owned her, he'd already installed all the equipment we needed to sail close to home, such as the VHF radio, the autopilot (so we didn't have to sit behind the wheel all the time), and a life raft.

The life raft had to be serviced before we left, and we went along to see it unpacked. It was supposed to accommodate four people, but was alarmingly cosy when we sat in it. It seemed a wholly inadequate contraption to entrust one's life to, and the accepted wisdom of only ever stepping up to your life raft became obvious. A basic survival pack was included that contained a knife with a flimsy blade, a small torch, and a plastic paddle that looked as if it had been stolen from a child's beach set. None of this mattered, though, because we prepared our own ditch bag and filled it with food, a hand-operated water maker that made seawater drinkable, a medical kit, sunscreen, hats, and even toothbrushes; if we were adrift for a long time, we didn't want to kiss our rescuers with bad breath. We kept the bag under the companionway steps, where it was easy to grab should that terrible need to abandon ship ever arise.

We only splashed out on the expensive blue-water cruising necessities when we knew for sure that we were actually going. A single sideband (SSB) radio would enable us to talk with other cruisers over long distances and e-mail our families and friends, a vital connection to the world beyond our small floating one. An emergency position indicating radio beacon (EPIRB) would transmit our location to the Coast Guard in the event we needed rescuing. A water purifier that used ultraviolet light to zap hostile bacteria would make the foreign water we put in the tanks safe to drink. A dinghy and outboard engine would take us ashore when at anchor, additional sails and a spinnaker pole would ensure we sailed well downwind in the trades. Solar panels placed on top of the bimini that provided

shade in the cockpit would prevent us from having to run the engine to produce electricity, and a towing generator would provide extra power underway.

Gjalt installed everything himself, not only to save money, but also so he could learn about the ins and outs of all the equipment onboard. To this end, he paid a mechanic to come to *Stella Maris* and give him a crash course in her diesel engine; understanding and properly maintaining it was vital. To Gjalt, self-sufficiency was just as appealing an aspect of cruising as the freedom and adventure it promised. Help would mostly be scarce or non-existent and was certainly not something that could be relied upon.

We put together a comprehensive medical kit that could treat anything from a headache, to a bacterial infection, to a partially severed finger. We had aspirin, antibiotics, morphine, plasters, bandages, syringes, and the ability to suture. We even had surgical implements, just in case *Stella Maris* turned out to be the closest hospital to the patient and one of us had to morph into the nearest surgeon. Gjalt suggested I have all my old amalgam fillings replaced, but my dentist and I were of a different opinion. He even considered the merits of an appendectomy (his had been whipped out years earlier), but dropped the idea after he read that antibiotics could stave off any trouble long enough to reach a hospital. (I would never have agreed to it, obviously.)

We did both have comprehensive medicals, though; if our bodies were harbouring anything unpleasant, we wanted to know about it before we quit. We were inoculated against yellow fever, tetanus, diphtheria, polio, typhoid, and hepatitis B, and stocked up on malaria pills. We took out worldwide health insurance in case something happened to us underway. It was quite expensive, but the cost was insignificant compared to the bankrupting potential of serious medical treatment.

Everything on the list took longer to complete than expected – much, much longer. Even simple tasks could span days, and each one spawned a new set, so the list only ever seemed to get longer. Gjalt repeatedly felt overwhelmed by the number of things that needed to be done, while time steadily slipped away.

My main task was to obtain provisions for the months ahead. Once we left America restocking would become more

difficult and more costly, especially in the Pacific. I read articles by cruisers about how to estimate the quantities of food required and heeded advice not to scrimp on things that were cheap in the States but monumentally expensive in the cruising waters beyond, such as toilet rolls and paper towels. From our own experience in the Gulf, I knew to avoid tinned meals, such as beef stew, chilli con carne, spaghetti meatballs, and that classic gourmet favourite, pork and beans. In a burst of misplaced enthusiasm, we'd bought these tins in bulk for our early trips, but as the flavour comes from excessive amounts of fat and sugar, they quickly become inedible. So we donated the remainder of our stock to the Houston Food Bank, doing our bit to expand the average American waistline.

