

## Seeking Solitude

Rory Hunter's Blog of His Solo Sailing Adventure from Hong Kong to Cairns  
May 21<sup>st</sup> to June 26<sup>th</sup> 2020

### T Minus 3

This is my first time writing a blog so please bear with me as I find my stride. I'm generally not one to put my thoughts and feelings on paper, but I know many friends and family are both concerned about the adventure I'm about to embark upon and are interested to follow my journey.

So, here goes...

A few months ago I had no plans to follow a lifelong dream and sail across the ocean. I was focussed on trying to grow a business and had big plans and aspirations that were the culmination of years of work. And then the virus hit at the same time as some major life changes occurred and I felt like Mike Tyson just punched me in the face.

I was down, but not out. In times of trauma, we look to areas that we can control to give us comfort and a sense of security and while I had no way to control my business' outcome (which took a while to accept) nor my life in Hong Kong, a little light at the back of my head went off and said it was time to go home to Australia, but on my own terms and to sail there. To embrace the uncertainty of life of the follow a dream.

I've never skippered a long ocean passage before, but I have a high appetite for risk and (thankfully) a decent ability to think through complex situations and execute. I wanted an adventure but also to escape and to try and reconnect with myself and nature and to heal. So, the past 6 weeks I've pulled together a great team to help me sail from Hong Kong to Australia via the Pacific, PNG and the Solomon Islands and we've been working diligently to prepare the boat so it meets Cat 1 off-shore regulations – the highest set of safety regulations for boats this size. Communications is the most important aspect as with comms comes weather updates and given I'm heading into the Pacific in the early part of the typhoon season, knowing what's ahead of me will be crucial to ensuring I can safely manage my biggest risk - getting hit by a typhoon.

All other risks from collision to medical issues (in particular infection), to making sure I take enough diesel, water and food have been discussed, and plans put in place with multiple levels of redundancy.

I recently read that others who have done similar journeys take between 1-3 years to prepare, yet for me it's been less than 2 months. It's safe to say it's been an exhausting process, but given I'm sitting here writing my first blog post just three days before departure, rather than working through lists dealing with Sat Comms, AIS, solar power generation, diesel calculations, or medical kits it's a good sign that I'm almost ready to go.

I'm sure I'll have lots of time to write more when I'm at sea. To be honest, I'm counting the moments until I'm not contactable by anyone (at least for work) and am not bombarded by the daily deluge of bad news and stress.

I have no idea what the journey will bring or how I'll respond, but I've done my best to prepare and I'm confident I'll be able to work it out. That's not to say I'm not slightly terrified though. The fear has driven me to prepare as best I can and to surround myself with some great sailors, meteorologists and experts as long-distance solo sailing is certainly a team sport. Once I'm on the water, it's just me and Ahyoka, taking on mother nature together. But for now, it's back to my lists...

## T minus 1

There's something so satisfying working with your hands. Its task-based work with a clear start and endpoint and immediate feedback on whether you did it well or not. The sense of satisfaction one feels at the end of a day after working on the tools is nothing like working at a desk. Getting home and feeling every muscle in your body ache and knowing the results that effort created. Showering the day off and seeing the dirt and sweat circling down the plughole gives a feeling of renewal, rebirth almost, and the ability to mentally close down the issues of the day and truly see the things that matter. Friends, family and life itself through eyes that are unfettered by residual stress and a subconscious not bogged down by the complexities of business. It's an honest and dignified way to earn a living and one that true pride can be gained from.

While there will be constant repairs and maintenance on the ocean, the work required to get the boat and all the systems ready is now complete. The preparation has been all-consuming and at times I've forgotten that I'm actually doing this to go sailing rather than it being some kind of renovation project. Part of me is sad that its ended as that means it's time to leave my life and those I love, particularly the boys and their endless smiles and hearts of joy. Oh, how I'll miss them. While Loky is too young to understand what's ahead, Naryth is worried about the risks but I hope that he can look back on this as a life lesson in years to come and how one can choose to respond in trying times and that chasing a dream is always possible if you're determined enough. My farewell present to them both were fishing rods so they can join me in Australia over the northern hemisphere summer holidays in July where we'll explore Queensland together and hopefully catch a few fish. Needless to say, they loved their new rods and tried to catch "fish" in the middle of the restaurant, narrowly missing other patrons but lots of laughs were had.

I'm finding it hard to get my head around what's next and the enormity of the challenge, so I think I'll just pick it up tomorrow. Its 8:30pm and I'm truly exhausted. From tomorrow morning for around 72 hours I'll only be able to take 20 mins naps until I'm out of the South China Sea given the volume of sea traffic and risk of collision so I'm going to hop into bed and read a few chapters of Moitessier's classic *The Long Way* and get lost in his adventures. Adventures that will be mine from tomorrow morning. What fate awaits me over the horizon?

## Day One – Baptism by Fire

I didn't plan to set off in a storm. It just, well, happened. I'd been watching the weather all week and each day the forecast got a little bit stronger but from the right direction, the SW so all good. However, what I awoke to this morning was a low-pressure system that was blasting up the South China Sea and it had me in its sights. Wind gusting 35knts + pouring rain, visibility less than 200m, thunder and lightning and rather than being a run with the wind behind me it was dead on the nose, meaning I had to sail head on into it. This would have been a huge day with a full crew and a weather tested boat but to go straight into this with no rhythm was far from ideal. I had many breakages and spent 3+ hours clipped on at both the mast and the foredeck with snatchblocks, dyneema and duct tape getting sprayed with saltwater. You know what they say about duct tape? If you can't fix it with duct tape, you're not using enough duct tape! Well, snatch blocks and dyneema are the sailing equivalent.

But let's back it up a little. Before the chaos of the storm was the farewell. I was truly moved to see so many friendly, supportive and loved faces at the dock. When Loky gave me one of his famous "hulk hugs" and started to cry, the emotion of it all got the better of me and I too shed a tear. The enormity of what's in front of me stopped me from being a blubbering mess though as my mind was full with all I needed to do.

Getting out of Victoria Harbour required a lot of tacks and I'd certainly built up a sweat by the time my support crew turned for home to go to work and the safety of land. A final call to Mel to thank her for being the amazing woman she is and for all she's done for me, goodbye to the boys and a wave to my friends and its off.

The pressure and impact of wind, like the Richter Scale, grows exponentially. 10 knots is a lovely day's sail. 15knts even better but you need to start keeping an eye on loads. 20 knots you're reefed and anxious. 25knts and things get gnarly. At 35knts like we had today, things become very loud, stressful and dangerous. I'm trying to type this with fingers that are cut, bruised, bandaged and fatigued. To be honest I can't believe I didn't get more injured. I was very lucky.

The track doesn't lie, but context is important. You'll see early on that it looks like I changed my mind and turned for home. In actual fact, it was chaos on board with gear breaking all over the place and I was so focused on the task at hand that I put in the wrong co-ordinates in the auto pilot. I'd like to think of it as me doing one big farewell donut and thumbing my finger to the weather gods who decided to see me off with such a bang.

I was pretty wired during the night, laying in my bunk listening to the wind howl and feeling the boat getting thrown around by the waves while keeping an anxious eye on the AIS and the multitude of commercial vessel around me which I needed to avoid. I was definitely worried, but I wasn't scared which I took as a good sign. I was however completely and utterly exhausted. The physical and mental stress of the day took its toll and it'll no doubt take me a few days to recover. Thankfully I have all the time in the world.

## Day two – Surf's up

The wind remained strong and steady overnight at 20knts, though thankfully no squalls so I was able to find some rest as the boat was now settled and, in a groove, however there was no sleeping. I was way too anxious for sleep to be a possibility. Ahyoka was introducing me to all her creaks and groans and I was yet to learn which were reassuring murmurs of “I’ve got this buddy” to “get out of bed NOW and fix this”. I listened attentively, thinking through the physics and three-dimensional geometry I thought each sound represented and trying to work out what they meant.

Dawn greeted me with more rain and thunderstorms and the forecast for winds to increase so I knew I was in for another challenging day. The open ocean is disorienting at the best of times but without the sun, moon or stars to guide me, I felt quite discombobulated, though I put this down to exhaustion as much as anything else.

I hadn't eaten properly since my “English” breakfast at the club before I departed. Boiling water is hard enough work in these conditions so for the second day in a row it was protein bars and fruit. I had to force myself to eat as I was anything but hungry. Thankfully I didn't feel the need to throw up so I knew the nutrients I was ingesting would support me throughout the day.

I shared SMS messages with a few close friends and family in the morning and their words of encouragement and love helped spur me on. Doing a trip like this with no Sat Phone as sailors of old did is a whole other level and I know my trip is relatively comfortable compared to what they experienced. This comfort, and the words from one friend: “Everything is going to be OK in the end. And if it's not OK it's not the end” gave me the courage to take on the day's storm. Courage I'd need at 13:30.

By mid-morning, the wind was a constant 25knts with gusts over 35knts. By 13:30 it was a constant 35knts for more than 1.5hrs with gusts of over 45knts. The strongest gust I saw was 47knts but I'm sure there were a couple of 50s in there as I wasn't looking at the instruments. My eyes were glued to the sea state, wind and what Ahyoka needed to do to survive. It's fair to say I was concerned. The saving grace was the wind was from astern so Ahyoka was running with the wind and the waves, which were 3m by this stage. If we'd been beating into that weather, it would have been a totally different proposition. For about an hour we were surfing down waves at 11knts and my knuckles were white as I held on for dear life, facing mortality head on. Ordinarily this could have been exciting but my mind was constantly thinking through gear failure scenarios and how I'd fix them as getting out of the relative comfort of the cockpit was something I was dreading and wanted to make sure I had a plan if I did have to step into the void and head to the bow. Sails were reefed to the same size as storm jib and trysail. I thought about putting the storm jib on, but I felt it was just too dangerous on the bow to do so and the reefed jib was holding nicely.

At the height of the storm I saw a fin pop out of the water next to me and knew I had company as we both surfed down a giant wave together. It was the sort of company that feels like a big hug from a best friend. Seeing a fellow mammal navigating these conditions with ease was

reassuring. Sensing my apprehension this kind dolphin seemed to be reaching out to guide the way, or at least that's how I like to think of it.

It was so humid that it felt like it was raining inside the cabin. Everything was wet and the only thing I could do to distract myself from the weather was put on an audio book. The words of Joshua Slocum and his wonderful adventures from 2 centuries ago were just what I needed to calm down and re-centre. Thankfully the winds eased by 16:00 and as dusk fell, it was only 17knts with the forecast to ease even further. I dared not let out more sail though. 45knts was bad enough in the day. At 3am with too much cloth up would have been a whole other story so I was happy to move along at 3-4knts until a series of wind shifts forced me to be put the preventer on and reset the Genoa, but there was no way I was touching the third reef. I made sure I was clipped on the entire time though Mum.

At 1am I crawled into my bunk and found sleep for the first time since leaving Hong Kong. They were only 30-45-minute bursts but what restful bursts they were. I dreamt of dolphins, waves and friendship and knew all would be OK.

### **Day 3 – Finding companionship**

Today's blog won't be too long as 6 of my 10 fingers are bandaged so it's tough to type. My wounds from day 1 became infected after being wet and dirty for 36 hours so I was forced to pull out my medical kit and play doctor for an hour this afternoon. I've put BNP antibiotic cream on, jelonet dressing to keep them dry, gauze and tape so my important fingers like index and thumb are fat and not too dexterous but they're healing. I've got 5 different kinds of antibiotics in my medical kit, so I'll see how they look in the morning and whether I should start a course of Cefalexin or not. An infection when I get to the middle of the Pacific, where a port of refuge is 1 week away could be deadly so I'm fully stocked up on all the medicine I could need and have a mini pharmacy on board. Hopefully I don't have to use too much of it though.

The weather that greeted me in the morning was 10-15 knots with a true wind angle of 130deg, so I felt confident enough to unfurl the full genoa and shake out my third reef. My second reefing line is toast from the first day's carnage, so I'll have to wait until I get to the Pacific and things calm down to re-run a new line. The forecast was for wind to build throughout the day though, so I wasn't comfortable letting my first reef out and stuck to the solo sailors' mantra of "Reef early. Reef often".

When alone on a boat or indeed anywhere, one instinctively finds companionship in the unlikelyst of places. I watched *Cast Away* in the afternoon and could so relate to Tom Hanks' character's relationship to Wilson, the Volleyball come best friend. My "Wilson" was becoming the third reef. I could have easily not gone with one and that would have been a monumental mistake. He'd gotten me through some intense weather, and I couldn't have been more grateful. As I was shaking him out and thanking him for his efforts that past two days, I noticed the block where the reefing line pulls the tack down to the boom was completely busted. I was able to pull the line out with my hands. How did it hold in those conditions yesterday? Could I have lashed the main in such

strong winds with my hands so beaten up if he hadn't held on? I really don't know. I do know that my respect for my new pal was even greater after seeing the state of the block. Good work holding on buddy. Good work.

Before watching the movie, I had my first shower (which was much needed) and made a yummy steak sandwich, the first "cooking" of the trip. Sitting there in my bunk, eating lunch and watching my iPad, the audio streaming through the sound system, I felt pretty happy. I looked up at one of the many signs I put up inside the cabin to "nudge" behaviour and thoughts such as "clip on" and "be safe". This one was above me so I could read it when laying down. It reads "You got this". I thought to myself, you know what, I think I do.

#### Day 4 – Mystery Barrels

The day started relatively benign. Winds of 15knts from 215deg with a true wind angle (TWA) of 120deg so plain sailing. I did my daily inspection and the boat was in order. The forecast was for strong winds from lunch time until the following morning, by which time I'd be in the Pacific where the forecast was for 2 weeks or champagne sailing – winds of 10-12knts, calm seas and blue skies. I figured I had a few hours where I could chill and do a bit of housekeeping before things got busy again with the increased pressure. Or at least that what I thought. I was cruising along at 5knts (SOG) in 2.5m of SW swell mid-morning when up ahead I saw the sea state change dramatically. As well as the SW swell I was in, there was an easterly chop of 2m with very short distances between each crest, making pyramids in the water around me. It pretty much meant my forward momentum dropped to 0knts and it felt like Ahokya and I were in a washing machine. I immediately put on the engine to regain some control and ascertain what was happening. The Admiralty Charts had nothing of note on them and all that was on my Navionics chart said "dumping ground" but the seas were 3kms deep according to all charts. As I looked about in wonder at what was happening, I saw waves 200m away, 60 degrees off my starboard bow barrelling. BARRELLING!!! Now waves do many things in the open ocean. They can crest, break and foam but they cannot barrel unless the water is very very shallow. Oh dear! Just as the enormity of what was in front of me started to sink in, my old friend the Dolphin from two days ago popped up on my starboard beam. He (she?) seemed to be nudging me to port, so I put the helm down and got out of there quick smart. 5 mins later the sea had returned to a pure SW swell but looking back I could see the barrels and they were certainly surfable. Under different circumstances they'd look spectacular but if things had been slightly different, they may have been deadly. WTF was that? And did my spirit guide really come along just at the right time? I was tired but not delirious. I've read about the hallucinations solo sailors experience when they're sleep deprived, but this was real. I'm sure of it. Speaking to my shore manager, Cameron, later on he thinks it may be an uncharted underwater volcano. Just another danger I didn't expect but which is making this a rather memorable start to the adventure. I wonder if I'll see my spirit guide again? I do hope so, but ideally our next encounter can be a little more playful and less dramatic. And what about a name? Or am I wrong to anthropomorphise my guide and the protection he's given me?

