

Bon Voyage
or
SNAFU

“Help me!” My husband’s voice pierced the tumult of wind and water.

Wa lurched and tossed me against her ash ribs. I untangled myself from the bedding and stumbled naked through the cabin, dragged myself up the three steps of the companionway, and grabbed the cabin top. Spray hit me in the face. In the dim light of a new moon, I could barely make out Pete’s form on the stern twelve feet away. Above him, the wind vane that steered the boat had disappeared from its bracket.

A wave broke over him, and he staggered. “I’ve got to get the vane back aboard,” he called. Take the tiller.” The wind whipped the words from his mouth.

Grabbing the flashlight by the companionway, I scuttled under the boom and unlashed the helm. Foot on the tiller, I pushed *Wa* back on course, held the flashlight for Pete with one hand and hung onto the side of the cockpit with the other. Thank God, he’d taken the time to put on his safety harness. He was wearing nothing else but his glasses.

It was 8:45 p.m., January 24, 1971. We and our chocolate-point Siamese cat Coco were deep in the tropics and more than a thousand miles from land, two weeks out from California, bound for Nuku Hiva, one of the Marquesas Islands.

With the wind blowing nearly thirty knots and kicking up ten-foot seas, Pete struggled with the vane and rudder of the self-steering gear, which flopped back and forth under the stern. Each time a wave hit, I feared he’d be thrown into the sea. The harness, made of three-inch nylon webbing that crisscrossed his chest and belted his waist, was sturdy enough, but if he fell overboard, he might not have the strength to climb back. I wasn’t wearing mine and didn’t dare leave the cockpit.

It took Pete nearly an hour to drag the vane and its rudder aboard and secure them. Clambering into the cockpit, he shook water from his blond hair and beard and straightened his lithe, lean body. He looked like a golden retriever with a lopsided grin.

My heart beat faster, and I smiled back. Even after being married for nearly seven years, knowing every inch of his body and peering into the dark places of his mind, I still could turn to mush at the sight of him.

When I met him, I believed men wanted nothing from me but sex. He’d swept me off my feet by being the first man to ask for more. He’d burrowed through my shyness and pulled out a violet I didn’t know was there.

“This is the pits,” he said, “but we’re OK.”

“Should I take the first watch?” Because we now had no self-steering device, I assumed we were doomed to take turns manually steering, which meant twelve hours apiece a day on the tiller, an arduous proposition.

“Hopefully, you won’t have to. I’ll rig lines to the tiller to try to make her self-steer. But first I’ve got to put clothes on. I’m freezing my ass off.”

He went below, returned in his yellow nylon jumpsuit, and looked me up and down. “You’re shivering,” he said. “I’ll steer while you get dry.”

Although I’d been in the cockpit, I was just as wet from spray as he’d been from breaking waves. I licked the salt from my lips, towed off, dressed in my red foul-weather jumpsuit, tucked my unruly hair inside the hood, put on my glasses, and buckled on my harness.

He spent a futile hour trying to make the boat self-steer, then made coffee for me, poured it into the stainless steel Thermos, and went to bed. I was to wake him at 12:30.

Wa sliced through the water at six, sometimes seven knots, dashing across waves that broke over the bow, kicking up spray that beat on my jumpsuit. Water cascaded aft along the decks until it ran out the scuppers. My face and hands were wet and cold, but the coffee warmed my insides.

This won't be so bad, I told myself. An inconvenience. And it will give me a good story for the News-Press, if I can take time from steering to write it. (The Santa Barbara News-Press, for which I'd worked before we left, had agreed to buy my stories at ten dollars apiece.) Pete will fix the self-steering when we get to the Marquesas. I can steer for a few days. Let the winds laugh at us. We're young and strong and will endure.



At just over twenty-eight feet from bow to stern, twenty and a half feet at the waterline, not quite eight feet wide, and weighing 5955 pounds—hardly bigger than a Ford Expedition—*Wa* was one of the smallest boats ever to attempt a circumnavigation.