What better place to find oversized supplies than in the USA? Another sailor directed us to Sam's Club, a wholesaler that primarily caters to small businesses but which fortuitously turned out to be the perfect ship chandler. The enormous warehouse was stacked to the rafters with tray upon tray of tinned foods, huge sacks of rice and pasta, bags of sugar, tea and coffee, boxes of Coca Cola cans, toilet rolls, paper towels, toothpaste, and even antiseptic hand sanitiser that didn't require water. It was a cruiser's heaven. We piled it all onto industrial-strength carts and as good as fork-lifted it into the boat, returning to get more as long as there was still space. I excelled at provisioning, filling up every available compartment, until Gjalt, horrified at the sight of *Stella Maris'* sinking waterline, stopped me.

To minimise the amount of litter we would produce as we ate our way through the supplies, I repackaged all the dry foods into reusable Ziploc bags. Although I'd read tips about preserving eggs by coating them in Vaseline and sealing tins with varnish, my laziness convinced me that such actions were unnecessary. I did make a spreadsheet listing everything we'd bought and where it was stored so we could keep track of stocks and find things easily. I soon stopped updating it, though, because we restocked whenever a good opportunity arose; besides, on a forty-one-foot boat, there are only so many places things can be.

Another store that doubled as a ship chandler was Bed Bath & Beyond – the Beyond inadvertently being the cruiser's section. I bought freestanding shelves and all manner of handy storage containers to convert *Stella*

Maris' interior into something as capacious as *Doctor Who's* Tardis. I spent an inordinate amount of time investigating the best electronic gadgetry we needed for the trip: laptop computer, digital camera complete with waterproof housing, camcorder, and an MP3 Walkman, something to keep me sane during night watches. I even bought a battery-operated cappuccino whisk because I didn't see why we should live without some luxuries, but the gadget never did see the light of day. We were about to sail away from one of the most enthusiastic consumer societies in the world and took full advantage of the incredible variety of low-priced products on offer while we still had the chance.

But the quantity of new possessions we acquired was far outweighed by the old ones we shed. For a while, we considered putting things in storage, but a critical close inspection of the quality and state of our belongings convinced us to part with them. This was one of our wisest decisions; it would have cost us around 1,500 dollars and necessitated a return to Houston to deal with it later into the bargain.

Instead, we ruthlessly scaled down our lives, keeping only what justified taking up space in our small sailing boat. We sold what we could, gave away what we couldn't, and stored the few remaining possessions we weren't able to part with in the attic of Gjalt's parents. We said goodbye to our two cars, our furniture, TVs, VCRs and DVD players, books, paintings, crockery, cutlery, pots, pans, kitchen appliances, plants, and a small mountain of clothes. A homeless man was the bewildered recipient of a Hugo Boss business suit, but I'm sure he didn't wear it whilst trying to raise money from the motorists who stopped at the traffic lights he called home.

In the end, some of my tasks slipped into Gjalt's domain because I just couldn't reduce the amount of time and energy I spent in the office during those last months. I did try to savour the fact that my colleagues' concerns were no longer of any consequence to me. I did try to be like The Dude when they asked me to do something:

"We need petrophysical evaluations of one hundred and fifty wells by Tuesday to evaluate this prospect."

"Far out."

"We must have a detailed data acquisition programme in time for next week's meeting."

“Far out.”

But being as cool as The Dude just wasn't that easy – not in real life. I did say, “Far out,” every now and then, but quickly explained the joke before agreeing to do whatever was asked of me. I worked hard right up until my last day, attempting to satisfy all the final demands that piled up as the end of my office life drew near. Producing a report that documented every detail of my four years of work on a project in Brazil almost became an obsession. Gjalt was struggling to complete his own tasks for the trip and then had to deal with those I neglected because I was dedicating myself to the death throes of my career. Instead of saying, “Far out” and meaning it, I couldn't bear the thought that the impression I'd leave with my colleagues was that I'd been a waster. It was obvious that the only hope I had of emulating The Dude was to leave my job behind and actually move far out: far out to sea and away from ‘the real world’ that I'd been conditioned to take so seriously.

Before I did, though, Gjalt and my boss convinced me to write my staff report for that final year, just so my CV would be up to date should I be back in the company any time soon. I knew it was pointless, and considering the amount of things I had to do before we left, it was also a terrible waste of time, but in the spirit of not being obnoxious and leaving bridges intact, I wrote it.

When I handed the finished article to my boss, he gazed at it with quizzical curiosity, as if seeing paper for the first time. “What should I do with it now?” he asked seriously, looking to me for guidance.

