

# Jagular Goes South

by Tom Pamperin

Author's note: I first wrote this story as a 3-part series for Duckworks Magazine, and you can still read the original version [HERE](#). Enough people liked my account of my first Texas 200 (particularly those mutinous Newtons) that I kept on writing. Later on I included "Jagular Goes South" in my first book, *Jagular Goes Everywhere: (mis)Adventures in a \$300 Sailboat*, which was published in 2014. If you like what you read here, you can get a copy of the book from [Duckworks](#), or [Small Craft Advisor Magazine](#), or direct from me at my website [HERE](#).

Meanwhile, I've asked the Texas 200 people to post "Jagular Goes South" here on T200.com in case it proves useful (or at least entertaining) to anyone who is thinking about sailing in the Texas 200 themselves someday. Just bring your shallowest-draft boat and a sail with lots of reef points. You'll need them. Happy sailing!

It's the end of the school year, and as usual, entropy is gaining ground fast. I plod through my last days of teaching, thinking about boat modifications for the Texas 200, a five-day sailing trip along the Texas coast that we've decided to do.

"None of this *we* stuff," Jagular says. "You decided. I'm just getting dragged along to suffer the consequences."

I ignore him. I'm trying to figure out how I'm going to handle a fourteen-foot boat with a nine-foot mast and an eighteen-foot yard in twenty-knot winds and big saltwater bays with tides and currents and devious oyster-shell reefs and maybe sharks for all I know. I've never done a trip this big before and I'm not sure how stupid it is.

"Pretty stupid," Jagular says. "If you ask me."

"I didn't," I tell him, and go back to my planning.

I make mental lists of things to do, things to buy. New mast. New sail. New mast step. Through-bolted oarlocks. Paint. Some kind of anchor. New tiller. Self-steering. Charts. At the Farm & Fleet, an aisle of folding knives catches my eye. Do I need one? Yes. Every sailor needs a knife. What for? Well... I just

do. This isn't some little Wisconsin lake, after all. This is the ocean, kind of. Salt spray. Flying fish. Albatrosses. Typhoons. So. Plain knife, or multi-tool? Compromise: a two-piece blade and Phillips screwdriver combo.

Back home, the latest paint job is threatening to peel off the bottom of the boat again. I pretend not to notice since there's no time to do anything about it. My new Chinese junk sail is a tangled mess of crude battens, duct tape, and strings everywhere. I give up on that and cram the whole mess into a corner of the garage, borrow the spritsail from my brother's boat instead. Tack on new rubrails.

Friday is the last day of school, and the students are out early. I slip home after lunch to load the boat and camping gear. The living room has been submerged under piles of gear for days, my usual packing method. Now I gather up a couple of bags and backpacks and start to shove everything in. Stove. Gas can. Tent. Raspberry Newtons. Sardines in mustard sauce. Five one-gallon jugs of water. Fork. Run to grocery store. Ramen noodles. Tuna packets. Lemonade mix. Five o'clock. Sleeping bag. Books. Compass. Charts. Five-thirty. Throw a random armload of clean clothes into the back of the car. Throw everything else on top. Hook up trailer. Stop at gas station. Quarter to six Friday night and we're finally on the road.

One-thirty a.m. Sunday morning and we pull into Port Mansfield, Texas. Fred Stone Park, our launching point, turns out to be a clutter of small boats and trailers surrounding a lumpy parking lot of hard-packed dirt, a dock, and a derelict cinderblock building with an overflowing trash barrel, a cold-water sink, and a toilet boldly unencumbered by walls or barriers. Someone has dragged the trash barrel in front of the toilet in an attempt to reduce the exposure.

"Nice to be among civilized people," Jagular says, eyeing the barrel.

I'm too tired to reply. A yard light at the docks shines into every corner of the parking lot, so I throw my sleeping mat on the dirt in the shadow of the boat and collapse. At least the wind keeps the mosquitoes away.

## MONDAY

I wake to the smell of rotting seaweed, which is pretty much how I fell asleep, too. I spent Sunday unloading Jagular and ferrying my car to the finish line at Magnolia Beach and riding a bus back to Fred Stone Park with my fellow sailors. Then I walked up and down the beach in the hot wind looking at all the other boats, some of which look even less capable than mine, before collapsing for the night beside Jagular on the sand. For the next five days we'll all be sailing northward along a remote stretch of semi-desert coast, an informal armada of sailors and would-be adventurers. The Texas 200.

Now gray light seeps slowly into the day until I decide there's no point lying here on the beach anymore. I stand up, wade through the ankle-deep slime to Jagular, throw my sleeping pad and blanket in and look around. Texas. There's a kind of gutbucket post-apocalyptic splendor to it, all sky and dust and scrub brush. No trees. Boats and people are scattered around the beach and anchored offshore, all waiting for the start of this crazy cruise or race or adventure or whatever it is. What looks like three or four large plywood boxes are beached nearby. These are the infamous Puddle Ducks, crude rectangular dinghies that look more like sandboxes than boats. Their skippers, an anarchic crowd of rum-swilling hooligans, are strewn around the desolate beach like fresh corpses. Next to me is a Hobie catamaran, beside it a tiny wooden sailboat painted bright blue. There must be thirty or forty boats. If I'm about to do something stupid, I'm not the only one.

"It's windy," I tell Jagular.

"Uh-huh," he says. "Real windy."

I stand there on the beach in the unwavering wind and watch the sun rise slowly above the horizon like an angry red eye. No shade for the next twelve hours. A few more people start moving around. Eventually the Duck skippers stagger down to the beach and drag their boats into thigh-deep water and sail away, and the Texas 200 has officially begun. I stand on the shore trying to think of an excuse not to launch.

“Your boat going to be all right in this much wind?” someone asks.

How the hell should I know, I wonder.

“Sure,” I say out loud. “Won’t be a problem.” I have the familiar feeling, though, that despite the reassuring presence of all these other boats and sailors, I’m about to do something stupid. The only question is *how* stupid. The white polytarp spritsail I’ve borrowed from my brother flaps wildly on the mast as if making a frantic attempt to surrender.

A lean grizzled sailor with white hair and sea-squinty eyes watches my nervous pacing from the beach where he is still calmly building his boat. Last year he was one of the Puddle Duckers. This year he’s designed himself a flat-bottomed fourteen-footer with two masts, two sails, and a bunch of lines and cleats that he’s still figuring out. After a moment he stops what he’s doing and gives Jagular a long look.

“You’ve done a nice job making your sail,” he says. “But you might want to tie in a reef before launching.” Then goes back to work without waiting to see whether I’ll take his advice.

“Your brother made the sail, didn’t he?” Jagular asks.

“Shut up,” I tell him. I’m trying to figure out what to do about reefing. It’s probably a good idea, but there are no reef points in the sail. I never bothered to reef the previous lateen rig either, so I’m not entirely sure how to go about it. But it can’t be that hard to figure out. I stare at the flapping sail for a few moments, sure there’s a way to set up a reefing system somehow.

“Reef points,” Jagular says. “That should’ve been on your list.”

“Too late now,” I tell him.

“It usually is,” he says.

“The hell with it,” I tell Jagular finally. “Let’s just go.” I could unlace the sail from the mast, roll up the foot, rig some kind of new sheeting point at the clew, re-lace the sail to the mast, and make some kind of crudely reefed sail out of the whole mess, but just thinking about it feels too much like work. Instead I

drag Jagular into deeper water, out past the moored boats, and clamber aboard.