My fingers are much better today so no need to take the oral antibiotics, but I think I'll keep them covered for one more day just to be sure.

An hour after my brush with the barrels, a dark wall of angry looking clouds heading straight for me knocked me out of my reverie and the consequences of what may have been. Here we go. Strap in for another 12-18 hours of 20-25knts with gusts above 30knts. It certainly delivered but I'm now so much more confident Ahoyka can handle the conditions and I've got a much better handle on where and how to set the sails to comfortably manage stronger winds. That's not to say it was a comfortable ride to end day 4 in the South China Sea. The swell was 3m and very close periods between the waves making for a rather lumpy sea and bumpy ride. I was getting tossed around in the cabin so didn't feel up to making a salad or anything fancy for dinner but I had a lovely looking rack of lamb which needed to be cooked so I sliced it up into 8 cutlets, fried them up and that was my dinner. Plenty of protein and just as much yumminess.

I neared the northern Philippines as darkness fell. It was stormy, grey and cool on deck as I said farewell to Asia for the last time. It seemed a fitting goodbye to my home for the past 15 years. A beautiful scene but one that was tumultuous, complex and difficult to navigate.

I was heading for the Bailintang Channel. My gateway to the Pacific and the part of the journey I'm most excited about. Not so much because the forecast is for 14 days of great weather but because this marks the transition home. The Pacific connects me with Australia and once I enter that monolithic ocean, I feel I'll be homeward bound. For now, I needed to deal with a northerly current, strong tides resulting in complex seas and various islands surrounding the channel. The most dangerous thing on the ocean is land, so I was hyper aware of not letting my guard down until I was safely through. By 3am, I passed Bailintang Island, the last island in the Philippines channel and I knew it was safe to get some sleep as I had nothing but thousands of miles of ocean in front of me. Tomorrow, as they say, is another day. I look forward to sharing it with you dear Reader.

## **Day 5 – Moonlight Cinema Mayhem**

What a difference a day (and an ocean) makes! I watched the dawn emerge from the companionway at 6am through hazy eyes and a happy heart. I made it through the channel and was now in the mighty, majestic and magnificent Pacific Ocean. I was so tired though, I felt drunk. My balance wasn't great, and my thoughts were far from clear, but I was also content in a way that only comes after serious physical and psychological exertion. It was a wonderful sense of achievement. I had the wind at my back, my face turned to home and the warmth of the first sunrise of the trip on my brow.

The morning was spent taking stock after the storm, getting everything in order and cleaning up. I reinstalled my solar panels, shook out the reefs and tidied up all my lines, sheets and the deck. I brought out my bedding to air in the sun, cleaned the dishes and made a third cup of coffee to enjoy this very special moment.

The afternoon was spent doing exactly what I'd hoped to do a lot of on this trip – nothing. I had a full main up and the A-Sail (like a spinnaker) set and the boat was moving along perfectly. Wind was a stead 12-14knts and was forecast to stay like this early evening then slowly easing as the

night wore on. I sat on the leeward cockpit seat, watching the waves roll by under the bright yellow, green and red of the A-Sail, framed by a cool, almost wispy blue the sky. The scene was accompanied by some epic playlists shared by friends before I left, interspersed with music from my childhood such as Midnight Oil, Red Hot Chilli Peppers, Jimmy Barnes and even a bit of Bowie. The breeze on my skin was just the right amount of warmth and I couldn't be more content. I wondered to myself, could this be heaven...? A few days ago, I didn't want to leave the cockpit as it was too dangerous outside. Today I didn't want to leave for a totally different reason. It was the most peaceful and comfy place I could imagine. Life was good.

As the sun started to set, I called the boys, though Sat-phone connection wasn't great and made a delicious dinner of grilled chicken breast and Greek salad with fresh goats cheese. I watched the setting sun while I savoured each bite.

When you're on the ocean, either in a boat or on a small island where you have water all around, you'll often get more than one sunset, especially if there are cumulonimbus clouds to the east. Tonight, I got three. The best was by far the large storm cell off in the distance across the horizon, far enough away to not worry about but large enough that the clouds refracted all the yellows, oranges, ambers and reds of the sun, while lightning was flashing inside. The west and south west were clear and as night encroached, I thought it could be nice to watch a movie under the stars, so I grabbed my iPad, fired up Anchorman and snuggled up on deck feeling rather happy with myself. A feeling that wouldn't last the film.

During the day you can see a squall coming. They often appear out of nowhere, but the dark wall of clouds and pouring rain inside are clear to see and you have time to prepare well in advance. At night it's a different story. I stupidly kept the full main and A-Sail up while I was watching Anchorman and I was so engrossed that I didn't notice the wind slowly building. I was too busy laughing, but by the time it got to 17knts I was shaken from the humour and I knew something was up. I was immediately alert and knew what was happening, but it was too late. Seeing the storm cells off in the distance at sunset I should have known better, but there would be time for self-recrimination later. For now, I needed to move fast to avert what could be a real issue given the kite was up. I threw on my PFD, clipped on to a jackline and headed for the bow. By this stage the wind was well over 20knts and we had way too much sail up. Just as I got to the mast we broached. The boat was pushed over to 50+ degrees on its side. Its only then that enough pressure is taken out of the sails to allow the keel to self-right the boat. I heard things flying across the cabin downstairs. There wasn't a moment to waste. This sail had to come down immediately. I tried to pull the sock down, but I hadn't let enough of the port sheet off to allow the sock to cover the main body of the sail, meaning I couldn't depower it sufficiently. Another gust and it ripped the line out of my hands and the only thing left I could do was blow the halyard. Thankfully I'd cleated this off at the mast, so I released the halyard and let it fly. As the head billowed out into the night, I grabbed the foot of the sail and pulled as hard as my arms could manage. I didn't have long before the sail would be in the water and due to the boat's forward momentum, it would become one large sea anchor and render it impossible to pull in. Slowly but surely, I got more and more sail over the railing and after 5 rather strenuous minutes, it was on board. A mess but not in the water so a definite win. Now for the main. By this stage the wind was above 25knts, so I



went straight to my old pal the third reef. I've had a fair bit of practice getting in reefs by now, so it didn't take too long. I then unfurled the jib to give the boat some power to move through the waves, after which I sat down, took a few breaths and reflected on what just happened. Thankfully there were no major issues, but it was a dumb mistake and I shouldn't have made it. What happened to my mantra of reefing early and reefing often? I won't make this same mistake tomorrow night.

The squall also brought a 70-degree wind shift, which meant I was now sailing far too south. Ahyoka and I gybed over, but the angles were taking us too far north, so I decided to gybe back, set the boat and get an hour sleep and see what things looked like then. It was 12am by this stage so I was tired. An hour later the wind indeed shifted back to its previous direction of 210degrees, so I set the sails and went back to bed and was asleep before my head hit the pillow.

Post note:

The ocean is a place for poetry. At the height of the storm on day two a dear and thoughtful friend sent me two poems, both of which came exactly when they were needed. The first was Invictus which defines bravery and inner strength and has a remarkable ability to inspire when you're about to confront your demons. The second was Kipling's If. My beloved grandmother gave me this poem when I was young, and I've gone back to it many times over the years. The values Kipling writes of are values all men aspire to, but most never attain, at least not consistently. We are only human after all. Its aspirational, yet also grounding and I've always taken great comfort in reading Kipling's wisdom. I share them both with you below in the hope you too can draw resilience from these powerful messages.

IF

If you can keep your head when all about you  
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,  
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,  
But make allowance for their doubting too;  
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,  
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,  
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,  
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;  
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;  
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster  
And treat those two impostors just the same;  
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken  
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,  
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,  
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings  
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,  
And lose, and start again at your beginnings  
And never breathe a word about your loss;  
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew  
To serve your turn long after they are gone,  
And so hold on when there is nothing in you  
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,  
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,  
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,  
If all men count with you, but none too much;  
If you can fill the unforgiving minute  
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,  
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,  
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

Invictus

Out of the night that covers me  
Black as the pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance,  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul.

## Day 6 – Squall Alley

I definitely had 3 squalls today. It may have been 4, but I'm not too sure whether the one at 2am was a dream or not. A week ago, if someone had woken me up in the middle of the night I would have been disoriented, annoyed and wouldn't have been able to get back to sleep. Now, I jump out of bed in a moment's notice and my subconscious takes over. Whether it was 7 or 10 times I got out of bed to trim sails, adjust course or just make sure everything was OK I couldn't tell you. I can tell you I woke feeling rested and alert, so I think it's fair to say my body is starting to become accustomed to the cadence of life at sea.

I learned my lesson from the night before and reefed the main and had the genoa set-up to reef at dusk. An hour later a squall hit, and I was very glad I'd throttled back and was prepared. The radar was certainly lit up all night from the walls of rain passing over, but all I was really focussed on was wind speed and direction. I sleep with my head next to the chart table so I can easily pop up and look at the instruments and decide whether I need to get out of bed, but to be honest I now know from the feeling of the boat where its overpowered, whether she needs to head downwind for a little 'till the squall passes or if sails need to be trimmed and preventer tightened.

Apart from the sails and their propulsion, one of the most important systems on the boat is power generation. With power comes communications and navigation, two fairly crucial aspects of this trip to maintain in good working order. Comms doesn't just mean being able to upload a blog and chat to friends and family, it means the ability to get daily weather forecasts. Given its typhoon season this is incredibly important. Thankfully there's nothing brewing in the next 14 days but if one was to start forming, comms immediately moves from being a luxury to lifesaving. During the day I have solar panels which, depending on how much sun there is, produce a good deal of my energy requirements but this is really only from 10am to 4pm when the sun angles allow for the PV panels to be efficient. This means my primary power is produced from the generator. I can use my main engine to charge the batteries but it both consumes a lot of diesel as well as doesn't charge the batteries very quickly as it has a small alternator. If these three systems fail, I have two back up solar systems which can charge an iPad and sat phone, however all the electronics on the boat I'm completely dependent on, in particular the autopilot wouldn't function. In short, the generator is super important. So, the fact I've been having issues with it the past few days is resulting in me being a little anxious. The first issue is the starter battery isn't charging and needs to be replaced. The only way for me to start the generator is to put the main engine on for 10mins and wait till it gives the generator battery just enough juice to kick it over. I do have a spare battery in the bow thruster so when the wind calms a little, I'll switch them over. The second issue seems to be a poor connection with the control panel which means the generator randomly turns off. When I was young, my dad used WD40 to fix almost anything, so I gave the connectors a spray of this magic fluid and am hoping it does the trick.

My afternoon was spent reading, watching the waves and listening to music. I'm still on Moitissier's The Long Way and have just finished the part where he rounds Cape Horn. It helps to give perspective of my wee storm from a few days ago and realise that the ocean can throw much,

much worse at you, but for an experienced sailor, this too can be handled with poise. I guess it shows how much I have to learn. Thankfully I'm a willing student.

I saw my first rainbow of the trip in the afternoon and was overcome with emotion. Mel and I always saw rainbows in trying times and believed they were our close family who had passed away, sending their love and support. The rainbows always came just at the right time and we would draw strength from their beauty and perceived message. It was our little thing and whether it was true or not didn't matter. What mattered was it was special. Was this a message of encouragement from those who'd gone before me wishing me a safe journey and hinting that things were so far in good shape? Rainbows are not only beautiful to me but there's an almost spiritual connection, so seeing one off in the distance was very special and I took it as a good sign. It made me realise it's been a long time since I saw one of these spectacular phenomena of refracted light. In Cambodia you'd see them all the time in the rainy season. It made me feel good to see one again.

The sea, I'm learning, is a place for dreamers. You can get lost in the waves and your thoughts but ironically it's by getting lost that you think, or at least I do, that I may be finding myself, whatever that may mean. I spend my mornings working on the more practical side of the journey. Setting and trimming sails, planning my navigation for the day ahead, reviewing weather and routing reports, inspecting the boat and doing any repairs and maintenance as well as writing this blog. The afternoons are my time to let the mind wander. Out here I don't feel trapped by the constraints of modern life. The need to be constantly "on", constantly being bombarded with news and never ending to do lists. I can be a truer version of myself. Certainly, a happier one. The afternoon is a time to let my heart soar with the clouds around me as they grow from the day's heat and to let my mind swim in the deep, deep blue water which is over 6km deep under the keel. It's a special time I'm coming to treasure. My "morslet"<sup>1</sup> of the day.

You'd think there wouldn't be much to see out here, but you'd be wrong. You can look out towards the horizon and not see the same thing twice. It's ever changing, the sea and the cloud and the sky. I find it both engrossing and enchanting and happily sit here for hours viewing the kaleidoscope unfold in front of me.

Watching tonight's sunset, I was overwhelmed in a way I've never been before. The beauty of the setting sun and the golden light that spread across my entire world created a grace you don't see on land. It touched everywhere I looked. It touched me to my very core, and I cried tears of pure joy at the privilege of experiencing it. We all come from the ocean originally, so there's an innate connection to this special place our generic forebearers once called home. But I think it's more than that. If there is a god, this is where you'll find her.

## Day 7 – Lazy Dayz

Everyone needs a rest day. Today was mine. I've been operating on 3-4 hours sleep for almost a week now and as I looked at the cloud formations that greeted the morning, I could see it would

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<sup>1</sup> Made up name for the yummiest piece of your meal, which you leave to the very end to savour.

be much more stable than previous days. The clouds were light and sparse with no sign of building anvils or areas of heavy rain. A flood of exhaustion washed over me and I surrendered into the reality that I was tired. Really tired. I felt no shame in the exhaustion though and took splendour in the fact I could postpone chores like washing 'till tomorrow and sink into chill mode. The wind was a steady 15knts from 210 deg TWD and TWA of 120deg, which meant the boat sailed well all day and once the sails were set, there wasn't much more for me to do. We averaged 6.6 knts for the 24-hour period giving us a total of 155nm sailed. A record so far. Who says doing nothing can't be productive 😊

While at times it can seem counterintuitive (at least to me), to find the best version of yourself, rest is absolutely crucial. Today I rested like a champion, if I do say so myself. I'm learning to master the art of the afternoon nap and am loving my new favourite accompaniment for such endeavours, Hermanos Guterrez. I also listened to classical music and some favourite jazz numbers by Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald. There's a right time and place for every kind of music and when you manage to get the combination in tune, it can be such a moving experience. Drifting between the chorus of the ocean caressing the hull, the artists performing musical miracles and the slow bass of the wind as it moved through the rigging and the sail, I gave in to the healing power of nature. This is why I was here, above all others and I rejoiced in the moment and felt my own vibrations start to slow and to strengthen.

Our bodies aren't designed to be in a constant state of "fight or flight" and when we're stressed, as almost everyone has been the past 3-4 months (for me its longer than I care to admit), our nervous systems go into overdrive, our adrenal glands work harder than they're designed to, and the inner balance the multitude of our internal systems naturally seek is seriously out of whack. This results in mental health issues like depression and anxiety, which I'm sure are at epidemic levels across the globe right now. While pharmaceutical supports for such ailments can be, and are helpful in the short-term, to really address the issue one needs to get to either the root of the cause or seek a more holistic approach to health and the lives we lead. This trip for me is in part an exploration of what choices I can make to help lift the cloud of anxiety which often takes over the pit of my stomach and mitigate the dark blanket of depression which I've unwittingly crawled under in the past. It's an exploration of how to live a better life. To liberate myself from societal constraints and to try and understand the ways in which I can be happier and healthier.

