

A SAILING HOLIDAY

Martin Nelson

First Self Published 2014 Kenya

First Published as E-book in 2014

Copyright © Martin Nelson 2014

This book is copyright under the Berne Convention

No reproduction without permission

ISBN 978-0-9926668-9-7

Manuscribit Publishing

LONDON SW7

The right of Martin Nelson to be identified as author of this work has been Asserted by him in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the UK Copyright Design and Patents Act 1988

SAILING INTO THE UNKNOWN

The sky so distant and remote looks on
Whilst invisible winds, full of spite,
And seas, boiling with hidden rage,
Engage in deadly argument.

Waging an ever constant battle,
Jabbing, straining, pushing, prodding,
Propelling this man-made floating form,
Into a shadowy world, the craft writhes,

Leaving behind a tell-tale wake,
Whilst cleaving the water as a scythe.
The slapping thud against the hull,
The wind roaring as it hits the sail,

The mast heels over against the strain
And spray rises as the boat speeds on,
With man helpless and alone.
No match against this unseen power unleashed,
Battered and bruised he sails on
Until a safe haven is found.

It was Patrick's last class before the holidays. At fifteen he was tall for his age, his voice was starting to break and he was beginning to shed his puppy fat. He was feeling more and more confident and no longer agreed with everything his parents said. Every morning he touched his upper lip looking for the tell tale signs of a mustache.

That morning at school everyone was relaxing, talking, staring out of the windows and playing word games, anything to occupy themselves when Miss Elliot, the class teacher asked them to pay attention. Miss Elliot was in her early fifties, small and neat, with grey hair that was tightly combed and held in a bun at the back of her head. Apart from a touch of lipstick she wore no other makeup.

'Over the summer break, I would like you to keep a holiday journal,' she announced suddenly. The class groaned.

'What about miss?' Piped up George a small boy with bright red hair.

'Anything, anything you like as long as it's real and not made up.'

'How do you mean miss?' Asked a tall blonde girl called Daphne.

'I want you to write about something that happens to you and not something you have read about or something someone has told you.'

Then she added,

‘You don’t have to do it but there will be a prize for the winners.’

‘What’s the prize Miss?’ jumped up Jeremy in excitement. He was a small boy with a squeaky voice.

‘The best three journals will be read out in assembly and published in the school magazine.’ The class went quiet.

‘So,’ added Miss Elliott, ‘I hope you will all have a go. It should be fun to do and fun to read.’

Patrick went to bed that night wondering whether he would try to keep a journal. He knew he wasn’t any good at writing but thought maybe he would have a go, but before he could think about it anymore, sleep overcame him and he drifted off. Next morning he awoke with a start. The day felt different and then he remembered, no more school for three months. He lay very still listening. There was no sound. Jumping out of bed, he ran to the window, opened his curtains and peered out. It was one of those rare summer days. The sun was just rising above the wide expanse of the beach, which was deserted apart from one or two people walking their dogs. The tide was out and the sea just visible on the horizon. He felt a wave of excitement.

Three months! It was an eternity. He opened the window and took a deep breath. The exhilarating freshness of the morning air struck him. He felt

happy, a deep warm feeling that began somewhere in his chest and spread throughout his body. He wanted to shout for joy and then realised how early it was. The family was all still sleeping.

But a dark cloud was hovering over him. Christopher, his dad, had decided to take the family on a sailing trip from their home in Brighton around the coast to Portsmouth. It was going to be so boring Patrick had decided; sailing was so tedious, nothing to do but sit watching the water; dull; no friends, no football, no cycling just sitting.

The family boat was called Thelma after his dad's mother whom he had never known and was moored at the marina close to the town centre. His grandfather and his father had built it many years ago. Sadly his grandfather had died five years earlier and his father inherited the boat but rarely had time to sail it. Patrick still remembered his grandfather. He used to walk over to his cottage at the weekends and sit on the porch listening to his stories, hanging on his every word. Patrick's grandfather lived, as a young man in Australia. It was where his father was born.

Patrick continued watching the waves as the tide slowly edged towards the beach wondering what to do. How can I get out of the trip he asked himself? I'll pretend to be sick with a tummy ache but that would stop the whole trip. Then an idea came to

him. He was his grandma's favourite, she had said so many times to him. He wasn't to know that she said it to both of her grandchildren.

She'll help me I'm sure, he thought. As soon as he could he arranged to visit her. It was only a short walk to her house - a modernized fisherman's cottage overlooking the harbour. There was no need to knock, as the front door was always open. 'Grandma!' He shouted as he entered. 'Hello Patrick! How nice to see you. I'm in the kitchen. Would you like a hot chocolate and a jam tart?'

Grandma was over eighty, grey-haired and a bit bowed but still with all her faculties.

'What brings you to see me today?' She asked as Patrick cupped his hot chocolate and sniffed the aroma. She loved to see her grandchildren but always knew that they came for something and not just to see her. She waited. Slowly Patrick began, 'Grandma?'

'Yes?'

'I need your help.'

'Oh yes, what's the problem?'

'I don't know if you've heard that dad wants to take the whole family sailing.'

'Yes, your mum did tell me. Although she is a bit nervous about sailing, she is very excited about the idea of the family being together.'

'That's the problem grandma, you see I don't want to go.'

'You don't want to go?' Said grandma looking up from her cooking.

'Why is that Patrick? It sounds like a lot of fun.'

'I know but it won't be. It's going to be so boring.

'I see.' Grandma stopped what she was doing and looked at him.

'Patrick, you know, you are my favourite grandson and I want you to be happy but sometimes we have to do things we don't want to do.'

'I know grandma but I don't want to go. Can I stay with you?'

'You know I would love you to stay with me but...'

'But what grandma?'

'I love your Daddy and Mummy also and I know you would have a wonderful time together. Please Patrick, your mother and father need to get away and want you to go with them.'

Patrick soon realised that there was nothing he could say to change his grandmother's mind.