I had a suggestion, but I didn't make it. I think I know where it ended up.

I had no regrets about leaving, but I wasn't entirely convinced that would always be the case.



GARDEN KEY ANCHORAGE, DRY TORTUGAS, FLORIDA



DOLPHINS UNDER THE BOAT EN ROUTE TO THE DRY TORTUGAS, FLORIDA

2.

Held Up in Mexico

In the 1970s, 12 families lived on the 20 kilometre-long island of Cancun, Mexico. Today, Cancun has more than 20,000 hotel rooms, 2.6 million visitors a year, and a permanent population of 300,000, only 30 per cent of whom have homes with treated sewage.

– Peopleandplanet.net, 2004

Small reef patches, such as El Garrafon at Isla Mujeres and Punta Nizuc at Cancun, have been completely destroyed by tourism.

– United Nations Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre Atlas, September 2001

The Gulf of Mexico lies in a zone of variable winds: not the steady and reliable trades that awaited us in the Pacific, but fickle, mischievous winds intent on making life hard for a small yacht wanting to sail south to Mexico. To get the better of them, we decided to take advantage of the kind of cold front that had twice dislodged our anchor and sent us drifting towards shore. These fronts regularly swept northerly winds down through the USA, and we planned to hang on to the tail of one to get us across the Gulf. This strategy meant sailing in strong winds, but we'd had plenty of practice doing that during our training trips, and even though it wasn't going to be much fun, the passage would at least be fast.

The bright sunshine couldn't warm us against the icy wind that was blowing the mid-December morning of our departure, but it did make me less reluctant to head out to sea. Wrapped up in cold-weather gear, we cast off the lines and left the marina for the last time. I'd expected

to feel emotional, but it seemed no different from all the other times we'd left. For Gjalt, though, it was a memorable moment: his dream was becoming a reality.

After we cleared the familiar Galveston Jetties, we steered a course southeast towards our destination of Isla Mujeres, a small island some five miles east of Cancun and the nearest Mexican check-in port. Sailing in this direction took us out of the extensive matrix of unmanned oil platforms sooner than on our previous trips, giving us the rewarding feeling that we were making fast progress.

The first two days were intensely cold, wet, and rough, and with thirteen hours of darkness, the nights were long. Alone on watch, staring into the pitch darkness, Gjalt felt overwhelmed by the magnitude of the adventure we had embarked on. He couldn't believe it was really happening, that we had severed our ties and reduced our lives to fit on our small boat. It made him feel excited but also very small – too small to be taking on something so big.

The winds were strong and more easterly than we had hoped, leading to dispiritingly familiar upwind sailing. *Stella Maris* beat doggedly into the waves, rising to the challenging conditions for which she'd been built. Gjalt found his sea legs straightaway and did the cooking, washing-up, and navigation, tasks which were impossible for me at that early stage in our voyage. Despite taking anti-seasickness pills, I felt instantly nauseous whenever I left the fresh air of the cockpit to go down below. Going to the toilet remained my most unpleasant and infuriating challenge and always pushed me into such a black mood that I became desperate to get off the boat. But being on a sea voyage is like being on a fairground ride: once it starts, you can't get off until the end.

We did at least make the good progress we'd hoped for, sailing between seven and eight knots in the strong winds. The sunshine had disappeared soon after we entered the Gulf, but at the halfway point, three grey days later, it finally found its way through a chink in the thick blanket of clouds. We were closing in on Mexico, and I took it as a sign that the warm weather and idyllic sailing I'd been promised really did lie ahead of us. We peeled away the layers of our cold-weather gear and felt our spirits lifting right along with the temperature.

By now I was able to move around below deck without

feeling sick and could help with the cooking and washing-up duties. I also sent my first e-mail using the SSB radio and Winlink, a system developed by radio hams for radio hams – a special band of enthusiasts who erect towering antennas in their back gardens so they can communicate over vast distances with others who find the telephone as unexciting and mundane as they do. Winlink was a wonderful spin-off of this interest and allowed cruising sailors who'd earned their way into the select fold to send and receive e-mails for free. Gjalt needed no greater incentive than this to subject himself to the necessary exams, one of which proved so testing it caused lasting psychological damage.