The Japanese have a term called forest bathing. Which literally means to go into the forest and soak up the energy, the beauty and the power of the natural world. I think I'm going to coin the term Ocean Bathing™, or at least I'm going to practice it as much as I can in the coming days and weeks. The reality I have 3-4 more weeks out here is hard to comprehend. A gift I'm eternally grateful for.

Buddha once said "For what has been, look to the body. For what will become, look to the mind". Only recently have scientists learned about neuroplasticity and that we truly have the ability to change the way our brains work. Much of this happens without our knowing, such as the increased ability for shallow reading thanks to modern communications at the expense of deep reading. But we can actively change both the format and the function of our brain if we try. Meditation is a

great way to do this but so too are doing things that bring joy and happiness, practicing compassion and giving to others. Most important to note is that these are conscious choices which we have the ability to influence. Viktor Frankel famously explored these themes in Man's Search for Meaning and both through empirical evidence in Nazi concentration camps and later through more scientific studies as a world-renowned psychologist, showed that it's our reaction to events, not the events themselves which determines our success. In concentration camps this meant the difference between living and dying, but in peace time, it meant the difference between joy and happiness and despair and depression. It's this awareness of control that's key. We must accept our situation as that can't be changed while remembering that the future is not yet determined. Whether consciously or subconsciously, we are only slaves if we let ourselves become so. Emancipation must come from within.

The sky was cloudless this evening, which meant I could also bath in the moon's rays as she slowly set. The silvery trail across the ocean of a moon set is far rarer to see than a sunset given we're usually asleep when it happens, and I always find it a more intimate affair. Sunsets are for champagne and celebration. Moonsets are for quiet reflection and contemplation. As I said goodbye to the moon, an extraordinary thing happened. I watched Venus rise in the night sky and she was so bright, I saw her purple reflection cascade across the ocean to the horizon. A sight I've never seen before.

It's easy to talk of the hundreds of billions of stars (and a few planets) in the night sky but to see so many of them appear on a pitch black canvas from the middle of the ocean gives new meaning to scale, though my feeble mind will never be able to comprehend the enormity of the universe. I can't even comprehend the scale of the Pacific, let alone mother earth.

It was so dark that I couldn't see where the watery horizon of our home planet stopped, and the universe began. We were all one. The delusional blinkers that deceive us into thinking of our own importance were cast aside like giant mooring lines and I found great solace in being reminded how truly insignificant I am. The stresses that would normally keep me up at night, give me anxiety and generally distract me from happiness are put in their appropriate place on the ocean at night, allowing me to freely commune with my soul.

I had to navigate a cluster of fishing boats which set off the AIS alarms and woke me from slumber at 1:30am. Who knows what they were up to, but I gave them a wide berth and wished them well? As I contemplated going back to bed an hour later, a shooting star light up the sky in front of me, seemingly showing the way and signally all was well, and I felt safe to drift back to sleep in this cosmic wonderland.

## **Day 8 – Breathing. Just breathing**

I've heard people say nothing happens in a day, not much in a week but what can happen in a year is remarkable. While at most times I'd agree, I think it also depends on the day. On the surface, not much happened today, but at an inner level, I can feel seismic shifts underway. My mind is slowing. I take great pride in doing nothing for hours and allowing the world to slowly

unfold around me. The ocean is now far calmer and the impact this is having on my soul is profound. I'm open to the change and letting it chart its own course, trusting in the universe and the inner wisdom of the subconscious and my body as a whole that it knows what it needs far better than my conscious self may assume.

I'm hearing rumours about the chaos and mess that's unfolding in the world, both in Hong Kong and the broader issues between China and the US and it only reinforces why I fastidiously curated a protective bubble for this trip. I only gave my satphone number and email address to a select few so I could develop deeper connections via letter writing and one on one communications, while having no communication from work, social media or news of any kind. I wanted to open my inbox in the same way I used to skip to the letter box as a boy. A sense of excitement and anticipation in each step, wondering if there would be a letter for me and if so, who it would be from and what exciting adventures I could get lost in. The joy of opening the envelope, savouring every word and rereading it later. It made you feel special. At least it did to me. Letter writing is an artform that's dying. We have too many people who want something from us, so we spread ourselves too thinly and write to those who shout the loudest, who are work related and who we think are important. All the while forgetting the ones we love, the ones we'll think about on our death bed and the ones who truly care for us. Well, not for the next month and not for me. I worked hard to create this space. This bubble. This alternate world where values and information flows are more akin to another generation. When we had time to digest news before we responded. When there were clear lines between work and personal life. When work was work and you could leave it at the office, the yard or the clinic at 5pm and then focus on the aspects of your life which were truly important. It didn't chase you down the street, into your living room demanding a conference call while you should be having dinner with your family. No, not here. Not in the Pacific. My oasis. My sanctuary. My home.

I've been heading due east on a course of 90 degrees for days now, the wind direction unchanged. As I get further from Hong Kong the winds are getting calmer, ocean flatter and my inner and outer world more peaceful. The weather seems to be reflecting my own emotional state, or perhaps it's the other way around. It doesn't really matter. Each day is a little slower than the last and I automatically calibrate with the energy. Dawn greets me on the bow as I drink a cup of coffee at 6am and slowly watch it rise. By midday I'm completely shaded by the Bimini and can rest and read and write. In the afternoon the sun then sets directly over the transom so all I need to do is sit on the other side of the seat, face west and slowly say goodbye to my friend the sun for another day. I feel a little like a human sun dial moving at a celestial pace. At my own pace. The right pace. It does mean the sun gets strong around 4pm so I move to the bow and read in the shade while the waves gently rock my heart, like a mother lovingly rocking a child in her arms. The bow is now a place of respite where I can feel close to the sea and watch the waves rolling by. I spent hours on the bow tonight star gazing. I wish I'd brought a book to learn more about the cosmos while I'm out here. I didn't anticipate how much I'd be captivated by the night sky and happily lay there gazing into the abyss while time slows down, listening to music and getting lost in the lyrics, the message and the emotion. I remembered today that Venus is in retrograde right now. A time of transition. A time for change. A time for growth.

At a more practical level I fixed the generator today, which was a huge relief and did my first load of washing. I read before I left that you can wash clothes in saltwater and that once they're dry, the salt flakes can simply be shaken out, so you don't waste any precious potable water. I use the windward lifelines as a clothesline. My shorts and T-shirts softly billowing in the afternoon sun only adds to the sense of peacefulness. As I peg each item on the line I think of my beautiful mother and the times I would help her as a child with household chores. Such simple acts but looking back as an adult, so powerful and important. Mum sends me a message each morning, just at the time she knows I'm sipping a coffee and watching the sunrise, while dad plots my day's progress on paper charts and reviews the weather for the day ahead. I love waking up to Mum's messages. It's like I'm a child again and her loving smile is the first thing I see as I slowly emerge from slumber and we chat around the kitchen table over breakfast.

No surprise that mum and dad didn't think it was a good idea for me to do the trip, though both for different reasons. I don't think any of us realised how much it would bring us together though. Yet another wonderful unintended consequence of this trip.

I think a lot about my childhood out here. About how supportive my parents were of all my crazy ideas, always believing in me once I'd made up my mind, no matter how much they disagreed with the course I was taking. The world likes to celebrate success as the triumph of the individual over adversity, but that's simply not true. Having a loving and supportive family and partner, a good education and committed friends are all crucial and in many cases it's simply a matter of luck whether you have them or not. I know that I wouldn't be the man I am without my wonderful parents and all they've done for me.

I love you both very much and I'm so grateful to have you in my life.

I originally thought I'd write this blog for Mum and Dad and for Mel and the boys, never thinking anyone else would actually be interested in my ramblings. I heard from my bestie Lachie overnight, who's posting these blogs for me, who said there are now 200 people reading this each day. Who are you dear Reader? What's your story? And why do I feel so comfortable opening up my inner world to you? I've never written for pleasure before, but I'm starting to gain such enjoyment from writing each day and I want you to know I'm truly grateful you're listening. How could one feel lonely out here when surrounded by so much love?

## Day 9 – Transitions

The South Westerly Monsoon winds have carried me much farther into the Pacific than expected and certainly more than is forecast for this time of year. It's been pretty much perfect sailing conditions for days now, either reaching or running with the wind and Ahyoka gliding through the water. Everything comes to an end though, and today I find myself in the transition zone between the monsoonal winds of Asia and the trade winds of the Pacific, each fighting the other for dominance, causing wind shifts of 180 degrees and hours of calm. When there's no wind out here the heat of the tropics has nowhere to escape to and nothing to cool it down. It becomes oppressive. Suffocating even. The air conditioning on the boat is temperamental at best and doesn't



work at all when the boat is sailing as air bubbles get caught in the water intake and the pump stalls. With Ahyoka almost stationary I knew the AC should work, but it required me to bleed the lines. A job that necessitated me moving a large amount of my stores and then spending an hour in the bilge. I emerged dripping in sweat and smeared with grime from Victoria Harbour, but the AC was working – Woohoo! What a difference this made. Lee Kwan Yu once famously said that Singapore's development as a first world nation state wouldn't have been possible without air conditioning. Anyone who's spent time with me in the tropics would know that my thick ancestral Scottish blood has never truly acclimatised and that I need my AC just as much as Singapore did. I napped downstairs today in the cool, crisp and luxuriantly dry air, grateful for technology and all it enables.

As the sun slowly started its afternoon descent, I moved to the shade of the bow. My favourite spot and time of day to read. Having finished Moitessier, I've now shifted gears to *Barbarian Days – A surfing Life*, by William Finnegan. Reading this surrounding by waves and water seems fitting.

The afternoon light was filled with deep golden hues. There were no clouds on the horizon, so the sky was able to display the full spectrum of oranges, reds and yellows a truly great sunset imbues. As I sat there, Neil Young's *Harvest Moon* came on. A beautiful track which always reminds me of Mel and our relationship. At that very moment, 50 m off the port bow I see my old pal, my spirit guide, my dolphin. This time he wasn't alone. He brought his family with him for this encounter. The one that cemented our bond. His message was as clear as it was powerful. He seemed to say, "I see you. We see you. And we know why you came. Why you truly came. You're safe now, my brother. Its time. It's time to grieve."

And he was right. It was time.

I'd been holding in my pain and my sadness for too long. It was time to accept my marriage, my beautiful, wonderful marriage to my sweetheart was over.

My tears came from somewhere deep inside. From a place I didn't know existed. It felt as deep as the ocean I was surrounded by. As far away as the stars I gaze at each night. As expansive as the horizon that surrounds me.

I cried for a future that is lost forever.

I cried for the pain I've put Mel through.

I cried for losing my best friend.

I cried for not being the husband I'd hoped to be.

I cried for the way our business partnership was left.

I cried for Axel and for not being able to do enough to save him.

I cried for dreams that would never be fulfilled.

I cried for Loky and Naryth, who so desperately need a stable and secure childhood, but who are now just more divorce statistics.

I cried for the love that I'll never get back.

But most of all I cried for Mel. Pure, kind, gorgeous, caring Mellie. Goodbye my love.

It took a long time for the darkness of the night to take hold. The sun seemed to be hanging on and giving light to the ocean, to me, for far longer than happened on previous nights. I found the warmth of the sun comforting, but I was also ready for the cool, dark night to take hold. I was sad, but I was also strong. I said goodbye to my dear friend the Sun. Thanked my Spirit Guide for reminding me why I came and sank into the cushions, allowing the dark evening shawl to be draped around my shoulders. This was why I came. To grieve, but also to grow. I sat there listening to the lessons of the sea for hours, surrendering to grief and embracing sadness.

Post Script:

I specifically didn't enable the comments section on the blog as the internet is so full of hate and I didn't want my journey to be polluted by trolls. However, Lachie convinced me to turn it on and promised that he'd vigilantly police any nastiness.

All I ask is your comments, like this blog, are kind, honest and from the heart.

## Day 10 – Time

After a night of fitful sleep, I dozily put my head through the companionway to view the day's conditions. The first thing I saw when I did was a rainbow directly off Ahyoka's stern. Two in fact. It was of those rare double rainbows. The second one there just to make sure you've seen the first. I smiled to myself. Gave them a wave and went back to bed knowing I was safe. My watch said 3:30am but the sun was up. Strange. I'll deal with that in a few hours once I've had some more sleep though.

I write entries in my logbook 6-10 times a day, putting in information such as my course, wind speed, barometric pressure and engine hours for both the generator and main engine. And of course, I put in my Latitude and Longitude co-ordinates. I've been travelling east for some time now and have covered well over 1000 miles. I just didn't realise how far from Hong Kong I was until I noticed the time of the sunrise this morning. I'm actually further east latitudinally than Darwin. I'm not sure what "time zone" I'm in but as I go to sleep early evening and wake up with the sunrise, I'm not sure it matters. I resolve to keep my watch on Hong Kong time as my only commitment is to call the boys at 5:30pm Monday, Wednesday and Friday so I figure it's easiest to not change anything. Keeping my watch on HK time also allows me to feel closer to the boys,

or at least not getting farther and farther away. I can remain connected to their rhythm and their schedule. Everything else can simply be based on my natural world and not by the man-made construct of “time”.

I often find myself meditating out here for hours on two simple sentences about time. Sentences I've come back to many times over the years, each time seeing something different. They're ascribed to a famous Hong Kong Buddhist Monk whose monastery I've spent many days in silent retreat at. They seem so poignant on the ocean, surrounded by the infinite of the stars, whose lives are measured in the billions of years, and the endless horizon where time has a very different meaning to that which we wear on our wrists.

“What is time. There is no memory”

Just let it sink in and take hold...

The AIS alarm pulls me from my reverie and I see a cargo ship off in the distance. Vessels like this one can move at over 20knts so the time from them coming over the horizon to being only a few hundred meters away is only a few minutes. They're often unwilling to alter their course and it's also possible there's no one monitoring the AIS their end. Sailing boats have no rights on the open ocean so the moment the alarm goes off you need to immediately understand the approaching ship's vector and speed over ground (SOG) and how this relates to your own course and ensure you take evasive action quickly if needed.

As the ship drew closer it looked more like an ocean liner than a cargo ship. It was the most stylish cargo ship I've ever seen. The only stylish cargo ship I've ever seen in fact. It was an exercise in monochrome. Everything was white with flecks of grey. The hull was white, the bridge was white, the life rafts were white, and the containers were white with a few grey ones thrown in purely to create contrast. The containers seemed to have been stacked by an artist for an open ocean art installation. I sat there marvelling at these projections of creativity and wondered why more containers and container ships weren't white. Before I could come up with an answer it was gone. Across the horizon and forever a mystery. So many mysteries on the ocean.

The forecast was for very light and variable winds and patches of rain. It was spot on. The sky was littered with cloudy pockets that clearly had rain in them. Not so much squalls as the wind was not very strong, but more micro rain cells. A patchwork of clouds, each a few hundred meters wide that were full of rain. The first one I approached I decided to try out my rain harvesting skills on and catch some water. I was mildly successful and managed to fill one 5L water bottle but, to be honest, I still had plenty of water and didn't feel like spending the day catching the few drops each cloud produced.