He sat for a while thinking. Maybe I could persuade dad that he and mum need time together without me to worry about. I would only be in the way moping and grumbling.

He imagined the scene:

Dad would be sitting reading in his study when he knocked.

'Come in, ah! It's you Patrick, what would you like? I'm a bit busy.' His father would be sitting in his big study looking out of the large picture window admiring his recent work, the recently mown lawn and flowerbeds, the well-stocked shelves on a wide range of subjects, framing his father's figure serving as a reminder of his deep respect for books.

'Dad, I've been thinking about the family sailing holiday.'

'Oh good, you must be looking forward to it. It won't be long now.' He would turn and looked at the calendar, 'about two weeks.'

Patrick waits and then in his most thoughtful voice says,

'Don't you and Mum need time together? I would just be in the way, a worry? You could focus on each other.'

'Patrick, that's very thoughtful of you and I really appreciate your unselfishness but it wouldn't be the same without you and Rachel. We would miss you and worry that you were lonely. No, mum and I want you both to come with us. We will have a wonderful time.'

Dear Journal, Patrick began,

It's nothing personal and please don't get upset but I don't really want to talk to you. I just wanted to spend the summer holidays moping about, getting up late, hanging out with my friends on the beach or at the hamburger joint but it's not to be.

Dad has different ideas, in fact it's an idea he's had for years, this dream in which the whole family Mum, sis Rachel, him and me spend quality time together. He wanted to include grandpa as well but sadly he didn't last long enough, you know what I mean. Great I said, when do we get started and then the bombshell, a sailing trip. Yes all of us cramped together in his boat, or should I say 'the love of his life'.

Twenty years earlier, Christopher, Patrick's father was standing at another picture window watching the sea as it turned. He had arrived at the seaside cottage late that afternoon when the tide was still out. At first he had noticed hardly any sign of change but slowly the water began to advance, moving slowly across the mud flats in long streaks of blue filling the small ponds and valleys.

The gradual transformation of the dry undulating sandy estuary transfixed him as the advancing water slowly covered it. It was as if a blue sheet was being drawn slowly towards him. He had tried to measure its rate of progress but it moved erratically, slowly in some places and then rapidly in others, with a rush as a shallow area was quickly filled.

The only sounds had been the cries of the wheeling gulls dipping and diving into the shallow water. Now it was lapping the sandy beach. Soon it would be

climbing the sloping surface until it reached the breakwater, the big irregular rocks that had been placed piled high to soften the impact of the huge waves that had hammered the wall during previous winter storms.

Today the water was gently lapping the wall as if they were long lost friends each supporting the other. He had tried to imagine where it had come from, to visualise that huge moving blanket of water prowling around the world, creating high and low tides, waves, swells and floods. He had seen pictures and read about tsunamis and knew that what was today a peaceful sea could tomorrow be both treacherous and stealthful, creating havoc.

He had loved the sea ever since his own father had taken him to the esplanade to watch the sailing boats. Born in Gelong, a small town on the coast of Southern Australia, the sea was in his blood. Every year he and his father went to the Sailing Festival and watched the keelboats compete. He imagined he was at the helm and wished the years away until he was old enough to learn to sail.

That first day when Christopher's father had pushed his boat away from the quay and wished him good luck still burned in his memory. He didn't win but the excitement of feeling the tiller under his hand and the pull of the sheet, as the wind whipped at the sail was the greatest thrill of his life. With his

quick mind and skillful hands, he soon mastered the knowledge necessary to build and equip his own boat. In order to finance it, he became a lecturer, a job that enabled him to remain close to his home and continue his love of the sea.

One day walking with his father along the coast he confided to him his ambition, to build his own sea going cruiser.

'Dad, 'I want to sail around the world.' Christopher waited for a rebuff; to be told it was a pipe dream but to his surprise none came, instead he felt his father's arm on his shoulder.

'Son, I wondered how long it would be before you said it. I knew it was only a matter of time. I've seen you looking wistfully out to sea and I understand what you're feeling, the need to go beyond the horizon, to test yourself against that unknown world.

But circumstances delayed his yearning and for many years. With the unexpected death of his father, he was forced again to think about his future. It was not until his mid thirties that he became aware that the predictability of family life on shore was not enough for him.

He wondered what experience had made him come to this conclusion. He realised that it was as the result of a number of events that had come together which had brought him to this point in his life. First

and foremost it was his upbringing in a small fishing village in South Australia where going to sea was as natural as walking to school.

From an early age he had become expert in sailing and all things to do with boats. Much of this was learned from his father. Secondly although he had had a conventional education, he did not continue beyond 16 after which he began to work during the holidays as a fisherman. That's when he caught the bug, he decided.

Finally there was the overwhelming sense of freedom he felt and craved when standing on the deck of a boat rolling slowly in the swell with the wind on his face with the taste of salt in his mouth. It was indescribable; nothing quite lived up to that feeling; it was so deep inside him that need for a life that only the open sea could provide.

He grew tall and strong with big hands and a steady stomach, able to withstand the rough seas without weakening as did so many of his mates. His first boat was a dinghy made from a kit but then he became bolder and set his sights on a bigger and more sea worthy vessel. So was born his dream of a forty foot steel hulled cruiser with two main sails and a small engine. Sailing this would open up a whole new world to explore far out of sight of land where he could do battle with the elements.

He had found his forte, and for the next 10 years he planned to travel at sea spending only a week or two on land. He set to work. The first thing was to buy a plan. He settled for a Dudley Dix designed boat, a Shearwater 39 ft. steel hulled cruiser with twin masts. It would be fitted with a diesel engine and all the latest electronic aids to navigation, including an automatic pilot, wind activated power system, Sonar, Radar and just about everything he would need. He sent off for the plans and waited impatiently, watching each day for the Postman.