This exam required a certain proficiency in the deciphering of Morse code, a level of ability the examiners thought modest and Gjalt thought monumental. He hated learning languages and this one, with its strange dot-dash sequences transmitted at insanely high speeds, was no exception. With a fair amount of complaining and ultimately a great deal of pride, he learnt every letter of the alphabet, numbers, and a host of punctuation marks. It was when all this was strung together to form words and sentences that the challenge proved too much for him.

The Morse code sequences were fired into Gjalt's ears like tap dancers from a machinegun. He simply didn't have enough time to decipher one letter before the next arrived, and he soon found himself adrift in a sea of incomprehensible clicks. He knew the only way he could pass the exam was to jot down the dots and dashes and translate them in his own good time. So, one Saturday morning, he filed into a classroom with a handful of other eager candidates, took a seat behind a school desk, and quietly confident, with his pencil at the ready, prepared to take the exam.

Unfortunately, though, the examiner was on to him and announced that the dots and dashes were not to be written down. People had obviously tried this flagrantly underhand trick before, and shortcuts to Hamdom were simply not allowed.

Gjalt protested vigorously, as if that would change the official rules being wafted under his nose. Finally he saw that he had no choice but to scoop up his pens, erasers, and good-luck charms from his desk and skulk home knowing that his brain would have to master the impossible if he

were to get his licence.

An intense period of study followed, and there was much robotic dah-dahing of letters around the house before he finally dared to take the exam and translate the message 'on the fly'. Against all the odds, he passed with flying colours, and it was because of his perseverance that we could now regularly reassure our parents that we were still alive, not just in port but also underway. We received weather forecasts and sent our latitude and longitude to the Winlink website, where our position was displayed on a world map for anyone who was interested to see. The pain had been worth it, although whenever someone was foolish enough to ask about our e-mailing capabilities, Gjalt would complain to them at length of the trauma he had suffered at the hands of Mr. Morse.

Two days from landfall, a new cold front was forecast. To enter the Isla Mujeres anchorage from the north, we'd have to sail over a reef in a narrow and shallow passage. We didn't want to cross this hazard in the strong winds and rough seas generated by a cold front, so we had a choice of reefing the sails and waiting for the bad weather to pass, or we could ensure that we reached Isla Mujeres ahead of it. The idea of slowing down and turning *Stella Maris* into a sitting duck was not the least bit appealing, so despite being under full sail, we enlisted the help of the engine to keep our speed above six and a half knots.

Gjalt wanted to be at the helm when we reached the northeastern tip of the Yucatan Peninsula, where we were due to arrive at 1:00 am. From there, the final miles to Isla Mujeres were along the coast, so it was essential to take great care with the navigation.

In order for Gjalt to get enough sleep to keep him going until we made landfall, I remained on watch for seven hours. By this stage of the trip, the nights had become more friendly, so staying up was no trial. The clouds had dispersed, revealing an abundance of stars and allowing the half-moon to soften the blackness of the sea with a silvery sheen. *Stella Maris* glided across the water to the music on my MP3 player, which had been initiated into night watch service as soon as conditions eased. Billy Joel was sailing through Black Island Sound on his "Downeaster *Alexa*", and I was sailing towards the Yucatan Channel on

my Westerly *Stella Maris*. I couldn't have stayed awake as easily, or enjoyed myself as much, without Billy to keep me company. Back in Texas, I'd been convinced that an MP3 player was a vital piece of boat equipment, and I was right. It transformed my watches from endurance tests to hours of listening pleasure, placing my entire music collection right in the palm of my hand. Without it, I might have gone crazy from boredom or fallen asleep at the wheel. With it I had no problem staying awake during any of the seventy nights we spent at sea during the following year. I often sang along, until a complaint from down below corrected my assumption that the wind was louder than I was.

I'd had some very vivid and colourful dreams as I sank into sleep on the Gulf crossing, and the final night was no exception. When Gjalt woke me up at sunrise to enjoy our first arrival in a foreign port onboard our own boat, he rescued me from a team meeting in which I was speaking my mind while my colleagues stared at me in shocked silence. I got dressed and climbed into the cockpit, where I slowly came to my senses. On seeing the palm trees and golden beaches of Isla Mujeres I was hugely relieved to discover that it had all just been a horrible nightmare about working folk.