It's windy—a steady twenty knots maybe, according to some of the other sailors I've been talking to, who probably don't know any better than I do—and I go through the usual launching fiasco, trying to keep the sheet from snagging on the leeboards, cleats, and tiller, with the boat trying to turn sideways as I fall into the cockpit and sheet in, flopping over the stern to shove down the kick-up rudder, arm soaked to the shoulder, Jagular thumping up and down as I shift my weight, one oar knocked off the oarlock, the sheet wrapped around my ankles, everything happening all at once, until I'm finally away on the starboard tack.

Time to regroup, remind myself that I know what I'm doing. Heading east across the Laguna Madre, the waves are piled up row after row from the south, tossing us around alarmingly as we sail a close reach on a starboard tack. To the north and south the water stretches away as far as I can see, into infinity for all I know, and a wide gray sky hangs down from overhead as if its weight has squashed Texas flat. Far off to the east, five or six miles, the long dune-swept finger of Padre Island shelters us from the open Gulf. Still, compared to our usual cruising grounds, this is big water, and big wind. I sail way out past the ICW's line of green and red buoys, nervous about making the turn downwind, when we'll be briefly broadside to the waves. I try a few tentative jabs of the tiller before finally just shoving it over to starboard and holding it there until we're heading north up the Laguna Madre, paralleling the western shore of Padre Island. The Puddle Ducks are way up ahead, then only a long line of ICW buoys stretching into the distance.

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The wind grows steadily stronger all day, so I'm glad I started as early as I did. After a while I tie off the sheet to the leeboard cleat. You're not supposed to do that, I've read—you want to be able to release the sheet instantly at any moment on a small boat to avoid capsizing in a gust—but the hell with that. My hands are already getting tired and cramping up from holding such a thin line with the weight of the wind pulling against me. If we go over in a gust, we go over.

“Alea jacta est,” I tell the boat. “If it was good enough for Caesar, who am I to argue?”

After tying off the sheet I fiddle with the self-steering gear, a line and bungee combination tied around the tiller led to jam cleats on the side decks, until it steers the boat better than I can. I’m hands-free. Bailing occasionally. A little scary, but not too bad now that we’re out here on our way.

Before long, Jagular starts to surf, a dull roar of wave slipping slowly by underneath. We surge forward on the face of the wave with a flood of exhilaration. Five seconds. Eight seconds. Ten seconds. Then Jagular settles as the wave leaves us behind, starts surfing again on the next wave, and the next. The boat surfs along, steering itself as the bungees tug the tiller back and forth, leaving me in a curious mixture of exhilaration, apprehension, and inactivity. I’d read one of the books I’ve brought along but it’s too wet; each wave sends a stream of water up the starboard leeboard and onto my right shoulder.

One by one I pass the Puddle Ducks. They wave and shout at me. I wave back and pretend to hear what they’re saying. Nice guys. I’m beginning to think their hard-man reputation may have been exaggerated, though. Their boats have back rests. Solar panels. Cabins with actual portholes. Stereos, even! Those Duck skippers look obscenely comfortable, lounging around in their little sandboxes. The bastards. At least I’m passing them.

But it keeps getting windier, and before long I’m bailing again. Suddenly Jagular gets on top of a big wave and surfs a long time, the longest run yet, then drops off the crest and slams his bow into the wave just ahead. Water pours over the foredeck and into the cockpit, gallons of it. I start bailing frantically, the boat heavy and threatening to broach. I get the cockpit halfway bailed out before Jagular buries his bow again. More water pours into the cockpit, and everything aboard is floating, held in only by tie-down lines. A couple of Raspberry Newtons escape their carton and slide overboard. I finally remember to shift my weight as far back as I can, which holds the bow clear and lets me keep bailing. Eventually the cockpit is back to mostly dry.

The rest of the Laguna Madre passes calmly. I re-open the package of Raspberry Newtons and proclaim the ancient Roman legionary's penalty for desertion: decimation! One out of every ten Newtons must die. I eat four of the remaining thirty-two Newtons.

"Always round up for mutinies and desertions," I explain. No one complains.

Up ahead the Laguna Madre is pinching down to its northern end, and a line of low spoil islands begins off to our right. I stop at one of them to stretch my legs and admire the lack of scenery. Flat sand. Scrub brush. Cactus. Sky. Weeds. Wind. Like sailing past an endless line of abandoned lots.

"You're the one that picked Texas," Jagular reminds me.

"True," I tell him. "But now that I've seen it I'm not sure why. No one in his right mind would come so far for this."

"Exactly," the boat says.

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The Ducks have passed us while we've been ashore, so I launch and follow them into the long narrow channel of the Land Cut. From here to tonight's camp we'll be sailing straight down a narrow canal dredged for miles through the mud flats, connecting the Laguna Madre with the bigger bays and channels to the north. Giant wind turbines line the western shore, spinning slowly in the distance as we sail by. Up ahead the Ducks pull in to the eastern shore to regroup, and we pass by without stopping, in the lead now.

"Do you even know where tonight's campsite is?" Jagular asks.

I don't bother to answer.

It's not long before I'm forced to admit that it's no optical illusion; there's a definite bend to the mast.

"You probably should have built a real mast instead of trying to get by with a left-over steel fence post," Jagular says.

"I built a real mast," I say. "I just decided to use the fence post instead."

“You’re an idiot,” the boat mutters.

“In theory, the fence post will bend enough to spill the worst gusts, maybe enough to keep us from capsizing,” I explain, steering toward the shore for repairs.

“It’s bending, anyway,” Jagular says. “You got that part right.”

I beach us in a mudbank without saying anything else and tug the fence post out of the mast step, then try to straighten it out. There’s nothing to pry against, though; the foot of the mast just sinks into the mud. I’m standing knee-deep in gray ooze and have to keep pausing to fight my way out. When I finally get free I try prying the mast against the hull, but the geometry is wrong; the mast rolls across the side decks rather than bending. Meanwhile the rest of the fleet is passing us by, a long string of boats that started later and sailed faster than we did.

“At least we’ll know where tonight’s campsite is,” I say.

“If we manage to get there before dark so we can see them,” Jagular grumbles.

But finally I get the mast, if not straightened out, then at least bent a little differently than it was before. I re-step it with the bend to the opposite side, hoping the wind will straighten it. More boats are passing as I launch; we’re dropping farther and farther back in the fleet. Time to get moving.

We haven’t gone half a mile before the mast is bending again, though. Needs a backstay, I decide. I glance at the anchor line in my gear bucket, the leeboard cleats perfectly located on the side decks. A backstay! I shove the tiller to port, steering for the beach again. But the mast is bending severely now, almost collapsing. I scramble to release the sheet, hoping to stave off complete disaster, but the mast is bending farther and farther under the force of the wind, folding sharply at the partner, a right angle bend, until the whole rig lies draped flat across the foredeck, foot still in the step, sail dragging through the water.

Jagular glides gently up onto the shore, burying his bow in the mud again, thirty seconds too late. The

sail billows slowly back and forth through the water, waving limply from the now-horizontal mast.

“Well,” the boat says, “we’re not going to have to worry about gusts anymore. That’s the good news.”

