

CRISPIN LATYMER

WHERE
THE
OCEAN
MEETS
THE
SKY

SOLO INTO THE UNKNOWN

A small sailboat is visible on the horizon line of the ocean, positioned towards the right side of the frame. The sky is filled with large, white, fluffy clouds, and the water is a deep blue. The overall scene is serene and expansive.

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For the overwhelming majority, true freedom is largely a dream. The lucky ones are those who find it or who help others to do so. In a world too often given to material pursuits few allow themselves the time to appreciate that gift of helping others. As I left, I had no idea what I might find in the open waters of the Atlantic. By the time I returned, family and friends had donated over £40,000 to two childrens' charities.

Thank you all. Your generosity and support helped me, somewhere deep in the Atlantic, to experience my own extraordinary sense of freedom.

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TO A MAN I NEVER KNEW
– BUT WHO MIGHT HAVE
UNDERSTOOD

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CONTENTS

PROLOGUE	1
CHAPTER 1 THE PLANNING	9
CHAPTER 2 LAS PALMAS	24
CHAPTER 3 THE TRANSAT	32
CHAPTER 4 BARBADOS	173
CHAPTER 5 AGAIN?	182
CHAPTER 6 LESSONS TO LEARN	185
APPENDIX I	
The Wife	198
APPENDIX II	
The Father: Las Palmas to Barbados 1963	205
APPENDIX III	
Heliousa	210
APPENDIX IV	
Fathom	212
APPENDIX V	
The Delivery Crews	215

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PROLOGUE

The Meltemi had been blowing hard from the northern Aegean throughout the night and the sea had become much more aggressive since dawn. *Pamara*, our 79ft twin diesel cruiser, was coping but, being narrow-beamed, had started to roll uncomfortably. Throughout the night my father had helmed from the shelter of the pilot house and after a perfunctory breakfast he sent my sister and me back down below. Aged eight and six neither of us were old enough to appreciate the conditions or possible risks as we sat cross-legged on our mother's bunk staring out of the porthole. To the lurching rhythm of the breaking waves we watched, with childlike innocence and fascination, as one minute we were astronauts looking up at the deep blue of limitless space before, rolling heavily, we became underwater explorers staring straight down into the dark green of the ocean depths, searching for whales and giant squid. I remember that particular storm well. By the next morning, it had swept overboard the metal railings and dining table that were bolted to the aft-deck.

I also remember, probably assisted by photographs, my father's dominating presence at the helm.

I never had much of a relationship with my father, Hugo Latymer. He did not understand personal relationships. To do that you need a natural interest in other people. For whatever reason, he had no interest or ability for that. I remember him as a mix of enviable physical achievements allied to a complete emotional vacuum. By the time I was old enough to be sufficiently interested to look at what relationship I did have he was an accomplished yachtsman, a recognised international botanist (a hobby he subsequently turned into a successful commercial business in Majorca) and a keen ornithologist. He had also rowed for Eton, been awarded a scholarship to Oxford, won the 'Belt of Honour' at Sandhurst as a young Grenadier officer, come fifth with my Godfather in the Monte Carlo Rally, was a member of the Royal Yacht Squadron, come second in the Baron Oetzen Cup on the Cresta (during which he co-founded the Shuttlecock Club for those who had crashed off the course more than five times at the infamous Shuttlecock Corner), been the youngest ever Partner at Robert Fleming and held nine City directorships including Save & Prosper, where he had been one of the founding directors. The only blot to this otherwise impressive list of personal achievements was his separation from my mother in 1962 shortly after his recovery from meningitis. He may not have seen it as such but, either way, it was an impressive CV for someone who at the time of his leaving his wife, family, job and England was only 36 years old.

To top it all, various aunts and related females always described him rather too breathlessly and in blushing terms as the most handsome man they had ever seen. I was somewhat amused, therefore, to meet someone recently who knew him slightly in the early 1960s and who provided some counter balance to this litany of personal achievements by describing him more bluntly (before knowing he was my father) as ‘that vain poof’.