One nice thing about the weather was there were rainbows everywhere. When these micro rain cells weren't on top of you the sun was out, so I saw rainbows in almost every direction for the whole day. It was quite unique and if I wasn't so tired, I'd have taken great joy in watching them

all. One was so close I could almost reach out and touch it. I even tried to, arms stretched out over the pulpit, but it somehow always seemed to be just a few meters away from my grasp.

As the day progressed, the wind died and shifted through all points of the compass at a frustrating 2-3knts. I was constantly changing sails and trim for little to no gain, so I felt quite frustrated. Its days like today that you bring a lot of fuel. I just couldn't be bothered with the constant tacks. I was drained from the emotion of yesterday and still in the depths of the grieving process, so I put the engine on, furlled the headsail and steered to my desired heading. I then watched another heart-warming sunset and went to bed early, knowing that at least I wouldn't have to get up every half hour and alter course or re-trim sails. The "thump, thump, thump" of the engine lulled me into a deep, restful sleep.

### **Day 11 – The Squall All-nighter**

I'm wedged in my bunk. One foot against the wall, pushing my back into the cushion so my position is secure while the boat is thrown 3m through the vertical plane down each wave every 5 seconds and yaws 2-3m on the horizontal plane. Her approach to the oncoming swell is approximately 45 degrees but some rogue waves are more head on. You know when one of these hits as the bow shoots up like a rocket ship and as Ahyoka falls off the precipice, you wait, teeth clenched for the landing. The hard, loud and terrifying landing. BANG! The noises always sound scarier in the cabin, so I find myself popping up to the cockpit regularly to escape them. Is she really designed for these kinds of forces? What are the things that could go wrong and how would I fix them?

It's been a long night. I haven't slept (I'm writing this the morning of day 12) and I've been dealing with a succession of squalls and tough sailing conditions since the early evening the day before. We're now well and truly in the Tradewinds, which means a TWD of 90 degrees. My heading to the next way point between the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea some 1600nm away is approximately 135 degrees, which means I've been sailing close hauled all day. Ahyoka sails beautifully in flat seas with TWS of 10knots and we made some great miles, averaging 6 knots from 8am to 8pm. As night fell, the pressure slowly increased until it was blowing a constant 20knots at 9pm. The seas started to build, both the swell and the chop and I had to bear away 10-20 degrees to flatten out our path as Ahyoka does not like these short and sharp conditions. I had the 1<sup>st</sup> reef in the main and the about half the Genoa furlled so it was shaped like a number 3 jib. The first squall hit around 10:30pm and winds were well above 30 knts. It hit with ferocity and without warning. I'd been downstairs feeling the boat and the waves and considering bearing away a little more to reduce the crash landing off the back of these very steep waves. As the first big gust hit, the boat heeled 50 degrees to leeward and I dashed up-stairs dressed only in a flimsy pair of board shorts, quickly letting off the sheets for both the main and the jib and dialled in a further 60 degrees downwind on the auto-pilot. There's no fighting a squall. Like so many things in life, its best to accept it for what it is and put the wind and the waves behind you, even if that means going backwards for a while.

Once the boat is heading downwind the waves flatten out dramatically, as does the apparent wind strength, so the intensity of the moment decreases, and things calm down slightly. It's an intense

moment to achieve this though. At 30 knots the rain stings when it hits your face, making it hard to see. The evaporative cooling effect of the wind and the rain means you're feeling cold very quickly and the noise and pressure of the moment wipes any last vestiges of tiredness that may remain.

The calm I refer to once the boat is sailing downwind is only in respect to the boat. The skipper is far from calm. You can't see the wind, the seas, the waves and the oncoming clouds at night so all you can do is "feel" the weather, "feel" the boat and "feel" the waves, discarding any unused senses and fine tuning the ones remaining, which can help you understand what's happening outside and therefore how you can tune the sails and adjust the boat to full effect. It means I find myself on deck most of the night sensing the wind shifts, increases and decreases in pressure and trying to sail the boat as best I possibly can. You run a fine line when things get windy and the seas build so it's certainly not the time to let your guard down. You need to remain focussed on the task at hand. Everything else can wait.

The ocean seamlessly shifts from soothing and nurturing to indifferent and antagonising, even aggressive with little to no warning. Like the seasons, the weather and our own moods, we need to soak up the good times and hold on tight during the bad, knowing these too shall pass. I held on tight all night, accepting each successive squall with as much grace and positivity as I could muster and reminded myself to:

Just. Keep. Going.

There are many kinds of all-nighters. There's the "staying up and finishing that assignment for Uni" all-nighter. There's the "out with friends dancing till dawn all-nighter", the "flying halfway around the world jet lagged" all-nighter, the "helping a loved one who's sick" all-nighter and then there's the Squall All-Nighter.

Unlike the others, the Squall All-Nighter is voluntary (I did choose to be here after all), terrifying and of an uncertain duration. You're left feeling tired and hollow. The adrenalin that's been coursing through your system for hours starts to dissipate and no amount of coffee is able to rejuvenate you. There's the real possibility of more squalls to come, so you can't shut down completely. You know you're at the mercy of mother nature and so the only thing you can do is roll with it. Knowing it can't last forever and that rest will be waiting for you when it passes.

I'm now a whole week's sail from landfall (and therefore help) of any kind. This is the most remote I'll be while I'm on this trip. The farthest away I've even been from humanity. In some respect, the Apollo astronauts were closer to mankind when they landed on the moon, at least from the perspective of how long they were away. I feel a bit like I'm on the moon right now, or a far-off distant planet. It's hard to put into words what it feels like to be so remote. So removed. So alone. The simplest way to put it is I feel alive in a way I never have before. I don't feel lonely. It's weird.

It just, well... is.

Post Script:

I can say that your comments were a warm and welcome boost after the night I just had. I don't have internet access so can't view them on the blog, but Lachie emailed some through overnight and I couldn't think of a better way to rebuild one's spirits after a night like that than by reading your kind words. The right words at the right time have the ability to move and to inspire. Yours did both, just when they were needed. Thank you, dear Reader.

## Day 12 – Shifty shifts

It's just after sunrise, and while the wind had died down from the previous night's blow, the seas were still very messy and Ahyoka was getting thrown around the place. At least I could sail into the wind, gain height and head due east, I tell myself. Tired from the squalls, I really need to rest. Even a little so I have my wits about me to take on the day. Sleeping downstairs was not going to happen as it was already very hot down there and it would have been more comfortable sleeping in a washing machine the boat was bouncing around so much. I decide to rest in the safety of the cockpit, but given how much the boat is rolling, I strap myself in as I'm worried I could just roll out I'm so tired. My biggest fear this whole trip is that I fall into the water by some silly accident while the boat is sailing and I'm not wearing my PFD. My PFD has an EPIRB and PLB attached, so in theory I might be rescued if I fell over while wearing it but without it, I'd be toast. A very slow, heartbreaking death as I slowly watch the boat sail off into the distance while I tread water, knowing no one is coming to get me but not giving up just in case. I wonder how long I could tread water for. 24 hours? Longer...? I strap in extra tight, just in case and find sleep almost immediately.

My thumb took a beating last night. I don't recall how it got injured but every time I go to use it this morning, it's sore. A sharp pain on the left side of the nail that seems to go through to the bone. It's swollen to about 50% of my other thumb and is a deep red. Better keep an eye on it and consider some kind of treatment tomorrow if it doesn't improve.

I managed to get some food down for lunch and then did an inspection of the boat. We were still heeled over 20 degrees and I saw the sheets on my bunk that had fallen on the floor were soaked. I pulled up the floorboards and there was water sloshing about the bilge. Hmmmm. Not ideal. I sponged out two buckets of saltwater from the bottom of the boat. Where did that come from? The forward hatch that broke on day one took in a tiny bit of water but that drained directly into the forward head and shouldn't have gotten into the bilge. I replaced all the through hull fittings before I left so it's unlikely one of them is loose, though we took quite a beating last night, so I'm worried there's a slow leak somewhere. In the whole scheme of things, two buckets are not a huge amount of water, so I try not to worry too much, though I commit to keeping a close eye on it in the days ahead.

By the time I pop my head out of the cabin the winds have become very light (TWS 2-3knts), shifting through 120 degrees. The windvane function on the autopilot is proving invaluable though "wind shift" alarms go off every 20 mins. This is what I expected the doldrums to be like but I'm

a long way from where they normally are this time of year. Light airs and constantly shifting winds are incredibly frustrating for a sailor as you need to constantly adjust to the shifts, but as the winds are so light you make little progress.

The sunset is a deep dark red tonight. Framed by dark grey storm clouds it takes on a dramatic aura. I try and recall the old saying my dad told me as a child. Was it “Red sky at night sailors delight, grey sky in the morning sailors warning” Or was it “red sky at night shepherds delight...”? Does really matter? I saw what I wanted to see and trusted that tonight would be calmer. I reefed the main just in case, ate my left over Thai green curry (even better the second time around), called the boys and then turned in for the night at 7pm HK time. I slept well and just ignored the wind shift alarms. Sometimes sleep is more important than Nms. I really didn’t care about what direction I was going. As long as the boat was safe, and I could sleep. Sleep. Sleep. Oh, how I needed sleep. Nothing else mattered. So, I slept. And it was good. Very good.

### Day 13 – Farewell Droopy Drawers (and my youth)

I used to be able to read for hours without interruption when I was younger, getting lost in the world my mind was now a part of, often staying up all night if the story had me in its grasp. Lord of the Rings had this affect on me as a teenager, as did James Clavell novels in my late twenties, amongst many others. However, as the distractions of technology and media grew, my ability and desire to read for long periods of time waned. The dopamine hit from a new WhatsApp message, email (constant bloody email), social media “likes” or the irrepressible “breaking news” cycle taking away my attention time and time again, to the point where my mind just wasn’t able to stick with books like it used to. I miss books. I miss the stimulation they bring and the joy and captivation I used to feel when I was in the moment, my own imagination at one with the authors. One of my many aspirations for this trip was to rekindle my love affair with books. My cunning plan was to ensure there weren’t any distractions out here, download some wonderful authors on my kindle and create the conditions for this relationship to be reset – i.e. lots and lots of free time. I’m very happy to report that its worked – books and I are back baby! I spent hour upon wonderful hour reading today and loved every minute of it.

There was no wind when I awoke this morning and when puffs did come, there was no consistency in either wind direction or strength, so I thought it a good idea to put the engine on and get a few Nm under the belt, if nothing else to boost morale. This meant I had little to do and therefore reading (after my daily chores) was at the top of my To Do list, closely followed by resting and napping.

As I doze on deck, I get lost in Hermanos Guitierrez. It’s becoming the sound track to my journey so far. The layers and complexity of each track are fascinating and like the ocean, I seem to experience a new perspective each time I listen to them. The tension and complicity of the electric guitar contrasted with the sharpness and smoothness of the semi-accountic guitar is mesmerising and so full of nuance. One gaining dominance over the other, quickly to be reversed in the next track. It feels a little like the Ocean and my relationship. We’re connected and at one but there’s a constant push and pull for dominance. Neither always on top, overpowering the other, but a

friendly to and fro, almost like a game of tennis between two best friends, both of whom are highly competitive but who love each other more and therefore don't want to win or lose. They just want to play and enjoy the game itself along with their time together, just as the ocean and I do each day.

We went through a rain shower late morning, so I try my hand at rain harvesting again. It wasn't a long shower, but I managed to get 2 x 5L bottles of water filled which would give me 3 days or more if needed, so a good further addition to my emergency rations.

As my fresh food supplies are getting low, it's going to be time to turn the fridge off in a few days as I'm using the generator more often than anticipated in this leg of the journey. I need to ensure I've got plenty of fuel remaining for the doldrums in a week's time as it's currently forecast to be a much larger area than expected due to a high-pressure system that's sitting across the Western Pacific right now.

Today marks my last day of being "droopy drawers", Bingo Lingo for 44. The boys and I like to use this hilarious British numbering systems as a type of nickname that refreshes each year. Loky, for example, is "Knock on the Door" (4) and Naryth is "Legs" (11). I used to work at Europe's largest bingo parlour in Dundee, Scotland when I spent the summer there many years ago. I was 19 and had just finished my first season ski instructing at Lake Louise in Canada. My best buddy Jas joined me and what ensued was a summer filled with adventure, mischief and laughter with my Dundee based cousins and their friends. For the first time I felt part of a larger family and connected to my Scottish heritage, so it's fair to say I have a soft spot for Bingo. Sadly, my new moniker will be "halfway there" at 1-minute past midnight tonight. Not nearly as cool as previous years. Even Bingo Lingo making it quite clear that, for all my protests and denials, I'm entering middle age.

Starting this life stage on a boat hurtling through the Pacific helps to take the sting out of the reality check though. I think it's less our age that concerns us as we grow older and more what this translates into as far as opportunities and experiences go – or the lack of them. Sitting here, entranced by the setting sun with rainbows all around Ahyoka and I, thanks to the multitude of rain cells, middle age aint looking so bad. I will however, soak in my final few hours of "youth" as Droopy Drawers.

My companion the Moon is growing. I'm enjoying watching him slowly gain in both size and significance each night. The early night sky is now lit up with silver and grey hues and there's no need for torches or light of any kind. Watching the boat sail in this light is a marvel of shadows, layers and reflections. I can watch these moon rays and corresponding shadows for hours. Something you simply never see when living in a city like Hong Kong and it feels like I'm able to see my world through a totally different lens each night. Even on my bunk in the cabin the moon's rays reach me, bathing me in light as I drift off the sleep.

The stars seem to recede more each night as the moon grows, giving the Earth's little brother his opportunity to shine, knowing their turn will come around again soon. The might of the Southern



Cross can't be dimmed though, even by the Moon. This majestic constellation is now on my horizon each night, marking the direction of home - South. Its more than a compass bearing though. For us antipodeans the Southern Cross represents our special place in the world. Far away but unique. Not part of the old world but a place where explorers and adventurers can thrive. A place where we're not weighed down by tradition and have optimism and youth on our side. A place where anything is possible. A place fondly called Down Under. So dear to Australians is the Southern Cross that it's on our national flag. It's been a long time since I've seen this collection of stars and I find its sight each night comforting as well as hypnotic. Home is just over the horizon, below the Southern Cross and across the water. It can't be that far now...

## Day 14 – Party time

The first rule of sailing (unlike fight club) is safety. Alcohol is seriously frowned upon at sea for all the right reasons. I simply can't imagine how terrifying it would be to be dealing with a squall related gear failure with anything but a clear head. With this in mind, I didn't bring any beer or wine and certainly wouldn't consider a "wee dram" at night. Unless of course it's a special occasion. What I did bring were two bottles of champagne. One rationed for my birthday and the other for my very own "line crossing ceremony" when I cross the equator for the first time.

I prechilled the birthday champagne overnight and had the last of my fresh food saved for Ahyoka and I to have a lovely birthday lunch together. Mel's family is from Greece and so we used to have special "Koulmandays" (Mel's maiden name is Koulmandas) where all we ate were Greek delicacies such as dolmades, tapenades, hummus, smoked seafood, octopus and other delicacies. I love Koulmandays and it has been way too long since the last one so I thought it could be the ideal boat food for my birthday party given its either vacuum packed or in cans.