Having safely crossed over the shallow reef that stretched from the northern tip of the island, we made our way into the anchorage. Marinas were now a thing of our past, and we moved between the dozen or so anchored yachts looking for the best place to drop the hook. Everything was perfect: the sun, the sand, the palm trees. We could even hear Mexican music drifting out to us from somewhere onshore.

"I don't think one year is going to be enough," I said.

Our first taste of yachtie camaraderie came within minutes of setting the anchor, when a couple came alongside in their dinghy, a small brown dog at the bow. John and Christine were British and had been lured over to *Stella Maris* by the pristine red of our brand new ensign. We learnt that the bright and cheerful early retirees had been sailing in the Caribbean for two years, their cruising experience evident from the duct tape holding John's glasses together.

"You're far too young to be enjoying yourselves," Christine

said, but soon afterwards endorsed my recent statement that one year of cruising wouldn't nearly be enough.

Having arrived on a Sunday, we had a day to get the boat tidied up and ready for any inspections the authorities might deem necessary. After five nights at sea, we were both looking forward to a long stretch of uninterrupted sleep, and by mid-morning, we'd crashed in the aft cabin. Afterwards I cheerfully dropped all our cold-weather gear into the laundry basket, ready to be washed and packed away for good. Sailing was about sun, blue skies, crystal-clear warm water, and beautiful tropical islands. I hadn't forgotten Gjalt's promise that the worst was now behind us.

The next morning, we retrieved our dinghy from the aft cabin, where it was stored during passages, inflated it on deck, and launched it into Mexican waters. With the outboard engine attached, Gjalt went onshore to clear us in. The port captain wasted no time ruining our slick plan by refusing to deal with him directly, citing newly introduced rules that required the use of an agent. The word 'agent' conjured up the image of an essentially useless middleman with a greedy grin and a desire to demand a fat fee for something we could easily do ourselves. At least in Isla Mujeres, an agent could be employed for twenty-five dollars; rumours were rife of fees up to ten times that amount being charged in other Mexican ports.

Having reluctantly hired the agent, the paper trail could begin. Gjalt returned to *Stella Maris* with Giovanni, a cordial quarantine officer dressed in a crisp white uniform. We filled out the forms he'd brought along, declaring the boat free of pestilence and the dead bodies of unfortunate crew members who'd perished underway. Giovanni checked the bilges just to be sure.

While the port captain didn't want to see either of us, the Immigration Department insisted on seeing us both. The officer was in Cancun for the morning ("He's always there," they told us when we enquired next door), so we awaited his return, idly sipping cold drinks in the beachside café opposite his locked office. Eventually he appeared and promptly dismissed us, directing us to the bank to pay our visa fees. A daunting queue snaked through the place, and progress was measured in centimetres as customers slowly shuffled forward. After a very long hour, we finally arrived at the

counter, relieved that we'd made it before they closed for lunch.

The extensive formalities drifted on into the next day and consumed the better part of Gjalt's time. Before we could leave Isla Mujeres, we would have to clear out (practically the whole caper in reverse), and if we wanted to stop at any other Mexican ports on our trip south, we would be required to meander in and out of this bureaucratic labyrinth every time. This convinced us to head straight for Belize. The Panama Canal was 1,000 miles away, and we had two months to get there if we were to reach the Pacific by the start of the cruising season. There were better things to see in that time than Mexican paperwork.

The long-term resident yachties of Isla Mujeres had organised the Cruisers' Net, a daily broadcast on the VHF radio intended as a way of exchanging information. Members of the inner circle took turns acting as Net Controller, tasked with running through a fixed agenda of useful (check-in procedures) and less useful (joke of the day) items. Every morning at 7:30, we drank coffee and turned on the radio, as if tuning into *The Archers*.

Regular players included the Stranded Couple, who, having made it across from Florida a few months earlier, had been waiting ever since for the ideal weather window to sail south to Belize. They readily aired the finer points of discussions that would have been better kept private, the wife often seizing the microphone from her husband to publicly announce that she disagreed with him. She seemed to want it known that she was well aware she'd married a fool. Her voice occasionally wavered, as though she'd had a measure or two of rum at breakfast to steady her nerves. Both of them clearly viewed the ever-impending trip with extreme trepidation, but they were also desperate for a change of scenery. Every morning they looked to the self-appointed weatherman for good news and reassurance: *Couldn't he crack that magic weather window wide open? Was he sure there weren't any good anchorages en route to save them from having to sail overnight?*

Darrell the weatherman was, himself, a colourful character; as captain of a boat called *Nightmare*, this was not exactly a surprise. A wiry, middle-aged American, half-hippy/half-Vietnam veteran, with the distinctly wild air of a man who'd lived alone for far too long, he was the anchor-

age's jack of all trades. He offered to fix anything and everything for whomever was in need – engines, fridges, video recorders – and no job was too big or too complex. On the Net one morning, Darrell asked for someone to stand in as weatherman while he delivered a boat to Florida.