A year later in 1963, having commissioned a 39ft ‘Miller-Fifer’ from Jimmy Miller and his uncle William in St Monace on the Firth of Forth, he set out to sail from England to Australia with my 20-year-old future stepmother and he left our lives semi-permanently. This was a journey very few were undertaking and some years before Chichester, Rose and Knox-Johnston hit the headlines. For that much he was an unusual man, not interested in the social games of Shire England and City life. In his memoirs he wrote:

‘It has seemed an easy explanation for me to account for my decision to leave the City as being due to a wish to spit out the spoon and use one’s own teeth, to achieve a personal triumph rather than one engineered and supported by my father. I had an independent and slightly misanthropic attitude to the world that made me want to get out of the City, London and the Establishment and to do something wild and silly in reaction to conventional curbs.’

The downside for me was that I was only 7 when he left my life and instantly sailing became a memory. It was to be another 30 years before I realised quite how

deeply that sense of freedom and the raw excitement of open water must have been ingrained in me. In 1993 I bought my first boat (a 15ft gaff rigged Cornish Shrimper) and, with impeccable timing and history repeating itself almost exactly, my own 15 year marriage irretrievably broke down six months later – coincidentally not long after my first wife had also recovered from meningitis. However, sailing gave me the escape I needed from her passion for hunting. Even now, I still flinch when I see a saddle. My mother later remarked that she knew our marriage was in trouble when I bought that boat. Perhaps it was a catalyst. All I can say with certainty and sadness is that I felt as if I was on my way to a mysterious date each time I drove to Chichester marina and set off solo into the Solent. I hadn't felt like that for a long time.

It was not totally surprising, therefore, when 42 years later I found myself facing almost identical conditions to that gale of 1961. It had to happen sooner or later. Shaunagh (my second wife), Harry (stepson), Rosie (daughter) and I were at the end of a two week cruise to northern Sardinia and southern Corsica. This time we were in my 41ft Beneteau sloop, *Fathom*. With four days before we were due to fly back to London (from Girona in Spain) we found ourselves confined to port in Sardinia by a north-westerly tramuntana. For 36 hours we sat it out before we ran out of time. Like my father, I was confident about handling bad conditions and was more concerned about how the others would feel and react. That morning the forecast pinned to the open door of the old boat-house that doubled as the local yacht club finally

predicted wind speeds to drop below 30 knots later that afternoon for the first time in two days. I knew we had to leave to stand any chance of reaching Spain in time to get our return flights. Under a leaden sky the sea had been dull grey for the last 24 hours and now, through the narrow rock-strewn passage between the islands, I had seen large breakers barging their way through the shallows. This one-mile passage, the Fornelli Pass, is just navigable in calm conditions carrying a maximum depth of barely three metres. It is often used by those making passage as it gives direct access from the Gulf of Asinara to the open Mediterranean. However, in current conditions, we would need to stay in deeper water and sail the longer 15-mile route round the rugged northern headland. I knew it would be rough and wet but hoped that the others would not be too worried.

Decision taken, we needed to get moving. Standing on the deck, I fought to secure all three reefs in the mainsail without raising it. Even within the relative protection of the small breakwater jutting into the bay the boat was yawing badly around the anchor chain. Shaunagh, Harry and Rosie cleared away all loose items below decks and secured the hatches. Ten minutes later, Harry and I did a final check before starting the engine and raising the anchor. When the anchor broke out of its grip on the weed and mud we immediately crabbed sideways towards the rough concrete blocks of the breakwater. I rapidly hoisted the reefed mainsail and unfurled a scrap of headsail as Shaunagh secured the anchor. We heeled over hard and, gathering speed, powered out

from behind the secluded safety of the small harbour in Stintino.