I hop out without answering, plans already running through my head. Worst case scenario, I ditch the rig entirely and row north up the Land Cut and the ICW to the Padre Island Yacht Club. Can’t be more than fifty miles, all downwind. I can camp by myself, I have water for five days, that will be fine. Best case, I work out a jury rig. Pry the mast out of the step, slide the sail off the mast, and put the sail back on upside-down so the mangled mast foot doesn’t have to go back in the step. But first duct-tape the sprit to the crumpled mast as a splint, that can’t hurt. Reef the sail by tying together the first three lacing points. Use the sprit boom for a shorter sprit. An oar for a boom.

Ten seconds after landing I’m already tugging the mast out of the step, surprised at how decisive I’ve become. It’s reassuring, this newly discovered capacity for immediate action in the face of a crisis. No dithering now. Bodes well for the rest of the trip.

“Fixing stupid mistakes is one thing,” Jagular says. “Not making them in the first place is something else.”

“You be quiet,” I tell him, still trying to tug the mast out of the step. Boats are passing by as I work things out, asking if I need help. No, I call back. I’m fine.

Of course I have no idea if I’m fine or not, but I’m determined to maintain some self-sufficiency, make some attempt to repair the effects of my own stupidity. A few of the Newtons are snickering, rustling around in their packaging. I ignore them. Boats keep passing—fewer now, though, with long stretches where no one passes by at all. We may be last in line.

Just as I’m finishing up a couple of boats pull in to make sure we’re ok. There’s a friendly guy sailing a lime green proa, and the white-haired sailor who suggested I reef before launching. They offer to help, but luckily I’ve already managed to get everything rigged. It’s ugly, but it should work. The mast is upside-

down in the step with the mangled foot at the top where it's out of the way, with the sprit duct-taped to it as a splint; the reefed sail is rolled up into a clumsy bundle at the foot; the boom is in place as a new shorter sprit; and one oar is in place as the new boom.

The white-haired sailor with sea-squinty eyes inspects my jury rig without saying anything, leaning in close to check it over.

"I should have tied in a reef like you suggested," I tell him. "I'd have probably avoided this whole mess. But I guess I kind of need to learn everything the hard way."

"Is there another way?" he says, smiling. We both laugh. I'm about to hop in and set sail when the proa sailor points at my mangled mast.

"You might want to think about rigging a backstay," he suggests politely.

A backstay! That's what I stopped for in the first place, and I've almost sailed off without it. But it doesn't take long to unstep the mast and use the anchor line to run a backstay from the starboard leeboard cleat to the masthead. Then I re-step the mast and step back to look it over. Afterwards the proa guy and the squinty-eyed sailor in the flat-bottomed sloop launch their boats and sail away with a few final words of encouragement. Apparently they've decided we'll make it. We're alone on the muddy beach again.

"There," I tell Jagular. "That wasn't so bad. What do you think?"

"Well, if there were any doubts about your craftsmanship before," he says, "there are none now."

I shove off the muddy beach and sheet in the new jury-rigged sail, and we're underway again. We slide smoothly down the channel, following the rest of the fleet. Maybe a little slower than before, but we're moving.

I eat a couple more of the Newtons, and the rest stop snickering.

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We reach the camp at Hap's Cut just after sunset and land on the muddy beach alongside the long line

of boats already there ahead of us. They're pulled up all along the shore, a misfit armada of homebuilts and aging second-handers, and we've landed at the far end of the line, the latest of the late arrivals. Even the Puddle Ducks came in ahead of us, although at eight feet long they ought to be the slowest boats in the fleet. I realize that the motto on the Texas 200 t-shirts I've seen people wearing—*Lord, let me at least beat the Puddle Ducks*—might not be as much of a joke as I thought.

I walk around a little but nothing seems to be happening except a lot of standing around talking about boats: building boats, fixing boats, building other boats. I'm sick of boats; I've been aboard Jagular for fifteen hours today. Aboard him, or standing beside him in the mud trying to fix him. Finally I wander off to find some supper and a place to sleep. The Duck skippers are standing around in a circle on the beach near my boat, talking loudly. There seems to be rum involved—with them there usually is. I borrow a can opener from one of them. Cold ravioli from a can. Darkness. Unroll sleeping mat on flat sand. Kick off my sandals. Collapse.

## TUESDAY

I'm up at dawn for an early launch, easy to do when getting ready means throwing my sleeping bag in Jagular's watertight storage compartment and stepping the duct-taped mast. Then we're off for a relaxing sail down the ICW. With our newly mangled rig, we're a contender for slowest boat of the fleet, but we don't seem to be having any other problems.

"Yet," Jagular says.

"I admire your optimism," I tell the boat. We're definitely moving slower than we were yesterday. I hook up the self-steering lines and settle in for another long day on the starboard tack. The land slides by, flat and featureless and empty. The wind blows on steadily from the southeast. The sun hangs overhead like a molten hammer, and it's another downwind day as we head north along the treeless shores. Texas.

The new jury-rigged sail is about half the size of the original, so it's downright peaceful to sail with. After a while I get out a notebook and start writing about yesterday's mast fiasco as we sail along. Boat after boat passes us, and I glance up now and then to see that Jagular seems to be following everyone else without any help from me, straight up the ICW's long line of red and green buoys. And then the friendly sailor in the green proa sails by. His boat is moving fast—really fast— and he's busily working the mainsheet and tiller, adjusting the daggerboard, trimming the sails, tightening this and readjusting that. I'm getting tired just watching him. He leans over for a close look at Jagular as he goes past, moving three times faster than we are.

“Are you reading a *book*?” he says, incredulous.

“No,” I call back. “Writing one.” But he's already gone.

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The Padre Island Yacht Club, tonight's camp, is a welcome outpost of luxury after Fred Stone Park and Hap's Cut, but the constant activity makes me feel like the world has been put on fast forward and I've been left behind at normal speed. People are scurrying along the docks from one boat to another, and the air-conditioned clubhouse is filled with tables of people fiddling with GPS units and charts, arranging rides into town for tools and supplies, discussing things and repairing things and making plans and back-up plans and alternate plans. After a quick shower and a set of clean clothes, I hang my wet pants on a railing and step back into the clubhouse.

The contrast between the slow silence of sailing and the harried buzz of the Yacht Club is unsettling. All the planning and consulting and chart marking and GPS programming going on here gives me the feeling that I should be doing something to prepare for the days ahead but I don't know what it is, so instead I head back to the boat to grab my shoes. Which aren't there, because I've left them on the beach at Hap's Cut. The dozen or so Raspberry Newtons left in the package chuckle quietly, nudging and

elbowing each other.

“Marooned his own shoes, the idjit,” I hear one of them say. I eat him, then wonder what to do next.

So far it’s been pretty easy, but tomorrow we’ll be sailing northward across Corpus Christi Bay and Aransas Bay, our first real stretches of open water, aiming for the remote oyster-shell reef of Paul’s Mott. A big day. Big wind, big fetches, and maybe some big waves. I pull out my bundle of charts and try to figure out what kind of planning everyone else seems to be doing. It doesn’t seem like there’s much to do: just keep heading north and don’t capsize.

“You ready for tomorrow?” another sailor calls to me as he’s walking across the dock, a bundle of gear in his arms, a GPS and handheld radio dangling from one hand, and a laundry bag from the other.

How the hell should I know, I wonder.

“Sure,” I tell him.