Living aboard was like living in a walk-in closet. Pete and I shared the triangular double bunk in the bow with six five-gallon water jugs lashed port and starboard and our clothing shelves above and forward of the jugs. Under the berth a seventeen-gallon water tank was attached to a pump and sink in the galley. Opposite the sink a built-in table served for navigation. Pete had taken the head out of its closet, complaining that having a special room for a toilet was a waste of space. Its replacement was a bucket.

I would learn to envy male anatomy. Pete went to the lee rail and peed over the side. I sat in the cabin on the metal bucket, holding on to the quarterberths as it slithered back and forth during heavy weather, creasing my backside with the rim's ring. Then I had to carry the bucket up the companionway, being careful not

to spill its contents, and, holding its handle and attached rope, dump it over the lee rail. This dedicated bucket lived in the lazarette, a locker aft of the cockpit.

Because *Wa* was small, we were often wet. Coco hated it. He wailed with that awful, piercing screech of a Siamese and stomped back and forth in the cabin.

Cooking in heavy weather was a lesson in gymnastics. Feet wide, I braced my knees against the port bunk under the stove and jammed my hip into the corner of the sink. The two-burner kerosene stove, on gimbals to keep it level no matter what the angle of the boat's heel, swung back and forth, sometimes sloshing water or food onto the berth.

I made doughnuts only in calm weather and tried to be very careful with boiling liquids and grease. I baked in a cast iron skillet. After making Scotch shortbread that tasted chalky instead of sweet, I realized I'd used cornstarch instead of powdered sugar. I started labeling containers.

I did the cooking because I enjoyed it and because Pete made almost all sail changes. Seemed like a good trade to me. Although I didn't mind going forward to handle halyards in light winds, I hated it when the foredeck was wet, bouncy, and dangerous.

Having only forty-seven gallons of water, we had to conserve. We used the saltwater pump at the sink for washing our faces and teeth. We washed our clothes and bathed in saltwater, using liquid dish soap, for bar soap wouldn't lather, scooping buckets of water from the sea and dumping them over our naked bodies as we stood braced on the stern holding onto the backstay. My hair got gummy, and clothing rinsed in saltwater never dried. Alone in the tropics, we seldom wore clothes anyway.

Because *Wa* carried only thirteen gallons of gasoline, we rarely ran her engine and thus had no source of electricity. Leaving with a fully charged battery, we seldom used the cabin lights, relying on kerosene lanterns instead. We were out of range of ship-to-shore radio frequencies after the first day.

We didn't have a refrigerator. When the fresh food was gone, we ate canned. Carrots, onions, and potatoes lasted unrefrigerated,



if kept dry, for a month or more. Unopened pumpkins survived three months. Eggs fresh from the poultry farm and greased with Vaseline lasted six weeks.

All our choices were dictated by money, or the lack of it. We paid \$4500 for *Wa*. For that amount we could buy only a wooden boat—Fiberglass, steel, and ferrocement were out of our price range for anything big enough to be safe at sea. If we'd known then that *Wa's* cockpit and cabin trunk would have to be varnished every three months, not to mention the other endless maintenance she required, we might've worked an extra year and gone with a larger Fiberglass craft.

We spent another \$4500 fitting her out, starting with a 44-pound Danforth anchor and two hundred feet of chain. We bought Dacron and made a genoa or genny (the larger foresail) and jib (the smaller foresail). Our only extravagances were diving masks fitted with prescription lenses for both of us. We knew we'd skin dive in most ports, and we wanted to be able to see the marvelous reef creatures of the tropics.

I stocked six months' supply of food, guesstimated on the basis of what we ate every week. I was on a first-name-basis at Smart & Final Iris Company, where I bought caseloads of canned beans, tomatoes, chicken, and ham and gunny sacks of flour and rice. Sailing by the seats of our pants, we could only hope the remaining \$1000 of our savings would last until we crossed the Pacific.



The night after we lost the self-steering, the wind still blew nearly thirty knots. It screamed through the rigging and drove walls of water to whack against *Wa*.

When I climbed to the cockpit for my midnight watch, I had to grab a new hand-hold every time I took a step. Spray stung my face, and the boat's violent motion forced me to brace myself, even when sitting.

I'd been straining against the tiller for an hour when I heard

something like a chunk of wood whapping against the mainsail. I shone the flashlight on the main but could see nothing. One learns on a boat to be suspicious of strange noises, so I kept searching. Still nothing.