I planned on a late lunch, which could become an afternoon of grazing with no need to make dinner. A mid-morning nap was therefore on the cards along with plenty of reading. I've never spent my birthday alone, but the slow calm pace with which it unfolded seemed appropriate and anything else would have jarred with my broader experience and state of mind right now. I was able to connect with family and friends throughout the day via SMS so felt very loved and connected, but, if I'm honest, also happy to be alone. This great experiment of mine has a long way to go and throwing a life celebration into the mix and seeing how this affects the outcome is both curious and appropriate.

It's another beautiful day and I even have some decent wind, so the boat is moving through the ocean nicely and I'm gratefully to see my log tick over at an average of 5 knots SOG. The wind shifts are still there, but I'm learning to accept the constant changes this requires and sink into the sailing.

As the sun starts down its long afternoon pitch, I pop the champagne, pour one glass for me and one for Ahyoka (which goes over the side). The thinking being that come glass two or three when my judgement may be impaired, and I change my mind about sharing the bottle there's simply none left. I just can't risk any overindulgence and I know there's a "frank the tank" (character from

Old School) in me so any temptation needs to be removed - sadly. The champagne is super cold and tastes divine. I say a toast to Ahyoka, thank her for a great effort the past 2 weeks and try to enjoy each cool sip so that the glass lasts as its still 2+ hours till the sunset reaches its visual zenith. My Mediterranean smorgasbord is as delicious as it looks (and as I remember) and I enjoy a slow afternoon of grazing, sipping, watching and listening. Nowhere else to go. Nowhere else I'd rather be. Time slows and takes on a blissful glow, enhanced by the champagne, the music and the colours of sunset. I sing. I dance. I celebrate and I'm happy. Certainly, a birthday to remember and one I'll never be able to replicate.

It really was a great party, though I turn in early, just after sunset and drift off to sleep. At midnight a squall hits and I'm very glad I shared the bottle with Ahyoka. I wipe the sleep from my eyes, crack off the sheets, bear away and go back to bed. Not even a squall is going to detract from my birthday bliss.

Day 15 – Bouy oh Bouy!

You know those days when nothing seems to go right? When you're frustrating and can't seem to make any progress? When if something is going to go wrong it will? Well... today was one of those days. It reached its nadir just before midnight when I had perhaps the most terrifying experience of the trip so far, certainly the most shocking, but more on that later.

Just below my rhumbline to the waypoint of Pioneer Channel, which is between New Ireland and Bougainville Island in PNG, there's a huge pocket of calm airs which may last for weeks. If I get stuck down there, I may not get out as I simply don't have enough fuel for the 1500Nm of motoring to get through it. It's a little like quicksand for sail boats. You do not want to get stuck. So, the only option is to head north east, away from the rhumbline and away from the waypoint so I can ensure I stay in the pressure pockets the next week. I begrudgingly tack over and watch my track get further away from my destination. When you've worked so hard for each mile, it's tough to go backwards but I know it's the only realistic option.

What is frustrating me the most though is the boat is simply not sailing well. Her upwind angles are all wrong and I can't tack through anything less than 140degrees. This is really worrying me as the wind is on the nose almost the entire way to Pioneer Channel, so unless I can sail to TWA of <50deg my VMG to the waypoint is going to be seriously compromised and it may take me weeks longer. Just what is wrong with her?

Because of the issue with the sailing angles (which I've had for days) and the light winds (also for many days), my trip is now looking likely to take closer to 6 weeks rather than the more optimistic 4-week best case in the passage plan. This is taking some readjusting to and I now need to look at all my rationing differently and also seriously adjust my own expectations. There was a stage where I was hoping to be halfway by now, however I've got two thirds of the way to go which feels like a long way. The middle section was always going to be difficult; I tell myself. The excitement of starting the journey having faded and the reality of many, many miles of sailing ahead makes Cairns feel like a very long way away. I keep telling myself to take it day by day and that things will certainly

improve, but my joy at being out here has been replaced with an air of problem solving, calculations and weather analysis. There'll be time to soak up the ocean again later. For now, I need to sort out what's wrong with the boat and build a solid plan to get through this light air.

Its times like this when having a shore team makes all the difference. While I can download basic weather GRIB files, Cam is back at HQ using a very powerful navigation software program called Expedition, which takes a multitude of data points and provides the same level of routing information and analysis as the Volvo Ocean Racing teams. If I'm going to find my way through this fickle weather, it's because of the team back in HK. Right now, I'm sailing to the conditions on the ground but the large strategic work of where to go and where I want to be in a week's time is all done by the team.

Not only that, I describe the issues on the ground to Cam re poor pointing angles and the state of the headsail and through his guidance we surmise the issue is a loose forestay via a combination of slack back stay and loosened rig. After a few hours work, the boat is indeed sailing much better, in particular she's sailing 20+ degrees higher than before and is tacking though an acceptable 95degrees. The rig was in good shape before I left so I can only put it down to the impact of the storm and that it was stretched after days of tension, even though it really should be fine.

With the acceptance that this is going to a longer trip than first hoped, I need to conserve water and fuel as much as I can. This means no more showers (I can shower when it rains) and good-bye to the fridge and the lovely cold drinks it produces. I'm really OK with both changes as I figured that would be the case at some point. Thankfully I brought plenty of deodorant, so I won't smell too bad. I also have wet wipes, the kind you use to clean little babies so I can use these to clean myself as well if the time between rain showers is a while.

As the afternoon progresses the wind starts to pick up. It's been 10-12knts all day so at least I'm making good progress as I head north. It's now 14knts and the seas are building slightly. It's meant my day has been rather bumpy and that I'm in for an even bumpier night. When sailing hard on the wind everything is more difficult. The boat is heeled over at 30+degrees so you can't sit flat anywhere, and your stomach muscles need to be constantly engaged as the boat moves through each wave. You can't stand flat anywhere either, so you always need to hold on (one hand for you and one for the boat) and I find myself constantly jammed in a doorway or with my foot on the wall to stop myself from falling over. There's also nowhere to lay flat so you just have to get good at sleeping in weird positions and getting constantly thrown around.

I went to bed early but was woken up at 11pm as the boat started to heel over a little more and I could feel the waves were getting bigger. The wind had increased to 18-20knts, but it wasn't a squall. Just a band of pressure which I'd been seeing a lot of the past two days. They generally don't last long so I simply dialled down the autopilot 20 degrees and let the sheets off slightly, content to ride it out. We were moving quickly, with boat a speed of 8knts so I was quite happy. As I stood in the cockpit cleaning up the sheets into coils, the most remarkable thing happened. This orange flashing light whizzed past the boat just above eye level or about 3m from water level. It was so close I don't know how it didn't touch the boat, but the distance was measured in inches.

The image was so foreign it took my brain some time to process just what was happening. I was watching a large, solid steel cardinal marker fly passed Ahyoka. This made no sense to me. Cardinal markers indicate a hazard of some kind and are only ever near shore. Meanwhile, we were in water 5km deep with no land, not even an atoll for hundreds of nautical miles. What just happened?

As I stared at the flashing light, I slowly worked out that it wasn't a hallucination. We just narrowly avoided disaster and this rogue bouy must have broken its mooring and be randomly floating around the ocean, its light powered by solar. The enormity of how close we came to collision sunk in and I was far more shaken up than when we sailed passed the barrels days earlier. That was in the day light and was a few hundred meters away. This was at night, we were smokin' along and could have so easily hit this thing and punctured the hull. One of the movies I downloaded for this trip is All is Lost with Robert Redford. It's a story of a solo sailor who hits a rogue container in the middle of the ocean and sinks. I vow there and then to not watch it. No way.

I stood there watching the flashing light until I could see it no more, still in disbelief at what just happened. The adrenalin in my body slowly dissipating. I check the charts and re check the charts but there's simply nothing anywhere near me, so I definitely didn't make any navigational errors. It was simply some of the ocean's countless flotsam and jetsam. Interestingly enough I had seen very little, if any impact by man so far. Coming from the polluted waters of both Hong Kong and Cambodia I've been pleasantly surprised up to now with just how little plastic or pollution of any kind I've seen.

Once I calmed down, I think to myself, surely lightning can't strike twice in the same place, at least not in the same night, right? I buy the argument and effectively deceive myself into a false sense of security and go downstairs to sleep, which, somewhat surprisingly, comes easily. I guess I was tired after a long day or worry.

Post Scripts:

Thank you all for your wonderful birthday wishes. I read them over about three times and each reading brought me closer to each of you. It's a strange type of irony that only by being so remote and so solitary that I'm able to deepen my bonds with the ones I care about the most.

Thanks for planting the seed about a book too. Certainly gives me something to ponder these many hours while I watch the ocean glide by and decide what I want the next decade to look like, let alone the next few months.

Finally, I know a few of you have asked for photos. Sadly, I don't have the bandwidth on my satellite connection to send photos, but I promise when I'm back I'll send through a whole bunch. I'm even trying to make a documentary while I'm out here, but as I have all of zero experience, I can't imagine it's going to be any good, but I'll certainly do my best.

## Day 16 – Acceptance

There were no major mishaps today, at least while the sun was up. Just what I needed. A solid day's sail on or above the rhumbline, so every mile I sailed got me a mile closer to Pioneer Channel. While we sailed hard on the wind, seeing my bearing remain relatively steady throughout the day gave me a sense of comfort to know that at least I was moving in the right direction. It's difficult sailing hard on the wind though, so each mile was well earned.

My ailments are slowly healing, my thumb in particular which, while still sore and swollen is now on the right side of healing.

There's also much less water in the bilge so I'm fairly confident it's not a leak and rather just water that got in under trying circumstances.

As the sun set, I got a lift from the wind and sailed much higher than I had been all day, almost due east. This meant I could watch the sun set on my transom while the moon rose off my bow. With so much beauty surrounding me it was hard to know where to look but nice to be able to allow the ocean and nature to captivate me again, my worries from the previous day dissipated, at least for now.

As the light from the sun started to wane, the moon came out in all its glory (one day off full) and I sailed directly into a silvery highway that seemed to go on forever. The ocean spectacularly reflecting the light of the moon all the way to the horizon. Sailing into the moon's reflection was a special experience and another moment from this trip I'll try and etch into my memory, unlike the rest of the evening that followed.

I slept on deck for much of the night as the wind and the swell picked up around 9pm and as we were hard on the wind, the crashes off the back of the waves were deafening downstairs. It feels a little like you're stuck inside a drum a giant is beating, while throwing it (and you) around on his knee. The sounds are unnatural, unsafe and unwanted. It's when I feel least safe, downstairs in the middle of the night being thrown around like a rag doll and the boat sounding like it's going to break any second.

I think what it must be like for prisoners of war. Having to endure long periods of torture and isolation, with none of the creature comforts I have. Laying there, I imagine the sort of tools they'd use to survive and try and apply a similar approach. I recall studying the Stockdale Paradox while at Stanford and I try and remember all the key points. From memory, it's about retaining hope that you will get home while accepting it may take much longer than you'd like, delicately balancing optimism with realism. I do recall that while Stockdale was in prison, those who thought they'd be home before Christmas (and weren't) were the ones who didn't make it.

Not finding sleep on deck, in part due to the brightness of the moon I move back downstairs. I lay there in my bunk, wincing at every crash landing after going over particularly large waves and focus on practicing acceptance and gratitude. Grateful for my freedoms, my health and for being

loved. Accepting of my pace and the time it'll take (or not take) to get home and that while I'd much rather be reaching or running, sailing into the wind is simply what I need to do right now and that it all will be OK. I remind myself I'm not in a rush. This is a time to be present, to be in the moment so I sit back, watch the moon through the window and breath. Just breath.

## Day 17 – Rough seas

Today was a wet weather jacket, shoes, PFD and glove day. That is to say, hard, wet sailing. The wind was 12knts at dawn and the sea state fairly flat, so we made good progress early on, moving along at an average of 6.5knts. However, by late morning the wind had increased, and we'd already been hit by two squalls. Wind was a steady 18-20knts with gusts in the squalls getting up to 30knts. Seas started to build, so sailing hard on the wind started to get challenging. Ahyoka is still having issues pointing but the bigger issue was that the periods between the waves were so short and the waves so high, that as Ahyoka's bow was going down a wave, her stern was going up a wave creating the feeling like a horse trying to buck you off. Her rump would pop up, often at an angle creating quite a unique feeling requiring constant handholds. It also resulted in boat speed being seriously impacted so we were only making 2-3knts SOG.

After a quick lunch of salmon and couscous I took over steering as the auto pilot couldn't handle the choppy seas. This turned out to be a blessing as 20 mins later another squall hit.

It's easy to see wind gusts coming towards you by the change in colour and texture of the water so when a squall is bearing down, I always find myself trying to read the water in the hope of gaining a better understanding of what I'm in for. Off in the distance I could see what looked like a solid white wall coming straight towards us at a rapid pace and the water underneath it was a deep grey and very different to the surrounding water colour. I'd never seen this before so was immediately on guard. I quickly put the engine on and turned head to wind. 5 seconds later it hit with such violence that I just stood there holding on tight, focussing on keeping the boat straight while any exposed skin felt like it was hit by a high-pressure hose. The water moved horizontally through the air and it sounded like a freight train it was so loud. I was too shocked at how quickly things escalated to be scared. I just knew I had to keep the boat head into the gust otherwise, with only one reef in the main and the genoa only partially furled we'd be in bad shape.

As quickly as it arrived it was over. I looked behind us and the sea was pushed entirely flat. It was a dark, milky grey and all there was on the water were long thick streaks, lines almost, of white foam that had been blown across the top of the water. The gust had made its mark, both on the ocean and my consciousness.

I immediately put the third reef in, furled a large portion of the headsail and bore away. The wind was coming from exactly where I wanted to go, meaning when I had my back to the wind we were going in the wrong direction. I stayed on this course for an hour, hoping the wind would die down, but after it became clear it was going to remain like this for some time, I furled the jib entirely, put the engine on and slowly motored into the wind and the waves so at least I could make some positive Nms, but it certainly wasn't smooth going. Some of the waves by this stage

were quite big and it took two boat lengths to ascend the face of the wave, putting the engine under strain to get us to the apex, then falling from the top, more often than not with a loud crash.

In the middle of this, while I was doing my best to practice acceptance of the day I just had, and without any ceremony or pageantry, we sailed across the Mariana Trench, the deepest place in the ocean anywhere on the planet. An abyss of 10.9km. I looked out at the grey sea surrounding me and pondered the fathoms below us. I was cold and tired but not beaten. No, it was just another day and I was now another day closer to home.

Tonight, was the full moon, one of the times I was really looking forward to being out here as I could watch the sunset and moon rise together. Sadly, there was nothing but storm clouds in the sky, so I ate my dehydrated chicken curry and tried to distract myself by watching a movie – Kon-Tiki. While I loved the spirit of adventure and triumph in the face of adversity, I also found the protagonist, the scientists and explorer Thor to have many failings. Failings I often see in myself. An over reliance on optimism. Unwilling to listen to the advice of others, often those more experienced and a blind pursuit of goals sometimes at the expense of relationships. I reflected on how often externally perceived achievement and success are simply down to dumb luck.