## WEDNESDAY

I’m up at 5:30. After a quick shower I stow my gear and untie from the dock, then row across the channel and beach Jagular on a nearby island where I’ll have room to step the mast and re-rig the backstay. A gray day, and windy. By the time I convince myself I’m ready to face Corpus Christi Bay, there are already some boats ahead of me, heading west down the Yacht Club channel to the ICW. I follow them, risking a couple of short jibes with our jury rig to tack my way downwind.

Today is where the trip gets interesting. It’s an easy mile down the ICW to the high bridge where Highway 358 connects Padre Island to the mainland. Maybe a mile after the bridge comes Corpus Christi Bay, a wide stretch of open water, ten miles across. The main channel, the ICW, takes the shortest route, heading almost straight north across the bay. With the winds likely to get stronger as the day goes on, though, anyone going that way could be in for some serious conditions.

Instead, I plan to leave the marked channel as it enters Corpus Christi Bay, cutting east to hug the shore of Mustang Island, the long thin stretch of land separating the ICW from the open waters of the Gulf on this part of our route. On the windward side of the bay near Mustang Island, the waves should be smaller, more suitable for an unballasted boat like Jagular. We'll be threading our way between Mustang Island and Shamrock Island, then on to Stingray Hole, a narrow pass at the northern edge of the bay.

Hugging the shore as I plan to do, it's about nine miles to Stingray Hole. Three hours of sailing, maybe. It will probably be the roughest stretch on the whole trip, and I'm not exactly sure how well the boat will handle it. Jagular is long and lean, only thirty-nine inches wide across the widest part of the flat bottom, and narrow boats don't stand up to wind and waves as well as beamier ones. But Jagular also has decks and large watertight compartments that should protect us from taking on much water, and with our new reefed sail we'll catch a lot less wind than we did on Monday. Finally I decide that the worst that can happen is that I'll be capsized, lose my boat and all my gear, and have a long swim to shore, followed by an even longer walk to someplace where I can buy a bus ticket home. Doesn't sound too bad. If I'm going to be a small boat sailor then I'm going to have to do some sailing. I make sure I have my wallet tucked safely away in the cargo pocket of my shorts and decide I'm ready to give it a try.

By the time we're nearing the high bridge that connects Padre Island to the mainland, I'm caught in the middle of a long procession of boats. Most of them are steadily passing me. There are dolphins popping up everywhere, too, chasing in and out of the other boats, but again they avoid Jagular.

"What's with those dolphins?" I ask. "Don't they like you?"

"They like me fine," Jagular says. "It's you they're avoiding."

"Why?" I ask.

"Why does anyone avoid you? You're impatient and antisocial and curmudgeonly," the boat says.

"You make it a point of honor to disagree with everything anyone says."

“No I don’t.”

“Quod erat demonstrandum.”

“All right,” I say. “Maybe I do—as if that’s such a bad thing. Most of what’s wrong with the world is only possible because everyone goes along with everything instead of disagreeing sometimes. But how do those dolphins know that about me, anyway?”

“Everyone knows. That’s why I’m the only one who’ll go sailing with you.”

“That’s not true,” I say.

“Who else?” Jagular demands.

I stop to think about it. “Well. The cat came with us once.”

“Yes,” Jagular says. “Once.”

Our debate dies down as we pass under the bridge and its shadow falls across the cockpit. I’m getting a little nervous. It’s only 7:15, but the wind is already strong, stronger than yesterday. My two lasting impressions of the Texas coast: flat and windy.

Soon we’ll reach the open waters of Corpus Christi Bay, so I glance around to make sure everything is ship-shape. It’s not. When I rigged the backstay this morning, I managed to tie it to the wooden pole duct-taped to the mast. I should have rigged it to the mast itself. Will it hold the way it is? Or will the wind be strong enough to peel the mast away from the improvised splint, crumpling the mast again? I can’t make up my mind about what to do, not wanting to waste time stopping but afraid of how little mistakes grow into big ones. Might be better to re-rig it.

Nearing the last of the tiny islands flanking the channel’s approach to the open bay, I make my decision: I’ll stop to fix the backstay. I steer toward the island, only thirty yards away, and sail right up onto a smooth beach made of millions of crushed oyster shells. Simple enough, and I’m pleased that I’ve made the smart decision. It’s really windy, maybe the windiest day yet—when you’re sailing downwind as we

are, the wind is always easier to notice when you stop—and it seems to be getting windier. I wouldn't want to lose the mast in the middle of Corpus Christi Bay.

I drag Jagular up out of the water and look around. We're on a perfect marooning island, a low small treeless stretch of sand and weeds lined with oyster shells. Beached here on the southern edge of Corpus Christi Bay, I can look northward across a long stretch of open water, ten miles or more. It's a lonely place. I won't be here long, though. It takes only a few seconds to pull down the mast and adjust the backstay and then I'm ready to go.

It's windy, hard to keep the boat in position for launching, and there's the inevitable shuffling the boat back and forth, trying to hold the bow into the wind as the sail and sprit flap overhead. I adjust the rudder and leeboards, trying not to step into the deep water just offshore. As I'm about to climb aboard, the rudder catches on the bottom just as a gust shoves the bow to port. I hear a distinct crack, a sound like breaking bone, and Jagular gives a small lurch.

Shit—the rudder. That could be an inglorious end to our journey. Plans to rig a steering oar are already flashing through my head as I turn to look, and I wonder if I'll have the nerve to try crossing the bay if I have to steer with the wobbly contraption in my imagination. But it's not the rudder. It's the tiller, broken when it wedged itself against the cockpit side where it couldn't follow the rudder's sudden movement. The rudder is fine. Still, we've lost the tiller.

“That went well,” the boat says.

“It could be worse,” I tell him.

“It probably will be.”

I want to disagree, but he could be right. The rest of the fleet will leave us far behind and it'll be a long slow death by marooning. Or worse, they *won't* leave us behind and we'll have to suffer an embarrassing rescue.

“You mean *another* embarrassing rescue,” Jagular says. “But don’t worry. No one’s here to call an airboat crew this time.”

“Good,” I say. “We’re on our own, then.”

A couple of the Newtons start chuckling quietly. I drag Jagular back onto the beach and unstep the mast before inspecting the damages. The tiller is broken cleanly across at the rudder head, almost completely severed. I wiggle it gently and it comes off in my hand, leaving a short stub bolted to the rudder cheeks.

Such a stupid mistake, and so easily avoidable. But already I see what I have to do, and once again there’s no dithering or deciding. I have to make the new shorter tiller fit between the rudder cheeks, then drill a new bolt hole through the tiller to attach it with. Easy enough. I pull out my Farm & Fleet knife, sit down on the starboard side deck, and start whittling. Only ten seconds have gone by since the tiller came off in my hand. Part of me is beginning to like these small emergencies that seem to bring out the best in me.

Another part of me is wondering how I’m going to drill a hole through the new tiller, but I do my best not to worry about that. One thing at a time. I keep whittling. Meanwhile, boat after boat passes my island. Other sailors are shouting to me, asking if I need help. No, I shout back. Not unless you have a quarter-inch drill. No one does. I keep whittling, checking the fit occasionally. Finally I have it; the new tiller, shorter by five inches, fits snugly between the rudder cheeks. Now for the bolt hole.