Astonished and horrified in equal measure, I watched Gjalt pick up the microphone and volunteer.

“Why did you do that?” I asked.

“I need to learn about the weather, and being put on the spot every morning will force me to do it.”

I was relieved that he'd been motivated by self-reliance and not a desire to join the inner circle of the community. Personally, I preferred limited involvement.

It wasn't long before something of a friendship flowered between Darrell the weatherman and Gjalt, his keen apprentice. The two of them spent hours together on *Nightmare* talking about the weather and boat maintenance, veering onto paranormal sightings of human spirit clusters on foreign mountaintops, eventually landing somewhere between fact and fiction along Guatemala's Rio Dulce, where they became embroiled in Darrell's shadowy adventures as a security guard. He even produced a bullet-wound scar to authenticate his stories.

When the Spanish arrived at Isla Mujeres in the sixteenth century, they found so many Mayan statues honouring the moon goddess Ixchel that they named it 'The Island of Women'. It was a mere half-mile wide, so even cruisers who hadn't used their legs for five days could easily cross to the eastern side and watch the Caribbean surf break on the rocky shore. The compact main town at the northern end of the four-mile-long island was a pleasant place for a stroll. Its atmospheric narrow streets were lined with low buildings painted in cheerful colours: hotels, restaurants, and many small shops, most of which sold paraphernalia for tourists. These potential customers were hoovered up from the enormous hotels that soared into the sky from the beaches of Cancun, whisked over on fast catamarans, and then released onto this charming island to sample a less modern, less crowded Mexico and hopefully part with a fair chunk of their holiday money. Around forty per cent of the 3,000,000 people who visit Cancun every year take the short trip to Isla Mujeres.

We ate good seafood at the no-frills cafés away from the more touristy quarters, bought bag-loads of cheap avocados from the supermarket, and steadfastly avoided souvenirs. I did this despite coveting one of the multicoloured blankets that brightened many of the shopfronts. There's always a love-hate relationship between natives and visitors in a place overrun by tourism, and there, with the whole town existing on tourist cash, I felt it was in full swing. Shopkeepers seemed aggressive as they tried to lure customers inside, whilst the customers remained on guard for the inevitable rip-off. I decided to wait until we reached a quieter corner of the Caribbean, where I could buy from someone who needed the business far more than an Isla Mujeres shopkeeper. It was a decision I came to regret, though, because we never saw such blankets again. So I learned a lesson: if you like it, you should just buy it.

Isla Mujeres was a wonderful destination after the cold, rough trip from the States, but we wanted to find quieter, more remote corners of the globe – those it was only possible to reach if you sailed there yourself. We were keen on heading south as soon as the weather allowed, but our plans were scuppered on Christmas Day, of all days.

On Christmas morning, Gjalt went for a swim, and I was seized by a desire to bake the first bread of the trip. It wasn't until the dough stubbornly refused to rise that it dawned on me I had doubled all the recipe ingredients except the yeast. Unwilling to admit defeat, I decided to bake the bread anyway; even if it didn't emerge light and fluffy, there was still a chance it would be edible. Well, at least that was what I thought.

When I took the two tins from the oven and turned them upside down, the loaves crashed onto the counter like pavement slabs. With a good aim and a strong arm, bakers could have used them as deadly weapons in a dawn duel. As the bread clearly stood the best chance in a duel with our teeth, I had no choice but to bury my maiden efforts at sea. I watched them sink to the depths, taking with them my premature pride at having been domestically self-sufficient.

My feelings of failure were soon swept away by a cold front that brought strong northwesterly winds into the anchorage from which there was no protection. Short,

choppy waves were quickly whipped up, and the hostile conditions drew Gjalt on deck. He immediately saw that the boat directly upwind of us had broken off its anchor and was drifting in our direction, with no one onboard. It was a thirty-eight-foot Beneteau, a boat Gjalt thought would be light enough to catch and tie off behind ours. We got fenders and lines ready, but something – probably my inexperience – stopped me from suggesting we start the engine in case we needed to move out of the way, and this was a mistake I would soon come to regret.