The next hour was deceptive as, under triple reefed main and genoa, we pounded our way across the white-flecked waters in the lee of the island. However, I knew that once we rounded the headland looming ahead of us the sea state would become much worse. The vertical cliffs of the Asinara peninsular spat down vicious squalls which came swirling towards us as they ripped at the surface of the water and I wondered what was going through the others' minds. We were all silent, lost in our own thoughts, apprehensive of the open sea between this isolated corner of northern Sardinia and the Spanish coastline 240 miles away. Stuffing my Vendee Globe baseball hat firmly onto my head to avoid losing it overboard, I concentrated on helming the boat.

An hour later we rounded the headland. Conditions immediately deteriorated, making it almost impossible to see the crucial small buoy marking the reef that extended from the old lighthouse, long since battered into ruins by generations of waves bursting against it. With increasing urgency and using two sets of binoculars we finally spotted the buoy. Once clearly past it, we slowly worked our way out into the open sea. Inexorably our speed over the ground dropped as we caught the full effect of the northwesterly gale and the waves that were now beginning to break across the front of the boat. I steered off a few degrees to try and get a better wind angle on the sails but realised with silent concern that on such a heading we were now running parallel to a dangerous lee shore only

three miles to port. Cursing myself, I realised the wind was too strong to point higher under sail alone. Turning the engine on, I started to pinch back into the wind to gain ground. Gradually, very gradually, we clawed our way to seaward. I kept the engine on until safely away from any potential hazard but even motor-sailing our heading was considerably south of what I wanted. The wind was too strong to sail higher. For a brief while I seriously considered turning back. By the time Shaunagh voiced the same question aloud we were four hours out and, by then, had gone too far to turn back. We were making ground, slowly and brutally.

For the next 38 hours, having cleared the Sardinian coastline, we stubbornly close-reached towards Menorca, substantially south of the heading I needed but the best I could achieve in such conditions. The wind never dropped below 30 knots. The forecast had been wrong. The short pitched waves, pushed up by the northwesterly gale over the last two days across 250 miles of open water, curled at us with foaming crests breaking over the boat and occasionally over the spray-hood soaking us all in slate-grey cold and salty water.

In such conditions, I have always found that most boats tell you about themselves, so long as you listen – not through your ears but through your hands and feet. Bernard Moitessier encapsulated sailing so well when he wrote, *‘There is not much to do on a boat. But there is much to feel’*. When that starts to happen it becomes a question of achieving the right balance between natural power and human input. *Fathom* and I seemed to find

our balance early that afternoon. Thereafter, I sat high on the windward cockpit coaming watching and timing the onrush of each wave. At the bottom of every trough *Fathom* would slow and gather herself momentarily before pushing up the side of the oncoming wave. With a sudden lift and flip of her transom we slipped over the crest, the wave rolled under the hull and we surged down the front in a welter of foam and rushing water before slowing, pausing and starting the process all over again. Wave after wave was treated in the same fashion in rhythmic cadence. Only the occasional wave caught us badly and we would fall off the top of the wave with an almighty crash that once threw Shaunagh clean out of her berth and across the saloon. That first night, as darkness fell, the others went below to try and get some sleep. I stayed on the helm and spent most of the night gradually relaxing and learning the feel and rhythm of *Fathom* through my hands and feet.

It took a total of 71 hours before we tied up on the fuel jetty in our home marina. We had sailed more than 300 miles, over half of it in gale-force winds. I had snatched a total of seven hours' sleep. Whilst tired, I was pleased *Fathom* and I had sailed in such conditions as, after 42 years, the open ocean's siren call had finally become irresistible. In four months' time I was setting out from the Canary Islands to follow my father's transatlantic footsteps, all 2,900 miles of them, to Barbados. Genetics are interesting.

However, in my case I was going solo.

CHAPTER 1

THE PLANNING

‘We all have a need, mostly unsatisfied and rarely spoken, to measure ourselves against nature as we were meant to. To see how far our muscles and our breath and our unaided minds can take us. In a culture that lets us do little for ourselves we have this curious and hidden need to make our way on our own two feet.’