I fold up my knife and stare at it for a moment. Tucked away alongside the knife blade is the Phillips screwdriver bit. I unfold it. Seems about the right size for a bolt hole. Carefully trying not to expect too much, I jab it into the tiller where the new bolt hole needs to be. It sinks in slightly, and I start to spin it back and forth, using the body of the knife as a handle. After a minute I pull the knife away and examine the result. The start of a hole. This might work.

Twenty minutes later I have a new tiller, shorter but still serviceable. I'm almost getting to like making mistakes just for the simple satisfaction I get from fixing them. Not a very seamanlike attitude but it's all I have.

\* \* \* \* \*

Corpus Christi Bay is bad, the worst conditions we've seen yet. All around us the water is broken into whitecaps, wave after wave after wave, and the wind is still getting stronger. I've cut across the ICW and am heading for the west side of Mustang Island, which means Jagular is almost broadside to the wind and waves now. I'm not sure we're going to make it. Still, for most of the way we'll be less than a mile from Mustang Island, so it's hardly a matter of life and death. Not in water this warm, anyway.

It's a good thing. Already we've seen one boat from the Texas 200 fleet capsize behind us here in Corpus Christi Bay, and another one lose its mast. I'd go back to help but there's no way we can make progress to windward in these conditions—lots of wind, and a sharp chop. And even if I could reach them, Jagular is too small to bring anyone else aboard anyway. They'll have to fend for themselves, or hope help catches up with them.

“That's heroic,” says Jagular.

“That's realistic,” I tell him. “I'd need a better boat to be a hero. I could swim back to that capsized boat faster than you could get to him. And that other boat probably already called SeaTow on his VHF anyway. No one needs us.”

We're close enough to Mustang Island now to start our swing north. Watching the approaching waves closely to time our turn, I swing us onto our new heading, and we're sailing up the shore of Mustang Island. Immediately the boat's motion eases as we start to move downwind rather than across the waves. Before long we're surfing again. Eight miles to go across the bay.

\* \* \* \* \*

Stingray Hole. We're alone by the time we reach the far side of the bay, no other boats in sight ahead or behind. Here there's another choice to make. The simplest route would be to turn right after passing through Stingray Hole, following the main shipping channel eastward about a mile, then turning north up the Lydia Ann Channel for another couple of miles.

"The channels are well marked, just a matter of following the buoys," I tell the boat. "What do you think?"

"Have you seen the shipping traffic that passes through these channels? And the car ferries?"

"Good point," I say. "Corpus Christi Bayou, then."

Corpus Christi Bayou is the back route into Aransas Bay. We'll pass through Stingray Hole and keep going straight ahead, aiming northeast. Any boat able to fit under an eight-foot-high bridge can follow this route, cutting across the shallow backwaters to avoid the traffic and the big dogleg detour of the shipping channels. I'll sail up to the bridge, beach Jagular to unstep the mast, and wade underneath pulling the boat through with me. Once on the other side I'll have to re-step the mast and follow a twisting, unobvious route through the series of mudflats and islands that make up Corpus Christi Bayou. If we don't get lost, we should re-join the ICW a few miles further on.

"In theory," the boat says.

I'm more worried about our ability to sail to windward than I am about getting lost, though. We'll have to make some short tacks up some of the channels on the route we've chosen, and I'm not sure how much strain our improvised rig can take. The backstay should help. But with our jury-rigged sail, our windward ability won't be as good as usual, either.

"Our windward ability is never that good," Jagular says. "Thanks to you I've got a baggy polytarp sail instead of real sailcloth, and flat plates for the leeboards and rudder instead of hydrodynamic foils."

"That's true. But it's that or try playing *Frogger* with those ferries."

There's a long moment of silence. All around us is emptiness; we're alone, no boats in sight. Most of the other boats, I know, will take the ship channels.

"You've got insurance, don't you?" Jagular says finally.

"Yes," I tell him. "But you don't."

\* \* \* \* \*

We sail through Stingray Hole, cross the shipping lane, and keep heading northeast toward Corpus Christi Bayou, pointing toward the bridge where we'll have to drop the mast. For the first time in the trip I'll be following the chart closely, making sure I know exactly where we are. A chart and a hand compass—the only tools I need. Simplicity, after all, is the foundation of adventure.

"Nonsense," one of the remaining Newtons says. "You're just not smart enough to learn how to use a GPS."

"The hell with that," I say. "I *like* navigating with a chart and compass. If I wanted to push buttons and play video games, I'd stay home on the couch where it's dry and comfortable. Besides, how come you're speaking up now? Where were you out in the bay when it was rough?"

No answer. In retaliation I open the package and eat two of them. They're getting a little soggy.

"What do you expect, taking a boat like this out on Corpus Christi Bay, genius?" one of them says. "Everything is a little soggy."

I pretend not to hear.

The bridge we're heading for is easy to see, so there's not much navigation involved at first. But it's getting even windier. As we near the bridge I see a crumbling marina at its foot, the Fin and Feather. No boats, just some old wooden docks and a parking lot. I'm not sure if it's still operational, but it makes a convenient place to land. I sail Jagular up onto a boat ramp and hop out, take a look around.

"Look at this," I tell Jagular. "We've come ashore in the middle of an industrial wasteland. A beautiful

stretch of barrier islands, remote bays, and deserted beaches, and they've made it all into a giant refinery. Consume! Consume! Increase production! Grow the economy! And everyone just goes along with it. If more people were like me and took the trouble to disagree with things, the world wouldn't be in such a mess."

"Doesn't the furnace in your basement run on natural gas?" Jagular says.

"When it runs at all. But that doesn't diminish the ugliness of this scene."

An occasional car crosses by on the bridge overhead, and drilling platforms, power lines, refineries and huge factory chimneys line the horizon. All greedily sucking oil and gas from the seabed as quickly as possible and spewing clouds of toxic smoke into the sky.

"The love of oil is the root of all evil," I tell Jagular.

"How far did we drive to get to Texas?" he asks. "Twelve hundred miles? One way?"

\* \* \* \* \*

I unstep the mast and wade under the bridge with Jagular in tow, carefully sidestepping the rocks, broken concrete slabs and mangled rebar that lie under the water. More ugliness, and no less ugly for being hidden under the surface.

Again, now that I'm no longer sailing directly downwind, I can feel how windy it is. Once under the bridge I pull the boat up onto the shore and pause to check the chart, and it almost flies away from me as I unfold it. If anything, it's windier now than it was out on Corpus Christi Bay.

From here we have to follow a curving channel that may or may not be marked. If we stray, we'll risk getting into water so shallow even Jagular won't be able to float. I'm not eager to drag my boat a mile or more through thigh-deep mud if I miss the channel.

Luckily, though, the channel begins as a passage between two islands just off the beach—I can see them from where I'm standing. The rest of the channel is marked, on my chart at least, by small white

circles that may be pilings or stakes. If they actually exist, the channel should be easy to follow. Time to give it a try. I re-step the mast. The sail flogs crazily; the wind is really ripping. But everything goes smoothly with the launch this time, and soon we're heading down the channel between the two islands.

For a while afterwards the channel *is* marked, lined with wooden posts that rise about eight feet above the water. Occasionally there are drilling platforms that I can find on the chart, too. Pretty simple stuff. But soon there is nothing, just a broad empty stretch of water that all looks the same. We've sailed alone for much of the trip so far, but here we're the most alone we've been. There are scattered islands marked on the chart, but everything is so flat that they're almost impossible to see; they could be islands, or just tall reeds sticking up above the surface of the water.