Meanwhile he had built an open-sided roofed structure in the back yard. It was high enough, long enough and wide enough to protect him and the vessel from the elements while under construction. Eventually a bulky special delivery parcel arrived with the name Dudley Dix on the cover. Christopher was at work when the postman delivered it. It was lying in the hall when he returned home that day. He took it into the garden laid out on a large table and studied it.

As the days passed, Christopher began to realise what an enormous task he had undertaken. The parts arrived from many suppliers and it became an act of love as the days spread into months and progress seemed to be so slow. But then one day he welded the final metal sheet in place to complete the hull, which was then settled onto its wooden cradle. Now at last Christopher was able to see the

boat taking shape. He was beginning to love the boat even at its early stage. The last thing he did at night was to stand at his bedroom window looking out at the boat's skeleton as it shone illuminated by the security lights.

Now the real work began, to fit out the hull and to complete the cabin with its teak interior. Building the deck and the engine compartment required patience and precision. The completion date in one year seemed so far away, particularly as a harsh winter with heavy snows delayed him. Christopher stood in the yard by the boat his feet deep in snow imagining her when completed, her hull shining white and her upper structures in contrasting light brown teak. Finally the day came to launch her, to check her balance and stability.

The word had gone around the small community and many of the old mariners had offered their services. It was on a bright sunny spring day when the boat on her cradle was moved onto a trailer. The onlookers were conscious that there was something sacred about launching a new boat. One old lag had said as much to another as he saw the boat beginning the two-mile journey to the Boat club. Many had lined the route and leapt forward to help when the trailer got stuck in a rut in the road.

There was a feeling of festivity, neighbour greeted neighbour, as it wasn't often that they had something to celebrate.

Christopher and his father had arranged for the trailer to arrive just before high tide to accommodate for the height of the keel. With great care and with the help of many hands, it was pushed slowly to the top of the ramp and attached to the winch.

Then the ceremony of naming her began. His mother Thelma stood at the top of the ramp, a bottle of champagne in her right hand. The crowd went quiet as she began the time-honored ritual. 'I name this ship Thelma. May God bless her and all who sail in her.' She let go the bottle and it swung on the rope that arched towards the bow. It seemed to hover for a moment before it crashed against the side of the boat splintering and releasing the champagne, which frothed and bubbled in the sunshine. A loud cheer came from the onlookers.

Everyone went quiet, waiting patiently for the sea to rise to the high water mark: the only sound was the cry of the wheeling gulls and the whimper of a small child.

At last the moment had come and with his heart in his mouth, Christopher unwound the winch allowing the boat to slide slowly down the ramp. He watched

as it gradually slid towards the water. There was a moment of anxiety when it stopped as it snared on the bottom but then a wave lifted it and it continued. With an audible sigh of relief from all the onlookers, it moved away from the cradle and became buoyant. Then it floated further out into the deeper water.

‘She’s a beaut,’ he heard many people say watching the clean lines of the hull as she settled into the water. Christopher thought about the name and for a moment he had a pang of sadness that his father wasn’t there to share that moment. Carrying his mother’s name would remind him of her during the lonely days and nights at sea.

Three months later Thelma was in ship shape with all the necessary sailing aids in place. The time had come to begin his journey. He hated farewells, particularly when he didn't know when he would return but he knew he had to go. He was tempted to just run away and send e-mails letting his family know where he was but that was the coward's way out and not for him.

He had met his wife Linda at the Yacht club. She was several years his junior but they had an instant chemistry. She soon became his crew and together they were a very successful team on the water. Christopher thought their partnership could be transferred into every day life and proposed and

they married soon after. All went well at first but when they were unable to conceive she became fretful and inward looking. He felt himself increasingly excluded from her life.

When he first broached the subject of his proposed trip she seemed to agree not aware that it was to be more than a day or two away. Finally he plucked up courage and told her of his plans. She learned like generations of women had before her, that the man in her life was leaving perhaps never to return. He had referred to it several times in the preceding weeks, opening the conversation with the words, 'Darling I need to get away, I feel confined almost imprisoned here and unless I make the break, I think I will go crazy.' She had looked at him unable to understand his need for the open sea but had accepted it would happen one day. On their wedding night after all the excitement of the day had subsided, he had confided to her his need. She, not taking it too seriously had light heartedly said,
'Anytime you need to get away I'll understand.'

Now those words were coming back to haunt her. So when he had finally told her he was going, she had panicked, realising that she would be alone, totally alone.

'I don't want you to go, I can't imagine my life without you,' she pleaded.

'Don't be silly,' he replied. 'I will only be away for a few weeks.'

He had spent several weeks in preparation but how was he to prepare for a journey of unknown length and challenges he did not know.

When Francis Chichester, the first man to circumnavigate the world was asked how he prepared for his first 'round the world' trip, he said; you begin at the beginning and you continue until you have finished. It didn't make sense when Christopher first read it but now faced with the very same conundrum he began to understand what Chichester had meant.

The problem was how much to take and where to store it all. He didn't want to be eating baked beans for weeks because he couldn't get to the other items until he had eaten them, space being so short. Christopher had to think about how and where to store his supplies. Systematically he filled the cupboards, the recesses and spaces until all were full. He had taken a wide range of reading material, scouring his shelves at home to select the ones that would provide him both with information as well as diversion.

Eventually he had checked aboard all the essentials. He could if necessary, replenish many items on the journey. Before turning in on the final day before departure, he again checked his list. At

last satisfied that he could do no more he drifted into sleep.

That final night was terrible, his wife had cried and pleaded with him not to go. He promised that he would only be away for a few weeks but he knew he had no intention of returning for several months or more. Linda eventually accepted his promise and fell asleep. The morning sun woke him and he lay still feeling the buzzing excitement inside him as he anticipated what was ahead.

Dressing silently, he slipped out of the house, closing the front door carefully hoping not to wake his wife. She heard his movement and feigning sleep she waited until he had left and watched him from the bedroom window, experiencing a hopeless resignation as he walked to the car with that strange half limp that he had had all his life. Before getting into his car he stopped and looked back. He wouldn't have been able to see the pale face watching him behind the net curtain of their bedroom window as he waved goodbye.