My mind was in a fog. I'd gotten only five hours of sleep the night before, I wasn't used to steering twelve hours a day, and my body felt battered by the rough seas. I stopped looking and let my mind go into autopilot.

Two hours later I called Pete to take over. "I heard something like a block hitting the main," I said, "but I'm not hearing it anymore."

He shone the flashlight where I pointed and peered into the darkness. "It's probably nothing," he said.

Exhaustion made fools of us.

The following afternoon, as I washed dishes, Pete's cry of alarm sounded once more.

When I raced to the cockpit, he jabbed his finger at the jumper stay, a triangular piece of metal used to hold the mast in place. It was swinging free on the starboard side. The steel shrouds attached to the jumper flopped like loose strings. The mast quivered.

At once I realized what that whapping against the mainsail had been. "Oh my God, what're we going to do?" I asked. For at least twelve hours the stay had been broken and the mast in danger of toppling.

Pete thrust the tiller into my hand, scrambled to the halyard, and brought down the mainsail.

"I've got to go up the mast," he said when he returned.

I didn't argue. Shoving down fears of what I would do if he hit the deck and died, I steered *Wa* under the jib alone while Pete fetched his tools. With not enough sail up to keep her steady, she bucked like an ornery horse. It took the power of both my hands to keep her on course.

This new problem was not just an inconvenience: it was potentially dangerous. *Wa's* mast towered thirty feet from the deck with nothing to hold it in place but thin strands of wire. If the mast fell, *Wa* would be crippled. Losing the mast wouldn't kill us, of course, but sailing thirteen hundred miles with only the genoa

or jib to power the boat would be a sea of troubles, as it were, and an unknown worthy of dread.

And I couldn't help. I wouldn't climb the mast even at a dock. I was too terrified of heights.

Pete attached the canvas bosun's chair to the halyard and put his tools in a bucket. Then, with a loud grunt, he pulled on the halyard to hoist himself up the mast. He got barely two feet above the boom as the heavy seas smacked him against the mast. He tried another pull, groaning with the effort, and his hands shook.

Twice more he tried; twice more he failed.

Discouraged, he slumped back into the cockpit and lit a cigarette.

"What are we going to do?" I asked.

"The wind'll die. It's not *supposed* to blow Force 6 in the north-east trades."

"I'm dead on my feet. I'm afraid I'll make a mistake and get us into bigger trouble."

He took the helm from me and hove to—pulling the tiller away from the direction of the wind and lashing it in order to keep the boat's forward motion to a minimum.

He put his arm around me and stroked my hair. "I'm sorry, babe. We're going to be OK."

"It's a bad beginning. I'm scared. And I just feel so, I don't know, like I don't want to go for two weeks without screwing."

Pete's voice softened. "Hey, there's no reason we have to keep on sailing. It's not a race. Let's take the night off and cuddle."

I smiled at his touch, my thoughts gladly side-tracked to romance.

The next morning, Pete double-reefed, or shortened, the mainsail and got us under way. He assumed that, with less sail up and lighter winds, *Wa* could handle the stress on the broken jumper stay until we could reach port.

Refreshed after sex and sleep, I washed my hair for the first time in more than two weeks by bracing myself at the top of the companionway and dunking my head in a bucket of saltwater.

I created so much lather from the dish soap that rinsing in

the bucket wouldn't work. So, eyes shut, I backed down the companionway and felt my way to the sink, where I pumped saltwater over my soapy hair until the lather was gone, much of it sloshed onto the floor.

"It's good to see you having so much fun," Pete remarked.

"And cleaning the cabin sole at the same time," I replied.

The next night, I woke to the now familiar call, "Addie, help!" I'd barely gotten to sleep and my body rebelled at the prospect of taking the tiller again. I yanked on my wet foul-weather gear and safety harness. With a sigh I climbed to the cockpit.

"It's the starboard spreader," he said. Shining the flashlight into the rigging, I saw dangling the foot-long piece of wood also used to hold up the mast.

I took the tiller and hove *Wa* to. The mast now had no support on the starboard side.

Pete scrambled about rigging running backstays—taut ropes from high up the mast to cleats aft of the cockpit—to provide extra support to the mast. We retreated below to wait for dawn.