The sense of space above is enormous, crowding out the land with an emptiness broken only by a few gulls. It's as if the world, flattened and deflated by the weight of so much sky, has sunk out of sight beneath us, leaving only the barest tips of things exposed to mark the trail we're trying to follow. I sail by compass headings from the chart, estimating the distance between turns by sheer guesswork. It seems to work, though the rudder bumps the bottom a couple of times and I'm never exactly certain where we are. After a while, though, we come out through a channel between two obvious islands, and we're through the worst of it. Not too bad.

"Compass and chart," I say.

"You got lucky," one of the Newtons says. I eat him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Aransas Bay is rough, too, but once we reach the lee of Mud Island it's not too bad. Should only be about eight or nine miles to the camp at Paul's Mott from here, and for the first time all day the sun breaks free of the clouds. Nothing is quite as scary in bright sunlight. Or maybe the wind is dropping. Maybe both.

By late afternoon I see a clump of masts on the horizon. Soon afterward I see the camp, a long finger of oyster-shell reef sticking out into Aransas Bay from the barrier island to our east. There are boats pulled up all along the reef and anchored offshore. I steer around the point and approach from the downwind side where I'll have some shelter from the waves. Several people wade out to meet us. Together we lift Jagular all the way out of the water, setting him down on top of the reef between the Hobie catamaran and the lime green proa. Jagular's stern hangs cantilevered out over the waves, a foot above sea level. We're high and dry on Paul's Mott. We've made it.

"This far, anyway," Jagular says.

#### THURSDAY

I'm up early, waiting for my turn at the clump of bushes a ways down the beach that's serving as the head for a bunch of us this morning. Between dodging the rattlesnakes and finding a convenient bush it makes for a later launch than usual, and many boats are already heading out by the time I manage to organize my gear and slide Jagular into the water. Got to wear long pants today—yesterday afternoon's sun gave me a good start at a burn. I start rummaging through my gear for my one pair of long pants. Which aren't there, because they're still draped over the railing at the Padre Island Yacht Club where I left them.

This time I eat a couple of the Newtons before they even have time to start snickering—call that breakfast. Then I decide the missing pants don't matter too much anyway; I'll just wrap my sleeping mat over my legs for some instant shade. But I'm wondering how much of my gear will end up strewn all along the Texas coast by the end of the week.

I'm too tired to really care, though. Before it was even fully dark last night I collapsed on the oyster-shell reef beside Jagular and fell asleep. No need to stay up all night making repairs like some of the other

sailors have been doing; I've had all my problems already. At least I hope so. But by now I have some confidence in my ability to muddle through despite making mistakes, anyway. I'm starting to feel like I belong here.

I've made another discovery, too: I really enjoy spending the long hours sailing alone. I suppose some might find it boring to spend all day alone, moving so slowly, but I seem to be immune to boredom aboard a small boat of my own. These long slow passages—thirty or forty miles a day, the longest I've ever sailed in a small boat by far—seem to offer an antidote to the mad rushing that marks so much of our lives. Alone for so long in a small boat like Jagular, my mind's clumsy and unceasing clamoring is slowly worn down until nothing remains but a simple awareness of the moment—a moment that stretches on for eight, nine, ten hours of solitude. No need for thinking, only being. The sound of the waves. The feel of the tiller. The motion of the boat through the water. And always, the wind. Sailing alone is life reduced to a perfectly elegant simplicity.

\* \* \* \* \*

After launching, we follow a line of boats northwest toward the day's first challenge: a series of three passes that will take us through the shallows of Carlos Bay and Mesquite Bay. I'm looking forward to finally leaving the well-marked ICW behind and doing some real navigating. I manage to pass a few boats by cutting close in across the shallows at the west end of Jaybird Reef, and then we're at the entrance to the first pass, just off Dunham Island. For once in this flat flat land it's easy to recognize features from the chart—Cape Carlos, then Cedar Point—and I'm a little disappointed to have a line of boats in front of me to follow. Takes some of the satisfaction out of finding my way through. Again, though, I'm given a little boost of confidence in my chart-and-compass navigating. No need for anything else.

"You're an idiot," one of the Newtons says. "Magellan, Shackleton, Cook—they used the best navigation technology they could get. They would have loved a GPS."

I ignore him; it's too nice a day to fight back. It's not long before we're through Cedar Dugout, the second pass, and then I'm following a long line of boats strung out across Mesquite Bay, heading generally eastward toward the narrow cut of Ayres Dugout. With our jury rig we can barely hold this course—we can't manage much more than a beam reach. I start trying to angle us to windward a little, putting something in the bank in case we miss the cut, but I can see it's going to be close.

Then up ahead, between me and the island that must mark the entrance to Ayres Dugout, I see waves breaking in shallow water, always an unsettling sight. And on the far side of the shoals, the island we're aimed at turns out to be two or three separate islands separated by marshy channels. There are a number of boats pulled up on the beach of the westernmost island, but I'll have to get past the reef to get there. I tuck my chart away without really looking at it, trying to make out what's happening up ahead. Again I try unsuccessfully to head more to windward, guessing that the beached boats have missed the channel at Ayres Dugout by being caught too far downwind. They must've landed on the island to regroup. Why else would they stop?

I aim for the passage between the islands, but I can already tell we're not going to make it. The wind is driving Jagular toward the shallow reefs ahead, and we can't point high enough to sail around them. Soon the rudder is bumping the bottom, then the leeboards. Then we're stopped, aground on a mound of oyster shells in ankle deep water two hundred and fifty yards off the beach.

As Jagular grinds to a halt, the full force of the wind hits me again. Windy! Now that I'm stopped I can really feel it, blowing hard. I pull on some flip-flops I borrowed from another sailor and quickly hop out of the boat to pull down the sprit and furl the sail, then unstep the mast and stow it aboard. The water is so shallow that even without me aboard Jagular won't float free. The wind is pushing the boat onto the leeboard and rudder, driving them hard into the oyster-shell bottom. I pull off the rudder, then untie both leeboards and stow everything aboard before starting to tug Jagular toward the island. The hull scrapes

across the surface of the reef, but pulls easily enough. Probably weighs less than two hundred pounds, even fully loaded as it is.

I haven't taken more than a few steps before the oyster shells have cut my feet up pretty badly, though—the muddy bottom keeps sucking the flip-flops off my feet, and the shells are sharp-edged and cruel. Feels like walking through a huge tub of knee-deep butter filled with thousands of pieces of broken glass. Still, the flip-flops are far better than nothing. I manage to make my way across the reef, stopping every few steps to pull the flip-flops back onto my feet, and in a few minutes I reach a narrow deep-water channel that separates the reefs from the island. I don't bother to get back in the boat, crowded with oars, rudder, leeboards, and rig; I just start swimming, pulling Jagular behind me like a dog on a leash. It only takes a few minutes to reach the shore, where I pull the boat up beside a Hobie catamaran and check my feet.

Not too bad after all—I'm bleeding from a number of cuts and scrapes, but only one bad wound, a three-inch laceration sliced deep into the meat of my right heel. I rinse it with fresh water and carefully press the flap of skin back over the cut and duct tape it shut. Seems to work. Then I head up the narrow beach to where a number of people have gathered at a cabin on the island.