The marina was deserted when he arrived. He parked his car and carried the few fresh items to the boat, which was rocking gently on the pontoon, the sun glistening on her white hull. He stepped on board and began to busy himself in preparation for his departure. A solitary seaman was on guard and came over to greet him.

'So you are off then?' The seaman asked.

'Yes it's been a difficult decision but it's the right one,' Christopher replied as if trying to convince himself.

'Cast her off please,' he called to the man. The towropes were unhooked and thrown onto the deck. The yacht drifted slowly away from the quay until the engine leapt into life and chugged quietly in the still of the morning.

The sail cruiser slipped silently out of the harbour before anyone was there to see her leave. Standing at the helm, Christopher looked up at the full sail now billowing before him; he felt the sheet tensing on his left, the tiller firm in his right. The sound of the waves lapping the hull and the distant cries of the gulls gave him a sense of peace and calm that he had been unable to find on shore.

Setting his compass for 40 latitude south and due west, he allowed the automatic pilot to take over. The hours slipped by as the coastline slowly dwindled until it was no longer visible. He passed a few fishing boats and a P&O passenger liner en route for Sydney.

'Who are you and where are you going?' a voice boomed over the radiotelephone. Christopher gave his ship's ID and explained that he was bound for Africa.

'Are you alone?'

'Yes, I'm on my own.'

They exchanged pleasantries and then signed off wishing each other a safe voyage.

At that time of year and at that latitude daylight remained late into the day so as fatigue crept in, he set his automatic rudder, switched on the alarm and retired to his cabin. He loved its closeness, like a womb. He felt safe and at ease. Looking around, he saw everything he needed, his favorite books, his collection of DVDs and his computer. He picked a novel at random and began to read but soon tiredness overcame him and leaving the small light on, he slept.

He was awoken by a sudden crashing which he later realised was a pile of plates toppling over in the galley. He pulled on some clothes and emerged from the cabin. Scrambling onto the deck, he attached the safety line and held on to what ever came to hand as he checked the sheets. The sea was like a wild animal disturbed from its sleep. Huge waves and troughs with constantly changing colours, seethed and foamed, twisting and turning unrestrained by gravity.

It was a world of tumbling walls of water and deep valleys through which the vessel rolled and shuddered. Then picked up like some flotsam it was flung against the next mountain of water. The sound was deafening, unlike any other, a world torn apart by shrieks and groans as if in great pain. He

finished checking the rigging and tied down one or two sheets that were flapping in the wind. Cold, wet and exhausted by the effort and aware that there was nothing more to do than ride it out, he retired to the cabin and watched the maelstrom outside through a porthole. He knew she was rugged and seaworthy but still felt a shiver of fear at each convulsion of the hull. It seemed like a lifetime when suddenly as quick as it came, the storm calmed, he relaxed and slept.

The ringing of the automatic alarm dragged him out of his sleep. Emerging from the cabin, he saw a line of huge rocks extending from the nearby land. His anchor had slipped and while asleep the boat had drifted towards the coast. The diesel coughed and came to life at the first attempt. Setting a low speed he steered the boat away from the shore into the deeper water.

He wasn't quite sure where he was but now that the boat was on a safe course, he set the automatic rudder and went below to look at his computer. He opened the navigation maps and soon found his position. He was pleased to see that he was not far off course. Returning to the deck, he checked the rigging, stopped the motor and sailed on a broad reach.

Sitting in the shade of the mainsail he contemplated his life. The sea was now calm with a light swell so very different from its earlier tumultuous life. He

was still puzzled by how he had reached this point in his life and why he had discarded the apparent security on shore for this uncertain but more thrilling existence. He reviewed his equipment checking the satellite navigation system and the online maps. Having decided on his route he settled down to the routine day to day activities.

Rising at sunrise, he took a bucket shower and prepared breakfast. While waiting for the kettle to boil, he went on deck to check the rigging making sure that all items that could shift were securely battened down. Then back to the cabin for tea, fruit and fried bread. Checking the computer charts, he adjusted the automatic steering to correct the effect of tide.

His overall plan was to cross the Indian Ocean, pass through the Doldrums, which should be reasonably windy at that time of the year and aim for Africa. Checking his maps he confirmed that he was following the 40th parallel west into the Indian Ocean. Then he planned to sail northwest aiming to reach Mauritius and then north of Madagascar to Zanzibar and Kenya.

On the way he might visit the two uninhabited islands of Amsterdam and St Paul. He was finding that solitude made him feel happy; a positive sense of wellbeing and enjoyment filled him. It had been a long time since he had felt so relaxed. Despite the confines of the boat he managed to maintain a

program of regular exercises with hand dumbbells and springs. He knew from his reading how important it was to maintain his fitness. Many of his idols such as Robin Knox Johnston and Chay Blythe wrote copiously about fitness while at sea.

After the first few days of frenetic activity, Christopher settled into a routine. He woke with the morning light and still in his nightclothes stepped out onto the deck to check the lines and do the other required chores, and to view the scene. He stood looking towards the horizon; no two days were the same. He marveled at the changing moods of the sky and sea, almost unlimited in their variety and sound.

He came to dread the calm when the sea was glass-like with barely a sound. He preferred a moderate wind with the occasional flash of white horses as it whipped up the water and the sound of the wind hissing and shaking the rigging. He often lingered outside reluctant to begin the day but begin he must. First a wash overboard, a shave and dressing then breakfast of tea and toast. He checked his fresh fruit and ate the apples before they rotted.

During moments of calm when there was nothing to do, he thought of Linda and wondered how she was faring. Now away from the routine of his everyday life he experienced waves of regret that for him to

be at ease he had had to leave home. He had tried to sail with her but it hadn't work. They seemed to rub each other up the wrong way.