As the boat, prophetically named *Driftwood*, approached us, it picked up speed and aimed straight for our bow. This messed up our plan. There was no time to rush back to the helm and start the engine, and suddenly Gjalt and I found ourselves manipulating fenders, frantically trying to keep *Stella Maris* from being damaged. In the mayhem, *Driftwood's* rudder hooked on to our anchor chain, preventing the boat from drifting past. In the angry waves, it began relentlessly bucking up and down against *Stella Maris*.

Suddenly a dinghy appeared alongside *Driftwood*, and one of the two men in it climbed aboard her to try and start the engine. (We later learnt she'd been towed into the anchorage, as her engine was broken.) Then another cruiser appeared from nowhere on *Stella Maris* to help fend off the captainless attacker. After several minutes bearing the weight of two yachts heaving up and down on it, our anchor lost its grip on the seabed. As if things weren't already bad enough, we began drifting in tandem towards the nearby marina.

With the situation now desperate, a large catamaran miraculously arrived to offer assistance. Luckily for us, it had also dragged on its anchor and, having seen our predicament, the captain came over to help. We gave long lines to the man who'd boarded *Driftwood*, and he attached them to her cleats before passing the other ends to the catamaran. With the marina looming ever closer, we paid out our anchor chain so that it fell free of *Driftwood's* rudder, and the unwelcome visitor was at last pulled free. With Gjalt at the helm, I winched up the anchor, which emerged from the water with a lobster trap clamped around it. Shrouded in this slippery wire cage, it hadn't been able to dig itself back into the mud.

We motored into the sheltered lagoon south of the main

anchorage and dropped the anchor, now freed from the trap; we were extremely thankful to be out of the fray. Few boats chose to stay in the lagoon because it was so far from town, but it was incredibly peaceful and well protected, a different world from the one we'd just left. When we inspected the damage, it was a relief to find that it had been mostly limited to the rub rail. A chunk of wood was missing, and there were several other dents and some chafing. Gjalt had wanted to save *Driftwood*, but that day we learned to protect *Stella Maris* first and worry about other boats later. Had we started the engine, as I should have suggested, we could at least have moved out of the way. We were immensely grateful to the people who'd rushed to help us, without whom we would have been in real trouble. Many other cruisers also worked together to prevent *Driftwood* from running aground, and more than once it turned out. Her captain had gone ashore to make Christmas phone calls, unaware that bad weather was on its way. In the sheltered streets of town, he hadn't even noticed the cold front and so didn't worry about his boat.

We waited in vain for him to call us on the radio. On the Cruisers' Net the following morning, he thanked everyone who helped to save his boat, but he didn't utter one word of apology to us. It wasn't until late in the afternoon that he finally came over to ask if there'd been any damage to our boat, by which time our blood was almost boiling. "I thought there'd be a hole in it," he said calmly, as he inspected the hull.

We were shocked, because if he expected such serious damage, why on earth had he taken so long to show up? Fear of facing the music, probably. We managed to hold our tongues and invited him onboard, where we soon discovered that Al was a quiet, kindly man determined to do the right thing. He offered to pay for the damage immediately.

Al was a millwright at an oil refinery in Canada, but he also claimed to be a bushman. This brought to mind Grizzly Adams in a bearskin coat, surviving on rabbits during bitter winters, an image incongruous with clean-shaven, mild-mannered Al. He had been a contented, middle-aged landlubber until the evening he attended a talk given by a cruising couple who'd sailed around the world in their thirty-eight-foot Beneteau. Al was so inspired by their story that he promptly bought an identical boat himself,

intent on emulating their achievement. Every winter for the previous five years, he'd sailed the waters around Florida, getting further afield each time. He and his wife had just completed the jump to Mexico. A few days later we met his wife, and she was as unassuming and endearing as Al, intrepid enough to share her husband's adventures without complaint. Their adult daughter was visiting them for Christmas, and like a wise mother aware that the time had come to let her children venture into the world alone, she refused to worry about her parents when they set off to sea.