It's a surreal transition, not at all what I expected to find here in the middle of nowhere. Someone is cooking breakfast in the cabin, offering food to all takers. Others are talking on handheld VHF radios, trying to warn people about the reefs. Still others are watching the approaching boats, a long line of them strung out from Cedar Dugout to the island. I wander around aimlessly for a while, not really sure why so many of us have gathered here. Lots of the boats behind me seem to be having problems. A Puddle Duck runs aground way out on the reef, and a couple of people wade out to help. Meanwhile the radio chatter grows more animated as everyone tries to figure out what's happening. "Go more to windward than you are," someone says. Another radio voice disagrees. Someone else comes on to ask what's going on. Utter confusion.

Finally I decide I might as well get moving. “Where’s the cut?” I ask the Hobie cat sailor. “Between the islands, right? I think I’ll just drag my boat back there along the beach, shouldn’t be too hard.”

He stares at me for a second. “Dude,” he says, pointing at the deep channel running past the island just a few feet offshore—the channel I swam across a few minutes before. “The cut’s right there. That’s it.”

What the... I go back to my boat and pull out my compass. The channel I swam across runs almost due north; I’m sure that on my chart, Ayres Dugout runs east to west. The Hobie guy can’t be right. He is, though. I understand as soon as I pull out my chart to check. The marked channel angles north a short distance before curving eastward—I’ve been fooled, not noticing how the island angles northeast instead of straight north. There is no passage between the islands, no need to fight to windward. I just have to sail around the west side of the whole group, right down the deep channel alongside the beach.

If I could have gained just a little more ground to windward, I would’ve sailed right around the eastern edge of the reefs, where a turn to the left would have put me safely in the channel without running aground. Either way, though, I’ve made it now. Home free. But I’m annoyed with myself for following the boats ahead of me instead of my chart. It wouldn’t have made much difference here—with Jagular unable to work to windward, I would have ended up aground on the reef anyway—but I decide it’s the last time I’ll let something like that happen. No more mindless following! I re-rig the rudder and leeboards, step the mast, and I’m off down the channel.

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After sailing past a few small islands, we round the corner into San Antonio Bay. There’s a sailboat way up ahead, its sails barely visible over the horizon. I set my self-steering gear and follow it directly across the bay, aiming for Panther Point. This course takes us away from the lee of Matagorda Island, into open water, but we seem to be doing fine. Along the way we pass several gas drilling platforms, intricate masses of pipes and tubes that rise from the shallow bay like sets of abandoned monkey bars. They’re

much smaller than I imagined.

“More vampiracy,” I tell the boat. “The love of oil really *is* the root of all evil, see? We’re slowly and steadily sucking the life from everything we touch, even here in the middle of a remote bay, far from any roads or cities.”

“Don’t even start,” Jagular says.

“If you want to bury your head in the sand, go ahead.” But I’m too lazy to say more, too contented. It’s a beautiful day. Soon the drilling platforms drop out of sight behind us.

Six miles later we reach Panther Point, where an exposed oyster shell reef reaches from deep out in the bay toward shore like a bony and beckoning finger. There are hundreds of hunched-over birds lined up in the shallows all along the way, a curmudgeonly bunch, surly and grumbling. Luckily there’s a narrow channel of deeper water just off the point, so we’re able to sail right past them between Panther Point and the reef just a few yards offshore.

About a mile and a half past Panther Point, I angle further offshore, following a compass course toward South Pass. At least, toward the place that South Pass is supposed to be, according to my chart—as always around here, the islands are too low to see. About four miles straight ahead if I’m doing this right.

“You’re not,” one of the Newtons says. “Smart sailors use a GPS.”

“You again,” I say. “GPS, hell. I like relying on skill, not buttons and batteries.”

Another Newton chimes in. “Your insistence on clinging to outdated technologies isn’t evidence of any moral superiority on your part, you know. It’s only a symptom of your psychotic compulsion toward non-conformity.”

“Hey, what’s with the constant negativity?” I ask. “Because look at this wind, these waves, this sun! When are you going to stop complaining?”

“When are you going to stop eating us?” the first Newton says.

“Circle of life,” I tell him. “We’re all part of someone’s food chain.”

“There are only eight of us left, you know,” it says.

“Don’t be such a baby,” I say. But I put the carton away without eating any of them. They’re getting too soggy anyway.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once we’re through South Pass and into Espiritu Santo Bay we run into problems again. The wind has shifted to the northeast, directly offshore. And it’s picking up. By the time I make out the distant group of buildings that must be Army Hole, the abandoned Army Air Corps base that’s tonight’s destination, I’m wondering if we’ll make it. We’re sailing a beam reach parallel to the shore, but we can’t point high enough to get any closer. The waves are building, making it even harder to make any progress to windward. The chop is getting big enough to be exciting. If I don’t figure something out soon we’re going to end up in the marshes two miles past Army Hole.

I mess around trying everything I can think of for an hour or so, but with this mangled jury rig it’s just not going to work. The wind is much stronger now, the waves tossing Jagular sharply, sending plenty of spray aboard. And it’s getting late, not much daylight left. Finally I give up. We’ll have to sail the best course we can manage until I hit the buoyed channel leading into Army Hole and figure out what to do from there. I can always row in, or tie up to a buoy for the night. Or keep going and camp in the marshes down the coast. Something. So it’s back to a beam reach on the starboard tack for now.

Once we give up our feeble attempts to fight the wind, we move along smartly, paralleling the shoreline. It’s not long before we hit the channel at marker 21, about a mile offshore and directly in line with the entrance to the Army Hole harbor. Moving quickly, I pull down the rig and stow it for rowing.

“You’re not that quick, actually,” Jagular says.

“You be quiet,” I say. But he’s right. I should have tied off to the buoy first and then dropped the sail.

By the time I start to row, the wind has pushed us a hundred yards further offshore. No matter. We'll get there eventually. I start rowing toward shore, dead upwind.

It only takes a few strokes before I know how much of an ordeal this is going to be, though. I can hardly move the boat at all, and on each recovery it's almost as hard to pry the oars through the air as it is to pull the boat through the water.

"It'd be nice if you could feather the oars, I bet," Jagular says. "Too bad you used those cheap pinned oars from the hardware store, huh?"

I'm working too hard to answer. Each oar blade becomes a sail as soon as I lift it from the water, pushing us backwards. And it's not easy timing the strokes in this chop; a couple of times my oars bite nothing but air, throwing me off balance. We're making no progress at all. At least no one's coming out to offer us a tow. I'm enough of a contrarian that I'd refuse, and then feel stupid about my decision. But I suppose it's dark enough by now that no one could see us even if they were looking this way.

"We're not going to make it," Jagular says after a while.

An unreasonable stubbornness grabs me, defeating my natural inclinations toward laziness.

"We'll make it," I say. "I am not giving up. I hereby swear a mighty oath that I will sleep ashore at Army Hole tonight, even if I have to swim there."

I'll have to start experimenting with different strokes. The conventional wisdom on rowing into a stiff wind, I vaguely remember reading somewhere, is to shorten your stroke, like downshifting a bike to ride up a steep hill. I try it for one hundred strokes, take a ten-second rest, then give it another hundred. No good—I can hold my place, but I'm not getting anywhere. Still about a mile to go.

I try the opposite instead, taking as long and slow a stroke as I can manage. It's slow and exhausting and probably poor technique, but we're moving. Barely. I continue for fifty strokes, then pause. Definite progress.