As his car disappeared around the corner, Linda felt alone and deserted as if her life had come to an end. She returned to her bed but was unable to sleep. Lying there, the future seemed to drag out ahead of her as far as she could see. Weeks merged into months with no sign of his return.

Initially very house proud she became oblivious of the dirt and mess that was accumulating. She could see seen no point in cooking for one and gradually slipped into living on pre-cooked dishes, as. She would sit staring out of the window trying to imagine what he was doing and hoping that in some mystical way her thoughts would be conveyed to him across the vast ocean. She would mouth, 'come home soon I need you.'

By this time Christopher was thinking about what he would write in his journal. He had a list of headings to guide him, date, time, position, weather, wind speed, personal feelings, thoughts of loved ones and friends, there was always something to write. This act of love would often take up to a hour or more as the movement of the boat made writing difficult, sometimes impossible and then he would resort to the computer keyboard using single fingers, a slow and tedious business. He left a

space in the journal to transcribe the typing later as he wanted the journal to be hand written.

He had noticed how his writing changed from day to day sometimes firm and consistent other times it was shaky and irregular. He gradually realised that it coincided with his moods and feelings of wellbeing. He had been writing his journal regularly describing in detail the events of his life at sea, in particular those things from which he had learned something new.

It was while he was thumbing through it that he noticed how much his writing changed from day to day, strong and upright when things were going well and sloping and a bit shaky when problems were troubling him. Then he remembered he had a book on graphology and after a short search found it.

He had bought it in a second hand bookshop. He recalled that at the time he had had a few hours to burn in between work. He went in and was rummaging around just looking without any fixed idea as to what if anything he wanted. The owner an elderly man with a mop of white hair peered at him and asked him what he was looking for. He said, I didn't know.

Christopher began to walk along the aisles of bookshelves crammed with books of every shape and size. He saw books on history, astronomy,

medicine, magic but nothing really caught his eye. Then he saw it, a book on Graphology, it had a strange cover of swirling lines and shapes. At first he didn't know what it was and then he opened it to see a page on writing a letter.

He read that the study of one's own writing could tell a lot about us. He was hooked. He sat on the floor with his back propped against a wall and read on. He came to the section on violence and was amazed to read that a person's handwriting can indicate a violent disposition. He was so absorbed that he didn't hear the owner approaching and was startled when a deep voice said, 'Interesting isn't it? Most people know nothing about the subject but it affects all of us since we all need to write at some time or other.'

Christopher realised that time was passing and that he had been there so long his conscience demanded that he would have to buy the book. He checked the price on the front page and offered two thirds, a paltry sum that was accepted and soon he was walking down the street with the wrapped book tucked under his arm.

Sitting in the cabin, he was thinking about the future and how he would make the most of the days and weeks ahead when he heard a strange sound. He had become familiar with all the noises of the boat, the grating and groaning, the scraping and the

moaning but this was different, it happened again. He stopped what he was doing and listened.

Gradually he was able to ignore the familiar sounds and listen to the new one. He screwed up his face and concentrated. He waited and then it happened again. He tried to localise it by moving towards it. It seemed to be coming from under the galley where the engine was. Carefully he pulled back the floor covering and slowly lifted the floor panels. Suddenly he saw it cowering in the corner, a fawn coloured cat, emaciated to the point of starvation.

‘Good God.’ he exclaimed, ‘what on earth are you doing here? How did you get on board?’ The cat backed into the corner, snarling with its claws threatening him.

‘Here kitty, kitty,’ he called stretching out his hand but all he got was another snarl. I know I’ll get some milk, cats like milk. He had a tin of milk open in the fridge and poured some into a saucer. Gingerly he placed it on the floor in front of the cat and withdrew waiting to see what would happen.

After a pause the cat reached forwards and sniffed at the milk then it put out its tongue and cautiously licked the edge of the liquid. Clearly to its liking, it began to lap furiously until all the milk had gone. Then Christopher remembered that there were some scraps of food from his meal the previous night. The cat backed as he put it down in front of it.

Again it sniffed, liked what it smelled and gobbled down the food.

Over the next few days, the cat remained on guard snarling whenever he approached but took the food and drink avidly. Then one morning while Christopher was shaving the cat appeared in the galley, looking much healthier. Its coat was now shiny and it had plumped up a bit.

It was clearly in a much more approachable mood, so much so that it allowed itself to be stroked. Soon it was staying in the galley and at night sleeping in the corner on a pillow. Christopher found he was beginning to like the cat's presence around the ship and in time it became a welcome addition. She took naturally to her name 'Stow' chosen, as she was after all a stowaway.

He was now entering the Indian Ocean, which could be very rough at that time of the year. Listening to the weather forecast Christopher heard the word storm and pricking up his ears, he tuned into the local weather station. A force 6 gale was expected within two hours with winds in a westerly direction. He suddenly noticed that the speed of the boat had increased significantly over the last two hours and immediately went on deck.

She was still in full sail so he decided to reduce the speed by taking in a reef, one would be enough, he

thought. He could always take in a second one if the wind became too strong. Setting the automatic pilot he returned to the calm of the cabin. At first he couldn't see Stow anywhere but then as he was about to lie down on the couch, he saw her head appear and she yawned.

He put out his hand and stroked her head feeling the smooth warm coat, she responded by lowering it and purring loudly.

The storm struck suddenly with a loud clap like thunder as an enormous wave hit the boat spinning it out of control, it hovered in the spray and then crashed down throwing any loose object in the cabin onto the floor.

Christopher hung on to the side of the cabin. Then as if changing its mind, it stopped, straightened and reeled onto the other side. For several hours Christopher could do nothing but hold on to the sides of the cabin as the vessel lurched from one side to the other. The cat slept peacefully unperturbed by the crashing sounds and the constant movement.

Finally exhausted by the storm Christopher fell asleep and woke to a calm sea and a blue sky. It was as if the previous days had never happened. He was starving and Stow was mewing loudly at the fridge. But on opening the door there was a strong putrid smell as much of the food had gone bad in the absence of power.