Now there was no question: Pete had to get up that mast. And if he couldn't fix the spreader, what would we do? Could we make it to Nuku Hiva under jury rig? We were more than twelve hundred miles from port.

I sat in the cockpit, chewing on my fingers, while Pete, in protective jeans and a long-sleeved shirt, put his tools in a bucket and prepared a block and tackle. He attached the stationary pulley to his safety harness and threaded the main halyard through the moveable pulley. Then he began to tug on the halyard and slowly, slowly rose.

The mast swayed in a sixty-degree arc. I imagined him falling, hitting the deck, crippling himself. Then I stopped those thoughts. Instead, I stared at his back and whispered, "You can do it," willing him upward.

Every time the mast pivoted, it battered Pete against its metal track. He clung like a spider to its web, buffeted by the wind, and

inched upward. If his legs hadn't been strong, he never would've been able to hang on. My fear turned to pride: *this is the man I love, a man of courage and resourcefulness. He will save us.*

When he reached the spreader, he stuck it back in its socket and bound the jumper to it with stainless steel rigging wire.

We were under way again by ten.

On February 9 at 10:30 in the morning, Pete yelled, "Land ho!"

I raced up on deck. A blue clump of volcanic island jutted four thousand feet from the sea off *Wa's* starboard bow. "The Marquesas! We did it!" I shrieked. I was so grateful I could've cried. Instead, I just stared, transfixed.

Coco, awakened by the shouting, ambled up the companionway and stretched. Then he sniffed the air. "Meow!" he said, pointing his nose at the island.

"You're right," I said. "Smart cat. Soon you won't be bouncing around and wet anymore." I didn't tell him his reprieve would last no more than a month.

Suddenly I had many things to do—write a letter to my dad and his wife, Helen, write another story for the *News-Press*, prepare lunch and clean up, then take my turn steering. When I wasn't steering, though, I kept popping back on deck to see how much closer we were to our first landfall.

With a glorious sunset of red, pink, orange, and yellow clouds crowning Ua Pou to the south, we rounded the corner at Hat Island and sailed into the triangle between Ua Huka, Ua Pou, and Nuku Hiva. I broke open the Chivas Regal a friend had thrown to us as we left Marina del Rey thirty days before and toasted the world. We had completed our first passage and thus passed our Great Adventure initiation. *It's all downhill from here*, I thought.

Coco, ears taut, tail arched, paced the cockpit breathing in the land. I breathed it in, too, for the first time in a month smelling fresh earth and grass.

Hundreds of terns and petrels, screeching, circled *Wa*. Coco's tail twitched. I wondered if he was thinking of those birds as din-

ner and decided to feed him extra that night. I sipped my scotch and stared at the brown and green land just ten miles away. Then I fixed a simple supper of beans that nevertheless seemed special.

Because Pete didn't want to sail into Taio Hae Bay after dark, we hove to and kept watches to make sure *Wa* wasn't close enough to land to run aground. I thought it would be hard to sleep, but once my stomach was full, weariness washed over me.

Pete got *Wa* under way at 2:30 a.m. At 4:30 I took the tiller, with instructions to wake him by seven so he could prepare the anchor and chain.

At mid-morning I sailed *Wa* into Taio Hae Bay, a thumb thrust into the island of Nuku Hiva, taking in great lungfuls of the air—rich earth and a riot of vegetation so fecund it was dank. The gardenia-like perfume of *tiare* Tahiti, the white flower used to make leis, floated from the shore, and the odor of burning coconut husks rode over the top. A rooster crowed, and another answered. A dog barked.

Suddenly there was color—red-painted tin roofs, yellow and orange trim on the houses—after an eternity of the blue, gray, black, and white of the sea and sky.

Taio Hae, a village of about four hundred, strung itself along the margin of the sea like a Christmas toy set. To the left was the yacht anchorage and, just ashore of it, a freshwater shower open to the air. To the right was the wharf. Tucked away in the hills to the right were the buildings of French officialdom—the post office, hospital, and *gendarmerie*.

We have survived the worst together. We can handle anything. Little did I know that I was basking in the bliss of ignorance.