I slept on the floor of the cockpit again (strapped in) as it was the most stable part of the boat and furthest away from the noise of the hull slamming into the sea as she fell off a wave. I napped there for a few hours, waking up to check instruments every 20 mins until I was so tired, I knew even the chaotic movements and noises down stairs wouldn't inhibit sleep, albeit fitful. As I drifted in and out of consciousness, I hoped for some dumb luck and calmer weather tomorrow and wondered where my friend the dolphin was.

## **Day 18 – Land Ahoy!**

I've been able to have a restful day getting in a couple of naps to rebuild my strength from the previous few days. The islands of Yap, Palau and various atolls are all with sailing distance so pose somewhat of a navigational challenge for the day. These islands mark the halfway point in this open ocean stage of the Pacific so it's a great milestone and one I'm very happy to achieve after the recent challenges. There's a very long way to go though, and I'm still not at the halfway point for the entire journey, which gives me a reality check and forces me to focus on the task ahead.

Its 2pm and off in the distance I see land for the first time in 14 days. Its Ulithi Atoll and I've sailed further south than the rhumbline just so I can take a look. I smile from ear to ear upon its sight and shout in joy. I'm surprised at how happy it makes me, the sight of land. I've dreamed of exploring atolls like this, having the place entirely to yourself and spending days under water on the untouched reefs, swimming, diving, fishing and surfing, enjoying the safety of the waters and the beautiful colours and marine life. I wonder if I should stop, just for a night?

I think I see another boat in the distance and ponder if the occupants would like some company over dinner tonight? I'd certainly love some human contact. Maybe they even have cold beer! I bet

they'd have some good stories to share and I'd love the conversation and interaction. I fanaticise about seeing some people, talking and laughing together for about an hour, but as we get closer, I see it's a wreck and my dreams need to be put on hold. There'll be plenty of time for that type of sailing in the future. For now, I need to focus on the task at hand, getting to Pioneer Channel and out of the northern latitudes.

Life is always greatest at the margins. I see lots of birds and sea life with fish jumping all around. I throw out my line and get a strike almost immediately. It didn't hook it properly though, so it's gone after a few minutes. I don't have to wait long before the next strike. It's a decent sized Dorado and after 20 mins I get him close enough to the boat that I can see the bright yellows and greens of its skin. Just at the last moment the hook pops out and it see him gracefully swim away. I have plenty of food, so I thank him for the fight and try again. I get one more strike before nightfall but can't seem to hook this one either so cook up various root vegetables and make a delicious hash while dreaming about the one (or three) that got away.

The moon is a blood orange tonight, as it slowly rises from the horizon, framed by dark clouds with even a palm tree silhouetted in the fore ground. It more than makes up for missing it the night before. It looks a little like a giant Jafa rising from the sea, a uniquely Australia sweet developed during the Depression. I think about all the change that has taken place in the world these past few months, much of which will impact an entire generation. Our great depression. The hundreds of millions of people who have lost jobs. The millions of businesses which have shut, many never to reopen. I count myself amongst the lucky ones. I wonder what's happening back in the world. At least for a minute, then remind myself that ignorance is bliss and to enjoy this unique moment of global detachment,

In many ways today was just what I needed. I got some much-needed rest and a solid (and surprising) morale boost from seeing land for the first time in two weeks. I ended the day happy and in good spirits. Dumb luck wins again.

Post Script:

I see there are a few questions in the comments, which is great. If there's anything you're curious to know feel free to type the question and I'll do my best to answer them here.

Here are some so far:

@ Eileen O'Farrell

- I love how engaged you are and thoroughly enjoy reading your comments.
- You mention that it sounds like I'm diurnal, which in some ways I am, but not a regime like I'd follow on land.
- A traditional watch system (like a 4/4/2) doesn't work so well when sailing solo as there are times when I'm busy for 12 hours straight and other times when I have no sailing related tasks for hours. The random nature of the sailing pattern means a structured watch



system is less effective as I can't rely on someone else to look after the boat when I'm off watch.

- I spoke to a French sleep doctor as part of my preparation who specialises in supporting solo sailors and his recommendation was to follow a poly-phasic sleep cycle, which is, by and large what I'm doing.
- Our sleep cycles are 90 minutes, so I generally give myself 100 minutes per cycle. I do one cycle during the day and then 3 at night. I get up between cycles to look at the boat, the weather and the instruments and then head back down 30 mins or so later. The bulk of my "chores" are during the day, which means all I need to do at night is deal with variables such as squalls and wind shifts. Because I can't really prepare for these, I find it easier to just get out of bed, sort it out then go back down and enter another sleep cycle.
- I don't sleep when I'm anywhere near land or when things are dangerous though and will simply stay up all night if I have to.
- It's also hard to sleep downstairs at any time, but particularly during the day as it's so hot. I've developed a heat rash on my back from constantly sweating while laying down to sleep so no matter which way I cut it, I'm definitely sleep deprived.
- In essence, I sleep when I can, where I can, but it's hard to find true structure when conditions are bad.

@ James Wilson

- Would love to video chat mate but even sending text is a tall order on an internet connection of 2.6kbs.
- When I'm back on shore lets lock it in

@ Pintu

- Sadly, I can't upload photos either brother. The connection is just too slow. I promise to send photos when I arrive

@ Fatou

- Thanks for the song suggestion (and lovely comments) my dear. Would love to listen to it out here, however like photos it sadly requires too much bandwidth, but I look forward to listening when I get to Cairns.

## Day 19 – Torn mainsail

It was a simple mistake. It was also a stupid one. One that could seriously affect the success or failure of this mission, making my isolation feel all the more acute.

The morning was cold and wet with thick, black pockets of cloud in all directions. It was obvious there would be many squalls today, so I got my gear on – shoes, PFD and jacket and made sure I had a solid breakfast and the boat was prepared.

The first squall hit around 9am HK time. It was coming from exactly where I wanted to go, making positive VMG tough if not impossible. To make matters even more challenging, once the squall

had passed, the wind died to almost zero knts and what wind there was shifted through 40 degrees making progress challenging at best and all the more reason to not turn around when a squall hit as I'd erase many hours of hard work.

I decided to sail into the subsequent squalls, feathering the sails to ensure I didn't lose too much ground. Or at least that was my intention. After lunch I was in the midst of the third squall of the day with a TWA of about 15 degrees and gusts of 25+knts when out of nowhere, there was a 40-degree wind shift and a gust of 30knts, which backwinded the jib, immediately spinning us around on a dime. I had no steering and the sheets, and the rigging were in all the wrong places. I honestly thought the rig was going to be ripped out of the decks and held on for dear life, waiting for something to snap. Thankfully it didn't and a few minutes later the boat was facing downwind, so I went with it for a while and collected my thoughts.

After the 4<sup>th</sup> squall hit late afternoon I decided to follow my plan of the previous day and put the third reef in the main, furl the jib and motor into the weather as I was seriously tired by this stage and rather disheartened if I'm honest. Pioneer Channel was going to take me a month at this pace.

Complementing the grey, windy, and wet drama of the weather was Melville's masterpiece, Moby Dick. All 135 chapters. I've taken to listening to audio books when the weather is bad as it's a nice distraction and helps to both calm me down and also pass the hours while I'm watching the weather and anticipating the changes and adapting appropriately. Next up is Dickens but I haven't decided whether it'll be Great Expectations or A Tale of Two Cities. Given Moby Dick is 20 hours I've got a few days to make up my mind.

I'm now in the single digit latitudes north, meaning the equator is just over a week away. Another huge milestone. Not only because crossing the equator at sea is a rite of passage for mariners of all kinds, but also because it means I'll be out of the monsoonal wet season so far less squalls. It also means I'll be away from the danger of typhoons. I'm starting to feel like I'm pushing my luck out here as each day gets me a day closer to the peak of the typhoon season and while I've had trying conditions with weather, a tropical low pressure system is a whole other story so the celebration when I do cross in a week to 10 days will be one of both excitement and great relief. It also means I'll then be in the southern latitudes and home will only feel that much closer (and safer).

By dusk, the weather had calmed again so I decided to try to sail some more. I was exhausted from the days efforts which, on the back of 19 days of sleep deprivation, was resulting in my decision-making process being flawed and my mind was quite foggy. I took what I thought were all the bungies and sail ties off the main and started to raise the halyard. A few moments later I heard a giant tear and I knew exactly what had happened. I'd missed a sail tie and as I looked up towards the main, my heart sank, and I cried out in despair. I just put a 1-meter long rip in my main sail. My primary form of propulsion, the functioning of which was a prerequisite to get me home.

S#&T

The enormity of what happened hit me immediately. I took three deep breaths and reminded myself what the great French sailors of old did when they had a major issue at sea. They'd get the boat settled and have a cigarette or two, while they calmed their nerves and worked out a plan. So... I dropped the main and lashed it to the boom, made a cup of tea (close enough to a ciggie) and just sat down at the helm and slowly drank the warm, soothing brew, while I gazed aimlessly into the dark of night, alone with my thoughts.

Was this a serious issue?

Yes.

But could it be repaired?

Yes.

Did I have the sail repair material I needed?

Yes.

I calmed down slightly and started to work out a plan. It was now night-time, and I decided it wasn't a great idea to try and fix this in a hurry. The hole was so large that I only had enough of the heavy-duty adhesive Dacron to try and fix it once, so I needed to get it right. I also needed rest. Everything would look better with some rest.

My sleep was fitful, and I couldn't shake the butterflies in my stomach, but I got a couple of hours in between AIS alarms going off and large waves. Tomorrow would be another day and I needed to trust in my ability to be resourceful and fix the problem. At least for now I was heading straight for Pioneer Channel at 132degrees, albeit under engine.

I've got this, I told myself. Even if only by my fingernails, I've got it.

Postscript:

- Please excuse my typos and poor grammar of late. Very tough to type in these conditions and my brain isn't functioning at 100% due to exhaustion (and being thrown around in a virtual washing machine while writing) 😊

## Day 20 – Back on track

I awoke before dawn, eager to get myself and Ahyoka sorted. Thankfully the sky was relatively clear, so after a strong coffee and some muesli, I got started on repairing the mainsail, reminding myself to take it slow and "measure twice, cut one".

After about an hour, the repairs were looking pretty good and I felt far more confident that the main would in fact be OK. I hoisted the sail, casting a nervous eye over my handy work. The Dacron repair was smooth with no air bubbles and seemed to be holding nicely with no impact to the sail's shape.

Phew!! Now, let's get back to it!

The sense of relief was palpable, but what was more noticeable was the impact to my mental acuity and motivation. With one part of the boat now in order, I felt like working through various other tasks that had been put off due to the recent storms. I set about cleaning the entire boat, in particular the heads, pulling out and airing all my bedding and doing a full load of washing. I filled up the fuel tank and then did a full stocktake on all my consumables.

The results of the stocktake were particularly promising. By all measures I'm using less than anticipated/rationed and this gave me further confidence that I'm absolutely able to continue the journey and that, bar any major breakages that can't be repaired, I have what's required to get us to Cairns, even though it's going to take close to 6 weeks.

For anyone who's interested, below is the result of this morning's audit:

Diesel (used for both propulsion and power generation):

- 260L used:
  - o 148hrs genset
  - o 70.5hs main engine
- 540L diesel remaining

Water:

- 27 x 5L bottles remaining
- Used 12 bottles so far which averages out at 3.15l/day, so based on current consumption I have 42 days remaining (I have probably about 20-25days sailing so this is plenty as I could reduce rations if needed)
- 20L of emergency water from rain harvesting (only to be used in a truly worst-case scenario)
- Water tank 1 = 90% (approx. 180L)
- Water tank 2 = 10% (approx. 20L)
- I'm now only using the water tanks for washing up, boiling water and brushing teeth, so now I'm not using this for showering there should be about a month's worth in the two tanks combined.

Food:

- 30 days of good quality dry food remaining (all fresh food now consumed)
  - o Each day's food is packed in its own bag so there's no thinking about whether or not I've got enough left, which helps to reduce any rationing anxiety

- Breakfasts are either muesli or Weetabix with powdered milk and fresh nuts and honey (all pre-packed)
- Snacks comprise protein bars, dried fruit (mango, dates and apricots) and nuts (almonds, cashews and pistachios), oatmeal biscuits and packets of Doritos or Chips every couple of days as a “treat”
- Lunches are a mix of tuna/sardines/salmon on either puffed corn circles, pumpnickel or rye bread or peanut butter sandwiches
- Dinners are either various freeze-dried options (which actually taste pretty good), pastas with tomato sauce, curries with canned vegetables or various root vegetables which last well (eg mash potato, or my special “hash”)
- I take 1L of electrolytes each day given how much one sweats in the tropics – Pocari Sweat is the brand I have which, contrary to its name, is rather delicious.
- Coffee/tea – though if I’m going to run out of anything its coffee which was by and large an after thought to the rationing, though a much appreciated one. I will not, however run out of tea. Certainly, not before I run out of water.
- Desert is either a small ration of dark chocolate, two short bread biscuits or two Tim Tams, which I generally have after dinner (once the washing up is done) while watching a movie or TV series (the only time of day I watch any TV)
- 10 days emergency rations
  - 5kg bag of rice (with soya sauce or chicken stock for flavouring)
  - 2kg of oatmeal
  - 6 dozen eggs covered in Vaseline so they’ll last 6 months
  - Cans of condensed milk
  - Various cans of things like baked beans and spam

#### Gas (Cooking):

- Still on first canister and I have 3 spares so more than enough

All in all, I live a pretty good life out here and don’t feel like I’m wanting for anything (other than human contact of course).

There’s a typhoon forming to my west. While it’s no danger, I missed it only by a matter of days, which only heightens my feeling of unease. I have approximately 700Nm till I cross the equator so around a week of uncertainty, however the lower I am latitudinally, the less likely there will be a typhoon in my path. I’m also now in motoring distance of land no matter where I am for the rest of the journey, which is a significant improvement to my risk profile. If I was caught out a week ago there was simply nowhere to go. Nowhere to shelter. Nowhere to hide. As you get plenty of warning when typhoons form, if there looks to be the risk of one anywhere near my path I can now simply motor south and/or to a port of refuge, which feels much safer, though I can’t completely relax until I’m across the equator.

To be clear, I was planning on leaving a few weeks before I did, which was just before the typhoon season in the northern hemisphere starts and just after the southern hemisphere cyclone season has come to an end. The main reason for leaving later was the multitude of items I required for

this trip either took longer to get to HK or simply didn't make it due to the significantly reduced air freight capacity from the virus. I always knew I was "running the gauntlet", but my sense was it was either now or never so after doing all the analysis, I felt the risk was manageable, albeit not zero.

I don't want to come across as reckless though as I don't believe this trip is. It is, however, an adventure and adventures always carry risk. That's what makes them exciting. I needed a sense of adventure in my life again. I wanted to feel alive and I didn't want to spend another 10 years sleep walking through my forties and early fifties. It was always going to be a gamble coming when I did, but in the end I'm glad I came. I'd much rather be sitting here, getting slammed by squalls and considering typhoon paths than in Hong Kong worried about the economic impact from the virus, the protests and the geopolitical direction of the US-China relationship. All events I have no control over. Even typing those words sounds intensely boring and uninspiring. No dear Reader, I needed a change and I'm immensely glad I'm here, even if I am half terrified at times.