‘Sorry Stow,’ he said stroking her back, ‘it’s powdered milk again I’m afraid.’ Stow didn’t seem to mind as she lapped the milk noisily. What shall I have? He wondered. Now that the power was back, he set about making some bread but it would take about three hours so meanwhile he settled for baked beans and some tinned tuna.

Soon the smell of baking bread was pervading the cabin. All was well again he felt as he removed the bread and allowed it to cool. Refreshed and reinvigorated he set about checking the deck. Some of the sheets needed tightening but otherwise there was remarkably little damage. He then raised the sails and once again Thelma was in full sail and on her way. He felt a sense of quiet satisfaction watching the sails tighten against the wind under the control of the automatic rudder.

But he couldn’t stay for long, as there was so much to do. He needed a wash badly and he had yet to tidy up the cabin and wash some clothes, a job he hated and put off for as long as he could. Washing regularly was essential to avoid getting rashes and sores. He knew the best way was to slip over the side have a good rub down and then clamber back as he had read that the world sailor Robin Knox-Johnston had done.

Christopher had the nightmare scenario of the wind coming up and the boat sailing away with him

unable to catch up with it. The thought of being stranded alone in the sea was a fear that never left him. He lived with it. Every time he went on deck he thought about it, tested the safety line several times before trusting it. In the end he managed to fashion a sort of harness from some spare ropes, undressed and tied himself in, still attached by a length of rope to the boat.

Then still anxious but now fearful of sharks he stood watching the water for some minutes before getting in. He checked to his left and right looking for any tell tale sign of a monster lurking just under the surface. He knew how fast they could move and waited until he had calmed his pounding heart. Then a sudden dive a quick wash and a scramble out. It was always a refreshing experience and he promised himself that he would do it more frequently.

It was while he was resting one afternoon that the Mayday signal startled him. For a moment he didn't recognise it and then he jumped up and went to the screen, using his radar he identified its position. It was about 10 kilometres away a journey which would take him about three hours. He sent a signal acknowledging his presence and position. The captain signalled back saying that he was a sailing boat and was on his way north when his mast

snapped. He said he was with his young son and they were both OK.

The question was what to do.

Christopher couldn't tow the boat the long distance to shore so the best solution was to see if a larger boat was in the vicinity, one that could take the crew on board and tow the boat to a nearby harbour. There it could moor until a replacement mast had been made or obtained. He sent out a message and waited. He repeated it but no ship replied.

Meanwhile he had changed course and was sailing on a tight reach towards the stricken vessel. The sea was boiling beneath his keel as he sailed as close to the wind as he could in its direction. Keeping in touch by phone he soon spotted the stalled craft. His heart sank as he saw her being tossed by the waves, like a doomed animal thrashing wildly in its dying throes. He could see that the situation was desperate.

He closed in on the boat and could now make out the two occupants, a man and his son standing on the deck. They had tied themselves to the stump of the mast. They saw him and waved. He could see them shouting but their voices were drowned out by the howling wind and was unable to make out the words. He could see that the rest of the mast and the mainsail had gone. The foresail was in tatters

flapping wildly in the wind. Using his horn he called out,
'Ahoy I am coming in close. Can you throw me a line?' This was going to be difficult Christopher realised as the sea was buffeting them and the two boats were in danger of colliding. After several attempts he caught the line and secured it. Then he watched helplessly as the man and boy climbed onto their rubber raft and attached it to the line. They cut the line to their boat and it swung out into the waves.

Slowly, and struggling against the swell, they inched the raft towards the safety of the motorboat. It took a good ten minutes before they were both safely on board and hugging Christopher, showering him with thanks.

The man was called Peter, a retired Solicitor; his son Daniel was in his final year before going onto college.

On the voyage home, Christopher had time to think about his reunion with Linda and began to dread it. He had not kept his promise and knew that he would face her wrath. He had allowed his self-interest to be more important than their love. In the event it was quite different. He expected an angry tirade, instead when he returned she was demure almost negative. It was as if the fight had gone out of her. They hugged but there was no enthusiasm in

her. Linda had changed. Once in doors and seated at the kitchen table he asked her if she was Ok.

She paused before answering and then it all poured out: her loneliness, her anger, her disappointment, her sense of helplessness. She didn't look at him as she spoke with tears occasionally choking her. He knew that there was nothing he could say to answer her accusations.

Over the next few days he tried to tell her about the rescue at sea but she wasn't interested. Gradually he noticed that she was losing weight. At first he thought it was because of him. A visit to the doctor revealed the cause. She had cancer and despite surgery and chemotherapy she slipped away three months later.

Alone and desperate, racked with guilt, he struggled to go on. Life seemed to have no purpose and the empty days stretched out as far as he could see. In the beginning friends visited and invited him out but in time he was forgotten. He soon learned that a single man is not welcomed in married couples company. He drifted into local pubs consoling himself with alcohol. He found that there many like him drifting without purpose.

One day while in the local supermarket he spotted a familiar face. At first he couldn't place her and then it came to him it was the nurse in the hospital

looking very different out of uniform. He hesitated to greet her certain that she wouldn't recognize him. She was selecting some tomatoes when she looked up and saw him. For a moment she didn't recognise him and then she realised who it was.

'Hello Christopher, how nice to see you. I was so sorry about your wife we did...'

'I know it's all right. Everyone was so kind.'

'Look,' he said, 'it's Hilda isn't it? Would you like to have a coffee when you have finished your shopping? There's a café upstairs.' For a moment she hesitated and then thought he looks so forlorn and his clothes seem too big for him. Why not he needs company?

Hilda was an only child and was brought up in a strict Roman Catholic home. One day at school the local doctor and his nurse visited to speak to the senior classes on the appeal of medicine as a career. Hilda listened fascinated by the opportunities available and as soon as she was eighteen, enrolled in the local Nursing College. After two years of practice in Melbourne she had itchy feet. Her life seemed to be too predictable and she wasn't ready for that.