Reese Palley, *There Be No Dragons*

Why do it? – I asked myself that question many times in the year before the trip. I was asked the same question by most of our friends and found I was unsure how to reply. It’s not everyday that a 50-year old who has spent the last 30 years behind a desk in the City or sardined on long distance flights decides to sail solo across one of the world’s great oceans. After a while I found the best response was to shrug, smile lightly and say it was the male menopause. It may sound a bit limp, but it normally produced knowing looks and discouraged further questioning.

The truth is that I had always had a nagging ambition for a transat which I dated back to my Oxford University days in the mid 1970s. Then, just after my first (losing) Oxford and Cambridge University Boat Race in 1975, I had considered a transatlantic row. The physical challenge appealed along with the adrenalin buzz but, like many of my ideas then, it sank before the onslaught of a second Boat Race in 1977 with the largest winning margin in 75 years. Every member of the crew that year had represented their respective countries at international level but training 6 hours a day, 13 days a fortnight and 8 months of the year was still one of the most physically and mentally energising experiences for each of us. The downside was that the level of physical training and commitment required for such an endurance race caused mayhem with crew relationships. As a result, whilst we completed the task successfully and professionally, we parted after the race rarely to see one another again. After that experience, in all things physically challenging, I feel more comfortable relying on my own skill, strength and company. It is less complicated.

A second thread had been my father's own transatlantic in 1963 with Jinty Calvert, the girl who was later to become my stepmother. In *Heliousa*, a 39ft teak and iroko ketch built by the same builder as *Pamara*, they had crossed the Atlantic in December 1963. Motor sailing for 95% of the way he, Jinty and another crewman taken on for the crossing took 23 days to reach Barbados. They had set off from Las Palmas and it was my intention to follow roughly the same route, the classic downwind

crossing using the prevailing northeasterly trade winds, aiming at their 23 days as an informal target to beat. The following year they crossed the Pacific to Brisbane. For part of that passage my father sailed the boat solo for 11 days and later told me that he had hated every moment. I was interested to see how deep the genes really went.

Whilst in 1963 my father had been 39, I was now 50 and my male menopause excuse had, probably, more than a grain of truth in it. For a while I had found I had been increasingly marking articles by those who had decided to go out and actually do something about fulfilling some personal ambitions long harboured but never actioned. That old adage of ‘the only things in life you ever regret are those you should have done and never did’ struck an enormous chord for me. The most poignant quote that I read shortly after my father died in November 2003 is in Joe Simpson’s superb book, *The Beckoning Silence*:

‘Nobody grows old living a number of years, people grow old only by deserting their ideals. Years wrinkle the skin, but to give up enthusiasm wrinkles the soul. Worry, doubt, distrust, fear and despair . . . these are the long, long years that bow the head and turn the growing spirit back to dust. Whether seventy or sixteen, there is in every being’s heart the love of wonder, the sweet amazement of the stars and star-like things and thoughts, the undaunted challenge of events, the unfailing child-like appetite for what is next, and the joy and game of life.’

This passage encompassed so many emotions and

seemed to evoke so many regrets about the swiftness of passing time. I knew that if I left it any longer such an ambition would just run the risk of sinking once more under the weight of expense, lack of time and general lethargy. This lack of enterprise was summed up by Libby Purves, who wrote about our western over-regulated handrail culture where *'a minority assert their rights to push their limits and risk their lives. The rest of us sink ever deeper into a fearful, torpid, timid, risk-averse culture which causes incalculable harm to health, education, mental balance, the spirit of enterprise, even the economy.'*

Whilst somewhat overstated, I nevertheless felt that I was slowly becoming a member of the 'rest of us' group, all for very good family and financial reasons, but that in so doing I was subjugating the part of me that yearned to do something more physically and mentally challenging than spend my time managing part of a large business. My bathroom mirror had also been increasingly telling me that there really was a minimum acceptable level of physical self-esteem and which it and I both felt, upon reflection, had been reached and breached a few years earlier.