The afternoon and evening had that wonderful calm, stable feel to it and I knew there would be no squalls today. It meant that after all my chores were complete, I was able to spend the afternoon resting and reading which, to be honest, was greatly needed as I'm feeling quite fatigued. My sense is this stability won't last long as the forecast is for more intense tropical cells in the days ahead so I best enjoy it while I can. And I do. I enjoy it greatly, feeling my heart calmed and body soothed by the gentle seas and the wonderful, constant positive sailing straight towards Pioneer Channel. Step by little step I'm getting closer.

## Day 21 – Half-way

At approximately 04:30am this morning I passed the halfway mark. Given I've been sailing for 3 weeks this felt somewhat anticlimactic as rather than feeling a sense of satisfaction, it was more a realisation that I still have a very long way to go. I no doubt have many challenges ahead, so Cairns feels like a faraway land. More an idea than an actual destination. The distance remaining in a straight line is just under 2000Nm but given I've sailed over 2500Nm so far, it's likely something similar, i.e. a long way. For now, I'm just biting it off in chunks with the next milestone the equator which is about 600Nm away.

My path today took me past another atoll, Eauripik Atoll, the last land mass I'll likely see until I reach pioneer channel in 10-12 days. This one had quite a large outer laying reef, so I gave it a wide berth, which meant I didn't see the granular level of detail like my last atoll, but I still wistfully wondered what it was like, particularly under the water. These reefs would have little to no fishing given how remote they are so must be some of the most untouched on the planet. I'd gladly spend weeks here living off the land and vow to come back one day.

After a few rain showers in the morning, the wind dropped, and the rest of the day was inordinately calm. The ocean was like glass it was so calm with little to no swell or wind. All the intensity and energy from the past week dissipated, leaving a soothing, gentle fluid beckoning you into its silence. It's serenity. It's peace.

I lay here for hours getting lost in my own thoughts in a way you simply can't do on land. There's nowhere else to go and nowhere else I'd rather be. I needed rest and gladly allowed myself the time and the space. No pressure. No judgement.

It's times like these when the simple beauty of nature unfolding before your eyes is seen. Truly seen. You're not thinking about 100 other things you need to do or places you need to go. You're simply being and soaking up each beautiful moment.

The ocean is like a canvas that any emotion can be painted on. Its vastness and diversity seemingly endless. This afternoon I transposed my own emotions of contentment, happiness and tranquillity on this world I'm now a part of. Knowing its fleeting but enjoying it even more because of this.

Postscript:

@ Wilso

I'm so sorry to hear about the passing of your last remaining grandparent James. Thinking of you brother and sending you all my love.

@ Eileen O'Farrell

Thanks for sharing your comments on Ocean Autopsy. I actually had a whole scientific aspect to my trip planned in partnership with a group studying micro-plastics in the Pacific so was really looking forward to lending a hand in collecting water samples in these remote waters. Sadly, the freight issues meant I couldn't get the equipment delivered in time. A real shame as I was looking forward to better understanding first hand our impact on the oceans.

As for the rash, I've been using Clotrimazole Cream which seems to be doing the trick 😊

Once I got closer the wreck looked very old and was a large steel hulled boat so no chance of cold beer sadly. Or perhaps that was fortunate, so the temptation wasn't there...

Great news re NZ being COVID Free – Go Jacinda! Thankfully I've got written confirmation from Australian Border Force that I won't need to quarantine when I arrive given its more than 14 days since departing my last port, so I'll be able to head straight to the pub.

@ Simon

Thanks for the tip re stitching the Dacron patch Simon. So far its holding and my plan is to sew a border around the patch once I get to the doldrums.

@ John McWilliam

I have bungies for reef ties, which makes the issue with the tear all the more painful as they were downstairs, while the sail ties were in the cockpit, so I was just being lazy. Won't make that mistake again. I've sandwiched the tear just as you've suggested and will sew it up when I get to the doldrums in a few days (or earlier if it starts to peel beforehand).

@ Nina and David

So lovely to hear from you both! The image of sailing on the swiss lakes over summer sounds wonderful and I love the idea of you both exploring together. Enjoy and big hugs to you both.

@ MC

Thanks for the kind words and the humour. Both of which are greatly appreciated.

@ Marc

So nice to hear from you. I've been following the advice from Bertrand who was super helpful with my sleep regime and other than when the weather is intense, I'm finding sleep fairly well all things considered.

As for giving Beneteau some feedback, I'm not sure they'd like all I've got to say ;)

@ Mercia Adonis

Many thanks for the well wishes.

## **Day 22 – Brocken gooseneck**

It was a relatively calm morning, at least to begin with. I sat in the cockpit enjoying my coffee, looking out to sea, soaking up another beautiful sunrise. There were grey clouds in the distance but nothing that looked as fierce as previous days. More intense rain cells than full-on squalls, or at least that's what I hoped. The sun was shining where I was though, so I enjoyed the moment, the coffee and the serenity.

Not long after I'd finished my breakfast and was sitting down writing my blog from the previous day, my much-enjoyed routine, I heard and felt a large "thud" on the bow. Immediately afterwards my boat speed markedly dropped, and I lurched forward from the deceleration. My first thought was we got caught in a fishing net as the "thud" was too dull for it to have been a container, so my mind jumped to what I'd need to do if it was wrapped around the keel. I brought a pony bottle (small dive tank) for just such an issue but before I needed to worry about getting it out, to my surprise a 20 ft log about 1ft in diameter popped out the back of the boat in our wake.



I always find it takes the mind a little longer than expected to process moments like this. So much information in such a short period of time. It was a big enough log to have its presence felt but not large enough to have caused any major damage (I hoped) so I breathed a few deep breaths. Just another close call. How many more of these would I have I wondered?

Before I got back to my writing, I looked out over the bow and in the distance were some thick black clouds, probably 10 mins from hitting us, so I packed up my electronics and put them downstairs and tried to gauge the appropriate course of action. I put a reef in the main but kept the genoa unfurled. I can get that thing rolled up in an instant these days, so I placed the furling line around a winch and kept a watchful eye on the weather.

As we got closer the pressure increased but as expected it wasn't too severe and maxed out at around 20knts. The cell didn't look very dense either so I knew it wouldn't last too long so wasn't concerned. A few minutes later though, I heard a loud "BANG". This was a new bang. One I hadn't heard before and it did not sound good. As I looked up, I saw the boom was detached from the mast and held in place only by the sail. Adrenalin exploded through my system and I immediately knew this was a very, very serious issue. What was interesting was time slowed down and a calm fell over me. I methodically started to think through what I needed to do. Seconds feeling like minutes.

Step one was settle the boat, so I put the engine on and brought the boat head to wind. The sails were making quite a racket by this stage, so I quickly furled the genoa. I then put on my shoes (it's too slippery on the deck when it's wet for bare feet and much safer with shoes on when there's an issue) and PFD, grabbed a hand full of sail ties, clipped on, then dumped the main halyard. Needless to say the sail came down quickly so I secured it as best I could in the pouring rain and did the same to the boom which was now also on deck as the vang had detached and the toppling lift shackle had broken with the line flailing 10ft above me in mid-air.

Once the boat was sorted, I came back inside the relative protection of the dodger, out of the wind and the rain and took my initial assessment. For those non-sailors amongst you, the gooseneck is the hinge that connects the boom to the mast, not dissimilar to the gooseneck on a bike which connects the forks with the main frame. It's a critical part of the rig and it's simply not possible to use the mainsail if the gooseneck is broken. Unlike a rip in the mainsail, if the gooseneck casing was broken there's no way to fix it so I was dealing with a very serious problem.

I find that when things go wrong out here there's a small part of my stomach that starts to feel the enormity of how remote we are, how far from help of any kind we are and how fragile we are. Thankfully my brain is able to keep this demon at bay and push it down. The last thing I needed right now was to panic. No. What was needed was a clear head to work through the issue and come up with a solution. There's always a solution when you have a clear head.

Once the weather calmed down, I headed back out to make an assessment of the damage. I expected to see the housing ripped apart but to my grateful surprise, it was still in one piece, albeit a little battered. The housing (like a hinge) is connected to the mast by a pin and it's the pin that

failed. Remarkably, I was able to find the pin and while it was bent and damaged, it too was in one piece.

I realised that, with a bit of work and creativity this was in fact fixable. I'd dodged a massive bullet but whether I could get this all sorted was now up to me.

First up I needed to dismantle the current set-up so I took the main off the boom along with the reefing lines, caught the topping lift (after about 10 mins) with the boat hook and cleaned up the various sheets and lines that were in a mess at the mast.

I then got to work on the pin which needed to be straightened and a shear smoothed out, which my large hammer and cordless angle grinder were able to sort out in 30 mins. I then needed to work out a new system to secure the pin as the previous bolt had sheared off. Thankfully I was able to find a similar sized bolt so drilled a new hole in the housing and pin to ensure it didn't fall out again.

Next step was to reattach the boom. Using the topping lift at the outboard end I was able to raise it high enough on my shoulder at the mast to wrestle it in place. It took a while as we were still motoring at 5knts and the waves made movement or lifting far more challenging than on land. Getting the pin fastened was a tricky job and took over an hour but ultimately was a success.

It was now early afternoon and as I stepped back to look at the boom, exactly where it was meant to be, a few tears welled up in my eyes. I may just be OK. Breath, Rory. Breath.

I tell myself to keep working slowly and methodically and focus only on the task ahead.

As I was pulling everything apart, I noticed the first reefing line had various defects from wear and tear over the past 3 weeks, so this also needed to be replaced. It took a while to run a new mousing line through the boom, but after about an hour everything was ready for the main to be reattached.

Once the main was on the boom and ready to hoist I felt a twinge of nerves course through my body. It was moment of truth time. Would it hold? Had I missed anything? I triple checked and was pretty sure I hadn't.

Pulling on the halyard, she went up without a hitch, the gooseneck holding firm and the sail and related systems in all the right places doing what they're supposed to be doing.

My relief was palpable. I unfurled the genoa, turned the engine off and we were sailing again, just as the sun started to set. I had tools and equipment scattered throughout the boat, so I cleaned everything up and had a saltwater shower with a freshwater rinse using a sponge (thanks Jim). The dirt, sweat and worries of the day falling off with each subsequent bucket. I felt renewed. I felt confident and I felt proud (and also clean). This was the biggest gear failure test so far and we'd passed with flying colours, though whether or not the repairs will last to Cairns is anyone's bet.

As I sat eating my dinner, a delicious chicken curry (dehydrated), the sunset a perfection of both beauty and of calm, a wave of exhaustion swept over me. It took 9 hours to complete the task which would have been fairly manual on shore, but at sea with a swell and the boat moving in every direction, combined with nerves, everything was more difficult. Heavier. More challenging. I felt that delicious tired you feel after a hard day's work when you're full of pride in the results of your handy work.

In the dying light I could see there were no storm clouds in sight and that there was a good chance this would be a squall free evening. The breeze was a solid 10-12knts and I was reaching, perfectly on my bearing for Pioneer Channel of 135degrees, travelling above 6knts.

Laying there, I was reminded by a line from the book I'm reading right now, A Gentleman in Moscow "If man doesn't master his circumstances then he is bound to be mastered by them". I dozed under the stars, listening to the waves and the water and felt at one with my surroundings.

Postscript:

@ Sara

Thanks for the lovely message, dear Sara. Always great to hear from you.

@ Wilso

That's so awesome you're able to share this with Lucas mate. Naryth and I have a shared love for boats and spending time together on a boat of any kind is certainly our happy place.

@ Michelle

I'm so thrilled your joining me on this journey Michelle and that it's providing some respite from the challenges the world is facing right now.

@ Eileen

I love the quote: "It's not the Golden years, but the Rusty Years" I'm going to use that one.

And yes, I'm going full cliché. Beard and long hair that I've barely brushed since leaving and certainly hasn't been washed. My boys love Jack Sparrow, particularly my youngest but I'm not sure I'll be able to keep it for long once I'm on land. A hot shower and a razor will seem like such a luxury it'll be tough to resist.

Will be sure to take a picture at 0'00'000 😊

@ Donald

How wonderful to hear from you uncle Donald and to know that Ayrshire is following along on the journey.

Big shout-out to the good folks of Ayrshire!

I wonder what granddad would have thought about this trip...? He was always so conservative, or at least that's how I perceived him as a boy. Definitely not a risk taker that's for sure. I don't think he ever forgave me for not becoming an accountant 😊

### Day 23 – Tired

The first thing that “greeted” me this morning was a dull ache in my hands, fore arms and lower back. I tried to get out of bed, but the exertion was too much, so I laid back down to try to assemble some order from the foggy chaos of my thoughts. I reminded myself of the previous day's physical exertion and emotional stress and my current state started to make more sense. After a few minutes I was able to stand but my balance wasn't great, so I had my coffee inside while I slowly regained consciousness and an ability to stand. I was tired. Really tired. While I've had a rest day here and there in between dramas, it's never been enough to regain full strength and the sleep deprivation on top of this is resulting in my physical (and mental) performance starting to wane and my mood dropping. I just need a few days where nothing major goes wrong and I'm pinning my hopes on the doldrums which are now less than 400Nm away.

I've decided to change my sail plan and will use the third reef until I pass the equator as the squalls aren't letting up and this is where the real damage to gear is done. When wind is less than 10knts I'll have the genoa fully unfurled though so I can still maintain boat speed while reducing the pressure on the gooseneck connection. The join was creaking a lot during the night, partly because it needs grease and partly because it's simply not an ideal repair (but the best I could do) which makes me think this friction will sooner or later result in a complete break. If nothing else this is resulting in some unwanted anxiety.

My ultimate back up plan if it does break irreparably is to use the storm trysail as this doesn't require a boom and, combined with the genoa will give me enough forward momentum to keep going and not have to pull into a port of refuge. At this stage I'd only pull into a port in either the Solomons or PNG if there was a medical emergency as I know they'd put me straight into quarantine (assuming they let me in) and likely impound the boat given their borders are closed so it poses a whole different set of risks by stopping. In essence the best strategy is to:

Just. Keep. Going.

While I'd hoped for a calm evening, a series of squalls hit around midnight and the seas started to get quite messy with winds variable at 18-20knts. By 3am the going was painful and slow with the boat getting thrown about the place, so I decided to furl the jib and put the engine on as I

desperately needed sleep. Once I know the boat is secure and engine on, I find I'm less sensitive to the exact angle of heel or boat noises and simply trust that the engine, the hull and auto pilot can sort out the situation and am able to get a semblance of restful sleep, though it's never enough.

@ Wilso

The Little Prince is a special book. I'm glad you're enjoying it with Lucas.

@ Donald Hunter

Love your humour Uncle Donald 😊

@ Eileen O'Farrell

Many thanks for sharing Eileen

@ Stephen Bottomley

Any chance you can order me a Beef and Liberty Cheeseburger, Chilli Fries and a large Chocolate Milkshake to be delivered in approx. 1 week from now...?

@ Doug and Jenna

Still not sure how I'm getting down from Cairns to Sydney (or when) but I'm really looking for to seeing you both when I get there.

## Day 24 – Impermanence

In many regattas, certainly ones with multiple races, sailors are able to drop a race from their overall points score, so even if they do badly in one race, as long as they're consistent in their other races they can still do well. The thinking being success is all about consistency, but that everyone also has bad days and that we don't deserve to be judged by them.

Well... if I could "drop" one day from this trip, or at least a morning it would be this one.

I'm over it.