An advert in the Australian Nursing Times caught her eye.

Are you ready for a change, ready to see what you are made of? Fed up with the routine? Then this is for you, an adventure awaits you.

Hilda read on,

Small cottage hospital in the Blue Mountains north of Sydney is in need of a dedicated Nurse. You will run your own unit dealing with the local people.

Four weeks later, after a long, bumpy, dusty journey, Hilda was climbing down from a four by four Toyota, which had drawn up outside a single storey building. The sign above the entrance read 'Blue Mountain Cottage Hospital'. A large aboriginal lady dressed in a light blue nurse's uniform greeted her.

'Welcome to Blue Mountains Hospital,' she extended her hand. I am Sister Merindah - it means beautiful and happy. You must be tired after the long journey?'

'Yes, almost 24 hours, a long way.'

'Let me show you your quarters, where you can clean up and rest.'

Sister led her to a small bungalow behind the hospital. It had an unrivalled view of the distant hills just beginning to appear blue in the failing light. Sister led the way and using a small key opened the front door. Light flooded into a large room as she walked over to open the windows.

It was simply but comfortably furnished.

'The shower and toilet are over there,' pointed sister, 'and through the other door is the kitchen. You will find a fully stocked fridge including some

Foster's beer- it's the local brew.' By the way what size are you? About 12 I'd guess, right.'

'Yes 12.'

'Ok when you feel ready come over and we'll fit you out with some uniforms.'

Hilda walked around the room. She felt a pang of sadness, thinking of her parents she had left but remembering the warm farewell she had, with tears and smiles. She lay down on the bed and slept. She awoke with a start. The room was now in darkness and for a moment she was completely disorientated. Gradually she focussed on its dim outlines and remembered where she was. She checked her watch it was still on UK time.

The hospital had two small wards of 6 beds each, a small basic OR and an Outpatient clinic with two examination rooms.

'We have a visiting doctor, Dr John MacIntyre from Sydney Children's Hospital once a week,' said Sister Merindah as she showed Hilda around. It was all very strange and different but Sister Hilda as she was called soon settled down into a routine. After her breakfast at 8 am she would visit the wards and review the patient's treatment.

Then onto the clinic where she would redo dressings give injections and collect patient details for Dr Macintyre's twice-weekly visits. He was due to visit the following day. There were more than

twenty patients for him to see including 4 children. Hilda checked their notes and put them in order. The clinic room was small and a bit dingy but she did her best to brighten it with some flowers and a jug of drinking water.

She was waiting at the hospital entrance when the doctor's vintage Hillman chugged to a halt. A tall bearded man in his early 60s stepped out. Hilda greeted him with an outstretched hand. He noted her firm almost masculine grip.

'Good morning Doctor, I am the new nurse who is looking after your clinic today.'

'Thank you Sister Hilda, Sister Merindah told me all about you. Finding out how we do it in the sticks I suppose.'

She ignored his slight sarcasm and led him into the clinic.

'You have twenty patients and four children to see.'

'Ok let's get started, I'd like to see the children first.'

Hilda began to warm to him with his gentle manner, thorough examination and firm opinion. The patients liked him and soon she had forgotten his initial remark and was enjoying the work. They took a short tea break where she learned that he had trained in Edinburgh and wanted to specialise but failed his higher exams.

He came to Australia for a holiday and never returned. Just before they parted he asked her if she was free on the Saturday as his wife was making a small dinner party and he would like her to come. Hilda was completely taken by surprise by the invitation but accepted willingly wanting to understand a bit more about this country in which she was now living. As he drove away he called back,

‘I’ll pick you up at 7.30 on Saturday.’ She waved as he disappeared in a cloud of dust. The week flew by and then it was Saturday. What shall I wear she wondered searching through his meager wardrobe. She settled for a light cotton dress with a pashmina shawl. Looking at herself in the long mirror she thought she’d put on some weight, it suits me, not bad! She decided.

Promptly at 7.30 she heard a car horn and went out to meet the doctor but it was someone else at the wheel.

‘Hello, the doctor asked me to call for you it was on my way.’ They drove in silence and then he spoke,

‘I hear you’ve just come from Melbourne?’ She turned to reply. There was something familiar about his clean features, mop of light brown hair and blue eyes with dimples appeared when he smiled. He was in his mid-forties she thought and then she remembered.

‘Yes, I was getting a bit staid and needed some adventure and saw an advert in the Nursing Times. She turned to look at him.

‘Haven’t we met? Isn’t your name Christopher, your wife died recently. I looked after her.’ He nodded.

‘I recognised you immediately but didn’t want to... you know?’

‘Sure I understand,’ she replied blushing. Neither spoke for the rest of the journey. When they arrived, the doctor was standing at the front. Taking Hilda by the arm, he steered her indoors.

‘Come in and meet my wife Frances, while Christopher parks the car around the back.’ Frances was petit with short grey hair. She greeted Hilda warmly kissing her on both cheeks.

‘Welcome my dear, how lovely of you to come. We don’t see many visitors these days. Come and meet some friends Jill and Michael, they live in Sydney. You have met Christopher I see?’

‘Yes we seem to know each other.’ The evening passed very quickly and before Hilda knew it, it was time to go home. She had enjoyed herself meeting some local people. Christopher had been very attentive and she had accepted his offer to drive her back to the hospital. On the way home she asked him how he was getting on. She learned that he had eventually had some counseling and was able to pick up his life again. As they said

goodbye, he leaned over and gave her a peck on her cheek.

'It's been great meeting you again,' he paused, 'may I phone you?'