“Hell with it then,” I say aloud, and start rowing in earnest, long slow strokes that push the boat slowly through the wind and water. Every so often a particularly large wave sends a shower of spray over the bow onto my back. I count a hundred strokes, rest for a few seconds, then a hundred more. Another hundred. Turn around to look—we’re closer now, but my look back just cost us a few yards. I give it another hundred. Getting darker. Blisters forming. Another hundred strokes. And another hundred. I turn to look. Half a mile to go. Plus the distance I just lost by looking. I start another hundred strokes. Somewhere in the cockpit the surviving Newtons start jeering, but I’m too busy to retaliate.

\* \* \* \* \*

I row into Army Hole’s inner harbor in the darkness, completely exhausted and almost asleep at the oars. Several people help me tie up to a dock that’s way too high for Jagular. Tired as I am, I can barely climb up onto the towering dock, dragging a random pile of food and gear with me. Someone from another boat asks me if there’s anything he can do to help. I’m grateful, but so tired all I can do is mumble an unintelligible reply and stagger off barefoot through the sandburs that lie scattered around the lawn like land mines. I barely feel them.

I drop my sleeping mat on the ground in the middle of the lawn and collapse on top of it for a while before I can find the energy to grab something from my food bag. Sardines in mustard sauce, the first thing I pull out. I pry open the can and start eating. I’m asleep almost before I finish them.

## FRIDAY

I lie on the ground staring blankly at nothing for a few minutes before I realize I’m awake. It’s as good as over, I think. This should be an easy day, only twenty miles or so. I slowly pull myself out from under my thin blanket and stand up, stretching my back and arms tentatively.

I’ve slept in today, tired from last night’s rowing. It looks like everyone else is already up. Moving

slowly, I limp across the grass to hang yesterday's damp shirt on a fence overlooking the harbor, give it a chance to dry before I leave.

In honor of our last day I pull on my Ironman Wisconsin t-shirt, which has the word FINISHER written in large bold letters across the back. Seems appropriate again today—I feel like I've just finished something, that's for sure. Then, reluctant to let the journey end, I take a long walk around Army Hole. No reason to hurry now.

But Army Hole is flat and windy and filled with huge jackrabbits hopping around and eyeing me with murderous intent, and there's not much to do. Before long I'm ready to get started, so I stow my gear aboard Jagular and cast off, rowing out to the harbor entrance. A fellow sailor on shore holds the bow line while I step the mast and set the spritsail, then tosses me the line when I'm ready. The offshore wind blows us off the dock and I sheet in on the port tack—port tack at last, after four days!—as we glide into the open water of Espiritu Santo Bay for the last passage.

From Army Hole the buoyed channel takes a v-shaped track, angling left and then back right to rejoin the main ICW. But we'll ignore the channel, sail straight past the tip of Grass Island instead, on the edge of the maze of drilling platforms clustered inside the v. The winds are light, the water calm, a perfect day. I take a compass heading from the chart, aiming for channel marker 13. It's out of sight way up ahead, a final exam in pilotage. I set the self-steering lines and lie back in the cockpit, dozing. Still tired. Every once in a while I look around. An occasional drilling platform to port. Grass Island to starboard. Most of the other boats have stuck to the channel and are well left of our course.

I sail across the bay for about an hour without ever touching the tiller before I see the buoy dead ahead. Still not touching the tiller, I watch it get closer and closer. A green channel marker. Still dead ahead, right on our compass heading. I watch, fascinated, as Jagular's self-steering lines tug the tiller back and forth, zeroing in on the buoy. Much closer now, I can almost read the number.

Unbelievable—it's a 13.

We sail directly toward the buoy, a collision course. We're actually going to hit it unless I do something. As we come within a boat length of the buoy I unhook the self-steering lines and push the tiller to port. Jagular angles away, passing so close to the buoy that I can reach out and touch it. The last few Newtons remain conspicuously silent.

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Later that evening, ashore at Magnolia Beach, I watch the Puddle Ducks arrive. They never made it in to Army Hole last night. Turns out they waited too long at Ayres Dugout, pulling boats off the reef, acting like heroes—a role that seems to fit them surprisingly well considering their crude little sandbox-boats and endearingly misfit status—and ended up camping on a god-awful spoil island somewhere, alone in the vast emptiness of the Texas coast while the rest of the fleet rested at Army Hole. Now they're sailing onto the beach like Lindbergh landing in Paris. Jagular and I left Ayres Dugout just in time to miss it all.

“See that welcome?” I say. “That could be us. We should have stayed behind and helped pull all those sinking ships off the reef.”

“Don't go trying to make us into heroes,” the boat says. “We're lucky we made it at all. We probably would've been the ones sinking if we'd have stayed.”

He's probably right. And I really didn't want to spend the day standing around in those oyster-shell reefs getting my feet all sliced up anyway. The water here is probably filled with flesh-eating bacteria and petroleum-based chemical waste. My heroism, such as it is, has limits.

“That's for sure,” Jagular says. “Like those capsized and dismasted boats in Corpus Christi Bay that you wouldn't turn back for.”

“We wouldn't have made it,” I tell him. “You're not a good enough boat.”

“It's not the boat, it's the captain,” he says.

Maybe so. But we did make it, after all. Port Mansfield to Magnolia Beach. Five days and almost two hundred miles and we're still afloat despite everything that went wrong. We may have done some dumb things but we didn't give up. Or worse, need any help. Maybe that's enough.

And now the Puddle Ducks are here, too, the last of the fleet, the rag-tag rum-swilling rearguard of the Texas 200, and every one of us is down at the water's edge watching them come in and probably wishing we were with them. One by one they sail up onto the beach where people are cheering and applauding and taking pictures and stepping forward to lift the little boats ashore. And then the last Duck skipper steps onto the sand to drag his boat up onto dry land and the crowd cheers a last cheer and the sun drops below the horizon and people take a few last photographs and then it's over.

I wander up and down the beach all the rest of the evening trying to hold something of the past few days in my mind, listening to stories from my fellow sailors, watching them pack up their boats and gear. Jagular is already back on the trailer for the long drive back to Wisconsin. The wind is dying down. The sky is slowly filling with the first faint stars of evening.

We made it. Nothing heroic or particularly impressive about that, but still, it's immensely satisfying. To have come so far—more than forty miles a day sometimes, serious distance for a boat like Jagular—and to have been so much at home in the doing of the thing, living the way sailors have always lived, in long slow hours filled with an abundance of time and solitude that life ashore rarely measures out with such generosity.

We've done all right, Jagular and I, to have travelled so far together, much farther than any map or chart can measure. Much farther than I had expected.

As it gets darker I walk slowly over to where a few people have started a fire on the beach. The flames glow brightly in the shadows, casting flickering shadows across the sand, creating a small circle of light in the immense darkness that surrounds us all. It's a nice place to end up, even if the Puddle Duckers are

breaking into the rum again. I suppose they've earned it, sailing those ridiculous little boats all this way.

I'm just starting to think about laying my sleeping mat beside the fire so I can drift off to sleep when another sailor approaches from somewhere down the beach. It's dark now, and he leans in close to be sure it's me.

"This is yours, isn't it?" he says. "I think I saw you wearing it before." He holds up my long-sleeved shirt, the one I left hanging on the fence at Army Hole this morning. Far across the beach, buried in the back of my car, the last few Newtons start laughing.