The following morning the wind shifted, putting us too close to shore for comfort, but when we tried to up-anchor the electric winch refused to cooperate. Gjalt removed it from the deck and took it to Darrell for inspection. When they opened it up, they discovered that some of the magnets in the electromotor had been mangled into a jumble of useless pieces. Darrell knew of a workshop in Cancun that he thought might be able to replace the magnets, so Gjalt took the fast catamaran to the mainland and embarked on a thorough exploration of the sprawling city's commercial zone.

The men in the workshop couldn't fix the electromotor, but they suggested another place to try. From there, Gjalt was directed somewhere else. This chain of events continued until half a dozen workshops had failed to repair the electromotor, but they did succeed in leaving Gjalt with the feeling that he had been helped. During this tour through the industrial yards of Cancun, he managed to add a fresh layer of grease and grime to his clothing every time he took the electromotor apart. Eventually he was so filthy that even taxi drivers refused to stop for him; only when he turned his t-shirt inside out did he regain enough respectability to be picked up.

We were left with no option but to order a new electromotor from Florida. When *Driftwood* was pulled free of *Stella Maris* and I brought up the anchor, the winch must have jammed. Not noticing this in the chaos, I continued to operate it, causing the motor to overheat and the magnets to disintegrate.

The electromotor was quickly sent from Florida, but it fell straight into the hands of Customs in Mexico City, because the company hadn't used the courier we expressly

asked for. Every day we went to the marina and asked the staff to help us get the package released. Every day they told us the wrong courier had been used. They made phone calls, they spoke to various people with encouraging gusto, but the head honcho was away for Christmas, and our electromotor wasn't going anywhere until he got back.

This carried on for six days. "Island time," people kept telling us. "Relax. Take it easy. Don't worry, be happy!" Wasn't it our goal to be like The Dude? Why hadn't we left our haste behind with the other possessions that weighed us down? It was proving hard to accept 'mañana' as a way of life.

We wandered around town, dinghied to neighbouring islands, snorkelled, swam, and began to settle into the cruising community where everyone's 'back door' was always open and yachties nipped through the anchorage to exchange information over a beer. We became good friends with John and Christine, the welcoming Brits, as well as a retired Dutch couple in their sixties, Els and Henk. We held Henk in high regard for a number of reasons: firstly he had circumnavigated the globe in their thirty-three-foot boat; secondly, he sported one of those fantastic handle-bar moustaches that curl up spectacularly at each end, a rare and rather arresting sight in modern society; and thirdly, he had an enviable ability to emphatically refuse unwanted invitations whilst smiling so disarmingly that no feelings were hurt, a consideration normally conspicuously lacking in Dutchmen.

These wonderful people saved us from the dreaded 'potluck' dinners on the beach, a kind of communal picnic for which every cruiser had to provide a dish. Perhaps it was because my cooking repertoire was more or less limited to tuna and pasta, or maybe because I felt like a Women's Institute matron baking cakes for the village fete, but I never took to those functions; neither of us did. Instead, we celebrated the eves of Christmas and New Year with our equally potluck-phobic friends and realised that thanks to them, our enforced stay in Mexico had done us good.

The electromotor finally reached Cancun on a Monday morning. If we wanted it in Isla Mujeres before Saturday, we'd have to fetch it ourselves, so that was what we did.

The following day, Gjalt installed the fully operational anchor winch back on the bow, and the perfect weather window for sailing south miraculously opened up at that very same moment. The time had come to move on, and we prepared for an early morning departure to San Pedro, Belize, some 200 miles away.

We took *Stella Maris* to the fuel dock, which was rocked violently each time a catamaran launched away from the island to take tourists back to their hotels in Cancun. While we filled the tanks with diesel and water, I sat on deck pushing my feet against the dock to keep our boat clear of its rough wooden posts.

Once again, fellow cruisers came over to help, including the male half of the Stranded Couple, a slightly built man who we now met for the first time. "Don't you mind sailing at night?" he asked me.

"Not really. If the weather's nice and there's moonlight, I enjoy it."

"You should leave with us," Gjalt suggested.

"No, I don't think so. The conditions aren't right for heading south," he insisted and slowly toddled away. Evidently he thought us irresponsible, an opinion we later heard from our friends he'd freely aired over the radio once we'd departed.

For some time afterwards, we wondered if the Stranded Couple ever left Isla Mujeres.