That said, I had no idea how I would react to three weeks alone in the wide oceanic waters of the Atlantic. I didn't quite subscribe to Nietzsche's *'what doesn't kill you makes you stronger'* but I was genuinely interested by the opportunity it would give me to observe my reactions.

I also felt strongly that doing something unusual like

this should be used as a way to raise money for others less fortunate than I have been in my life. A successful career and the privileges that it can bring are still too easily taken for granted. The City is also not an environment that has recently been readily associated with charitable giving, unfairly in some very notable cases, so it seemed to me appropriate to pass the hat around. The response and individual generosity was far more than I had ever expected. Additionally I reckoned that, if I ended up hating the whole thing by day three, I could hardly turn back and reimburse all my family, friends and colleagues who had so generously filled the hat from their own pockets. I would have to carry on. Accordingly, I asked Save the Children and Beormund School, a small special-needs school in Southwark, if they would be my chosen charities. Doing something for children emotionally challenged and less privileged than many at the outset of their lives seemed appropriate after my own working lifetime in the City. Working with representatives from Save the Children and the staff and children from Beormund was hugely rewarding, especially the latter, who twice asked me down to their assembly to give presentations to the pupils and staff on the trip. After the first one, I was immensely touched to receive a book of wonderfully imaginative drawings from many of the pupils to encourage me on my way.

My family thought I was nuts. My beloved wife, Shaunagh, and all five of our children have always been quite open and direct in their opinions and it had taken some long talks with Shaunagh, and some memorably

shorter ones, to win her agreement. I realised I was asking her to sacrifice a lot emotionally. Throughout all the subsequent planning she was wonderful both in terms of her visible and open support and for keeping her concerns largely unspoken. The only times the latter appeared was when well-meaning friends said, 'You're so brave' (to me) and, 'Aren't you worried?' (to her). Neither were helpful, neither added anything and both were unnecessary reminders of only the negative aspects of such a trip. How much nicer it would have been to hear, 'You're so lucky' (to me) or, 'Aren't you pissed off not to be going?' (to her). The response to both would have been, of course, yes.

We had originally considered doing the transat together but I found myself increasingly turning to the concept of a solo. Why? I longed to see if I could prove to myself before it was too late that I still had most of the physical and mental strength I enjoyed when rowing; I wanted to feel again the excitement of uncertainty; I wanted to experience and sail across one of the great oceans; above all, I wanted the buzz of achieving something that I felt would really test my character and ability. I knew that to complete a transat in the company of others would not satisfy those feelings for me. The longer I thought about it the more I realised that I had to go alone. However, going alone made it more important that we were both fully committed to the trip as we realised the one left behind was likely to worry far more. Shaunagh also worried that my desire to go alone signified some form of running away from her. As this was precisely

what my father had done in 1963, I suppose it was a logical assumption. However, she was wrong. Having been together for 12 years we were – and still are – very close and I would have found it impossible to contemplate such a trip without her support.

As a result, we agreed that I would take with me an Iridium satellite phone and speak briefly twice daily. These calls were largely to talk about what had happened during the day, how we were both getting on and the more mundane aspects of everyday family life. It helped both of us retain a sense of normality which, on a couple of occasions when things went wrong for me on the trip, I found immensely reassuring. From reading my father's memoirs of his Atlantic crossing I knew this had been an important psychological issue for him when he wrote:

'Jinty accused me of becoming addicted to fiddling with the wireless . . . it gave one something to do, but much more than this it gave one the illusion that one was still in touch with the world. Otherwise one felt like a traveller through space in a rocket without windows'

Taking the satellite phone was a great boost as another in a long list of worries I had before the trip was how I would react to the absence of hearing other voices. A box full of talking books including *My Way* (Bill Clinton), *My Trade* (Andrew Marr), *Himalaya* (Michael Palin), *The Life of Pi* (Yann Martell), *A Short History of Almost Everything* (Bill Bryson), and *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (Douglas Adams) sat on the shelves alongside various CDs from John Cleese, Billy Connolly, Victor Borge and Peter Ustinov. As travelling companions go it