After a whirlwind courtship, Hilda and Christopher got married and decided to leave Australia and settle on the south coast of England. Christopher went back to college and became a lecturer. They found a small bungalow overlooking the sea and in time they had a family, a boy Patrick and a girl Rachel. But Christopher never forgot his love of the sea. He arranged for Thelma his boat to be brought to the Brighton marina where it stayed un-sailed for many years. In his spare time he would walk down to the marina, remove her canvas cover and let the light flood into the cabin. Then he would sit in his favorite chair now unsteady, its cushions moth eaten remembering his last trip. He promised himself that one day when the children were old enough he would sail her again. Hilda did not share his love of sailing. She was secretly frightened of the water ever since as a small girl an enthusiastic uncle threw her in. But she could see by the way he avidly read the Yachting Times that one-day he would take it up again.

'When they are old enough,' he would say and she nodded knowing that nothing she could say would deter him.

The day for the family trip began badly. The weather forecast was for rain and the occasional

thunderstorm but it was expected to improve by the evening. Patrick heard the news with quiet satisfaction. Maybe Dad will postpone the trip or even, dare he hope, cancel it all together.

'No problem,' his dad had announced, 'we'll wait until the weather improves, hopefully it will by evening, and set off then. Sailing at night should be fun especially if the moon is out, quite romantic,' he added smiling at Hilda his wife. Christopher had checked the tides and knew that high tide was at 10 pm ideal for their trip.

Having stowed their gear the family took up their places. Mum in the galley preparing a meal and Christopher and the two children on deck manning the sheets. By the time they had cast off, there was a clear sky and a force 4 wind strong enough to get her going at a steady rate. Christopher had worked out the route planning to hug the coast and arriving at Plymouth around lunch the following day when the tide would be favorable. Standing at the helm with his two youngsters Christopher felt a swell of happiness. He looked back at the marina as it dwindled in the distance, the early moon casting a bright light on the waves as they scurried along. Hearing Mum calling them into the cabin for food, they reluctantly left the deck; Christopher set the steering on automatic.

It's not as bad as I thought, Patrick said to himself as he scoffed fried eggs, bacon and beans.

‘Nice grub mum,’ he grunted and the others agreed.

About 20 metres to their port side, a pod of whales was travelling west to reach their feeding grounds, two adults and two youngsters. They had been swimming for over two days. The larger whale a male, wanting to stretch himself had suddenly dived down into the deeper water. Then turning sharply he swam up to the surface at great speed to breach, throwing more than a third of his 30-metre body into the open air. He fell back creating a gigantic wave. Over five metres high it advanced silently towards the yacht. No one on board heard the mountain of moving water as it gained momentum. They were all relaxing enjoying the meal when it struck with a sudden thunder-like crash. They had hardly registered the sound before the boat caught by the wall of water was lifted up and rolled onto her side tipping the family off their feet. They went sliding and rolling onto the opposite side of the cabin, together with dislodged objects, pots and pans, book etc. The lights went out and suddenly it was deathly quiet.

‘What was that?’ Exclaimed Patrick trying to keep his balance. ‘Hilda, Rachel, Patrick, are you all right?’

‘Everyone call out, I can’t see you,’ shouted Christopher desperately trying to get to his feet. They all replied that they were OK. Then the sound of water cascading through the open door could be

heard. It gradually poured across the floor, filling the cabin. Slowly the hull continued to roll until it was upside down.

Looking up Christopher could see that an air bubble had been trapped under the hull.

‘Swim upwards,’ shouted Christopher.

‘Mum I’m scared,’ whispered Rachel.

‘It’s OK, we’ll get out of this don’t worry,’ replied Hilda keeping her voice as calm as possible. Christopher realised that they had to get out; the air wouldn’t last very long, but not alone in the sea. The rubber dingy? That’s it he thought.

‘Patrick, listen carefully. I want you to take some big breaths and swim out of the cabin. You remember we have a rubber dinghy tied on the deck. I want you to untie it and float with it to the surface. Tie it on to something secure and then tap twice. I will return the tap. You can then come back and take us all out OK?’

‘Ok Dad,’ Patrick couldnt believe what was happening; it was a real life drama like TV and strangely he wasn’t frightened. Taking a few deep breaths he swam towards the cabin door feeling his way and then he was out on the upside down deck. He found the dinghy, untied it and held on to it tightly as it bobbed to the surface. There he tied it on securely. By now, the sea was calm and looked beautiful with the moonlight glistening on it. He tapped the hull hard took a few deep breaths and waited. He heard a return tap. Diving back into the

water he felt his way to the cabin and to the air bubble.

‘Was it OK?’ whispered his Dad now feeling a bit breathless.

‘Yes I have done what you asked.’

‘Good. Now Patrick, I want you to take Mum and Rachel to the dinghy. They will swim behind you holding on to your shirt and each other and I’ll follow. But as he was leaving Christopher suddenly remembered Stow. I can’t leave her he realised and swam back to find her. He found her trapped under a chair and when he reached her, he could feel that she wasn’t breathing. He grabbed her and swam up into the air bubble. By now he was struggling to breathe. He had tried to hang on until he could reach the open air not wanting to swallow any seawater. The air in the bubble was now fetid and sour as he fought back a feeling of panic. I must stay calm he said to himself as his breath became more laboured. His thoughts were now very confused as everything became vague and blurred; sounds were distant and indistinct as he slowly lapsed into unconsciousness, his lungs straining to breathe the foul air. In the dinghy, Hilda started to feel uneasy. She shouted frantically.

‘Patrick, Dad should have appeared by now. What’s happening? Patrick, I don’t know what’s happened to Dad? Hurry, go back and see what’s stopping him.’

Christopher wasn't breathing when Patrick found him. His dad was pale and limp as the boy grabbed his father's jacket and pulling on it, dragged the inert body to the surface. In the daylight his father appeared lifeless as he was laid down on the rubber dinghy. Without stopping to think, Patrick began to do what he had been taught at school. He leaned over the prostrate body and started pounding on the chest every few seconds. After a while Christopher groaned and coughed as seawater spewed from his mouth; his colour slowly returned and he opened his eyes.

Patrick was chosen to read his journal in class. When he came to the part where he had swum back into the boat to bring his father out, the whole class stood up and cheered.