After the squalls of last night, I woke to a grey, cool dawn with black clouds on all points of the compass. To say I'm getting frustrated with this weather is an understatement. It's not only because the squalls are so unpredictable, difficult to sail in and pose gear failure risk, but because once they've passed, all the wind for miles around has been sucked up by the cell so any "forecast" winds are nowhere to be seen and all that remains are inconsistent puffs that veer through 30 degrees making for very challenging sailing with constant adjustments required for any forward momentum. Sailing in these conditions is both physically and mentally draining and after the previous night's lack of sleep, on top of weeks of sleep deprivation and all the issues my motivation levels are at their lowest of the trip this morning.

I remind myself of the principles of impermanence and my rational brain does its best to convince my more emotional side that this too shall pass, but the dark clouds I see on the horizon each day

have crept into my being and a few stern words aren't going to shake them. I just accept that this is a bad day and that its to be expected after the past 10 days or so and I get to the distraction of my chores.

While doing my regular inspections, I notice the coolant for the main engine was very low, almost empty in fact. Thankfully, I brought plenty of spare coolant and top it up to the appropriate level, but it reminds me how dependent I am on various pieces of technology out here and that they require constant care and attention if they're going to get me all the way to Cairns. I commit to checking the engine bay twice a day to make sure the coolant levels as well as oil, fan belt and all other items are in good shape.

Try as I might to keep to an HK time zone to remain connected to the boys, for some strange reason and at different times throughout the day, all my devices from my iPhone and computer to my watch and the ship's electronics, decided to switch to Australian Eastern Standard Time (AEST) or two hours ahead of HK. It certainly made practical sense as I'm now more east than Cairns and will be further east than Hobart and my parents (where they live) this time tomorrow but it would have been nice to be given a choice.

I was still feeling pretty low after lunch and looking at the weather, it seemed the squalls of the morning had sucked up all the remaining wind for the day as we were almost stationary. I put the engine on and decide to watch a movie and at least have a laugh. It turned out to be a good plan. I'd forgotten how funny Hangover 2 is and it provided the perfect distraction from the weather and the poor sailing conditions and my heart felt a good deal lighter afterwards. So much so I decided to watch Entourage the movie while eating dinner as there was now no wind at all and no way I was able to sail.

Entourage was another good choice and I felt much better than I did in the morning. I think I just went into a downward spiral thinking about the weather, lack of momentum and gear issues so pulling my head out of that unhealthy cycle was the right move.

The moon is now rising later and later each night, meaning I can enjoy the full gambit of stars in the night sky, accompanied by the sparkling phosphorescence in my bow wave as I cruise through the water before the moon arrives. There really are two-night skies out here. When the moon hasn't risen there's so much to see, so I lay on the deck for hours listening to music and gazing into the infinite. The ocean is completely flat by now and the boat is cruising along under motor, almost floating on a cloud it's so smooth. It feels like I'm in outer space, floating in zero gravity, no friction, no breeze, just nothingness.

I watch the Southern Cross, which is now getting higher in the night sky as I head further south and am surprised by how much its position has changed since I first saw it about 10 days ago. My overall consistency has, it turns out, been quite good and I'm making solid progress each day, even though at times it doesn't feel like it.

I remind myself its ok to have a bad day.

Staring into the night, into the nothingness, I find a wonder and a joy that's been missing for a few days now and I smile to myself, knowingly, at the impermanence of it all.

Postscript:

@Nick Hunter

Thank you, Uncle Nick. Your words mean a great deal.

I'm so happy these posts are bringing you joy and that you're able to join me on this journey. Isn't it interesting how a trip whose genesis started with a desire to detach from the world and find solitude could result in feeling more connected to my family than at any time in my 44 years?

Funny how things work out.

Much Love,

Rory

@Alan Doran

Mum and Dad often speak fondly of you and Sharyn, so I certainly remember you both. I'm so thrilled you're enjoying my posts and my wee adventure. Hope to see you at Mum and Dad's when I get back to Australia.

@Eileen O'Farrell

I hear you about the language of sailing and that for any novice, just learning the lingo can be tall order. Hopefully these posts aren't too jargonistic...

The mention of Gauloises brought a smile to my face. I think I'll term these "Gauloises Moments" going forward.

@Wilso

Don't worry brother, I'm all OK 😊

## Day 25 – Sleep, finally

Sometimes you just gotta do what you gotta do. Last night I needed to whatever it took to get some restful sleep. The engine was on due to lack of wind, which made for a smooth ride. I put my ear plugs in for the first time and my eye mask on. I had already tested the alarms with the ear plugs in to make sure I could hear them, and I could, though not as easily. While I wouldn't normally use ear plugs when sailing on my own because of the risk of not waking up when you need to, I felt the impact of not getting some sleep was a greater risk so decided to just do it. To hell with the risk. I. Needed. Sleep.

And sleep I got. Certainly not the blissful 8hrs in a quiet bedroom I would have liked, but it was enough to keep me going and I was grateful.

The morning was grey and cool, but I felt more rested, at least a little more energised than in previous days so I was ready to take on another battle with the weather.

While it rained and the wind was about 20 knts, it wasn't too intense and didn't last long so come late morning, the wind was all gone, and the seas calm and we were under engine.

With the boat flat and seas calm, I filled up the fuel tank and did lots of fuel calculations and analysis. The calm airs of the doldrums are looking to be much larger than anticipated, which means more motoring. I work out how much fuel I want to have remaining at key points along the way as a means of both rationing and ensuring I don't use too much too early and mark these both in my log and on my electronic charts as waypoints. While it'll be a stretch with my fuel reserves if the doldrums are as bad as expected, I'll be OK and feel very grateful I built so much redundancy into my planning, esp. fuel storage. No matter what, I'll also have one x 20L jerry can of diesel that's simply not touched under anything but extreme circumstances, so I also have an emergency supply and final layer of redundancy.

My relationship with food is changing. I find myself licking the bowl no matter what I eat to ensure nothing is wasted. I'm grateful for everything I eat and look back at the waste I was guilty of a month ago. With so much access to food in many economies, a level of complacency has crept into so many of us and we take the unimaginable choices available to us for granted, and in so doing, we've lost the ability to truly taste the life-giving nutrients in front of us. They're just valueless calories and we can have as much as we want when we want, leading to most people carrying more weight than they need to. Out here I'm so appreciative of the food I have available and I'm really enjoying renewing my relationship with the fuel I need to survive.

I watch the sunset while eating my dinner of fried potatoes, onions, carrots and spam with a side of baked beans, which was actually really good, and say goodbye to my second last day in the northern hemisphere. After a while I rise to go downstairs and do the washing up and off to the east, I see a ginormous rainbow. Possibly the thickest I've ever seen and full of colour radiating from the last of the sun's rays. Behind this however lay dark, ominous storm clouds. They're right in front of me and my direction of travel and cover the majority of the eastern horizon. Where did they sneak up from, I wonder? And seriously, can't I just have one 24-hour period without a squall? You must be getting sick of reading about squalls, dear Reader. I know I'm getting sick of writing about them! Each one is different and this one brought with it a tremendous amount of rain and gusts of 30knts but thankfully it blew itself out by around 11pm, so I was able to get a relatively decent sleep without having to constantly get up. The thumping of the engine reassuringly present.



Postscript:

@Tracey garden

You know I used to sail on Monikie Pond when I lived at Grannies? I loved it, though the water was a little chilly...

Hopefully I'm able to sail to the Ferry one day and I'll take you up on the Bingo offer x

@Jo

Thanks Jo! I'll try and keep the jargon to a minimum 😊

@Eileen O'Farrell

Some great tips on giving the gooseneck some redundancy. So far its holding well, but I'll take a look at putting in place a temporary connection using lines once I get to the doldrums.

@Marc Castagnet

You're right brother, the path to change is never easy, but hopefully worth it. Will be sure to look after myself in the coming days.

## Day 26 – Crossing the Equator

Today was a day I'd been looking forward to for some time. At some point, depending on wind speed, direction and my course I'd be crossing the equator. For those who have been following my journey the past few weeks, you'd know that just getting here was a challenge and that crossing into the Southern Hemisphere means respite from the risk of typhoon (now zero) and a dramatic reduction in the seemingly relentless monsoonal squalls. The Southern Hemisphere tropics are in the stable "dry season" phase, so once I'm in the Southern Lats I'll be in a very different weather system and I should have a much calmer, safer ride. I'll also be leaving the North Pacific and crossing into the South Pacific Ocean which, given I've been sailing across the North West Pacific for 3 weeks, only amplifies the unimaginable scale of this majestic body of water.

Crossing the equator is also a serious rite of passage for not just sailors, but mariners of all kinds. For centuries Navies, merchant vessels and sailors of all walks of life have conducted Line Crossing Ceremonies when crossing the equator. King Neptune and his trusty Trident come out to welcome these new recruits into this esteemed club. Many of the ceremonies were more hazing than celebration though, so I'm quite happy for my initiation to be marked with a cold bottle of champagne rather than some humiliating ritual.

But mostly, for me at least, crossing the equator marks my entering home waters. I may still have a long way to go, but once I'm in the Southern Hemisphere I'll be in the "home stretch" of the journey and my sense is the darker moods of the past few days will float away once I know it's all "downhill" to go.

I spent the afternoon dealing with headaches from back home, which is never easy with a sleep deprived mind. It's almost like the Northern Hemisphere doesn't want to let me go easily before I'm released into the safety of the South, but I'm also glad to be dealing with it before I cross so I can leave the energy behind.

By mid-afternoon I still have 40Nm to go before I cross the equator if I follow the rhumbline to my way point which puts me crossing at something like 3am which doesn't feel like much fun. I decide to make a run for it and head due south so I can cross at a more, ahem respectable hour. I turn on the fridge and put the champagne in the freezer.

As I bear away from the wind, I'm reminded just how much easier it is to reach. Our boat speed jumps from 4knts to 7knts (gooseneck is holding, and I've shaken the third reef out), we're flatter and far steadier and sailing becomes that much more enjoyable. It also helps to highlight just how much work it's been sailing hard on the wind for thousands of miles to get here. I have almost 500Nm to go before I can expect to be off the wind, so I enjoy my few hours reaching and the blissful ease that each mile comes with.

As the sun sets, the sky around me is calm with very light cloud and there's no sign of any storm activity. While I know it doesn't work this way, it's almost like the monsoonal wet season weather has abruptly ended now we're less than 1 degree from the equator and all that's ahead of me is the stillness of the Southern Hemisphere's dry season. My mood lifts with each mile south and my confidence, which has taken a hit with the relentless battering starts to come back too.

I smile.

I constantly watch my iPhone and the iNavX app I use for navigation to see how much farther until we're across, watching the compass Minutes and Seconds slowly tick down. Its night-time by this stage and for the first time I take down both the bimini and the dodger so the full canopy of stars can reveal itself. It's so calm. So beautiful. I want this moment to be special. One I can fondly revisit many times in the years ahead. I breath in and taste each inhalation. Each minute. Each second.

Taking it all in.

With less than 1 minute to go (which is the equivalent to 1Nm) I get the Champagne ready and the countdown begins.

20:48 - 0degrees 00''000'n

I snap a screen grab of the coordinates and pop the cork. While there's no discernible change in the ocean, there is in me. I swell with pride. With elation. And I tear up just a little. We did it. After almost 4 weeks of hard sailing, Ahyoka and I are in the Southern Hemisphere and I couldn't be happier.

Scrapping my idea to share a glass with Ahyoka and King Neptune, I decide to have three glasses tonight and then the rest of the bottle at sunset tomorrow to “maximise” the celebrations. And how do I seal the bottle, so it’ll still be fresh? That’s right dear Reader, with Duct Tape.

I speak to Mum and Dad, who may just be more relieved than anyone now I’m in the safety of the South along with various friends. While this is a deeply personal moment and one I’m quite happy to be doing alone, it also helps to share the news and the moment with those I love and to thank them for all their support in getting here.

By my third glass, I’m not sure if it’s the champagne, my buddy Geoff’s special care package for this moment or the euphoria of crossing the equator but the night sky has never looked so beautiful. There are shooting stars everywhere and the Milky Way is radiating with light and colour. I take the shooting stars as messages of welcome and congratulations from King Neptune and, if I squint my eyes just a little, I think can even see his trident in a constellation just off my bow. As I drift in and out of sleep under this spectacular blanket of stars, I thank Neptune for letting me cross the threshold in such a memorable and magical setting and wish him a good night. We made it. My heart swells with the emotion of it all.

Postscript:

@Gavin Garden  
Hi Uncle Gavin!

So wonderful to know you and Jacqui are following along. Hope all is well with you both in Bonnie Dundee.

Give Jacqui and big hug from me.

Much Love,

Rory

@Nitesh Jain  
Thanks Brother!

@Eileen O’Farrell  
Moment relished. Well and truly 😊

@Alexia Silver  
OMG Lexi – so great to hear from you!

You know I haven’t thought about that wonderful book for almost 20 years. I’m going to revisit it when I get back as I recall how much my younger self loved it.

See you on the harbour or the CYCA in a few months.

## Day 27 – A warm welcome from my Spirit Guide

The light this morning seemed different. Clearer. Full of colours. Dazzling, almost. It was a contrast of blues and yellows that I'd always imagined seeing in the Pacific, but which was missing the past few weeks when the predominant theme was a spectrum of grey. There were a few cotton ball-esque clouds on the horizon, but otherwise the sky was a clear and soothing shade of blue, contrasting with the deep, deep blue of the ocean.

Simply put, it was a beautiful morning.

I slept well and felt rested physically in the morning, though as my nervous system has been on overload the past few weeks, I could feel the emotional fatigue that is starting to have the confidence to show itself. What I need in the coming days is plenty of mental rest to allow my system to regain some balance and ensure my cognitive abilities recover in time for the Coral Sea crossing in 8-10 day's time. The winds for the Coral Sea leg are forecast to be 20-30knts so this is the time to recuperate and reenergise and get the boat repaired so I can be ready for the final blast home.

Heeding this sensible advice, after my chores I spend the morning reading, captivated by the humour and the prose of a Gentleman In Moscow. It's the story of a Russian aristocrat sentenced to spend the rest of his life in the Metropole Hotel in Moscow in the early days of the Soviet Union. I relate to how one's life transforms when their living area becomes significantly reduced. Rather than finding this suffocating and depressing though, the book shows how this can be an exercise in becoming acquainted with the beauty of the minutia and the hidden worlds we overlook when our horizons are vast and options endless. The humility and grace the protagonist accepts his new circumstances with is uplifting and it's a lesson in how to live in the world we're given and to enjoy all it has to offer, as opposed to constantly hoping for a world that's unattainable and being forever disappointed.

Just as I giggle at yet another wonderful series of sentences, I hear a splash. I immediately look up and I see a large dark creature mid-air. My first thought is that it's a seal, but then I put that thought to bed quickly, realising that we're far too far from land for it to be a seal. Just as I realise it can't be a seal, I see another jump and the unmistakable site that it's a pod of dolphins. They're making a beeline for Ahyoka and I and seem to be jumping with joy at the site of us, not dissimilar to the greeting your dog gives you when you've been away for a long time. The pure joy at knowing you're home and that they have company again. It was certainly a joy I immediately felt. I've been alone for weeks now and didn't realise how much I craved contact with another living soul. That was until these beautiful dolphins came smiling into my morning. I grab my camera (yes, it's all on film – yay!!) and shout in pure joy the warmest of welcomes, tears streaming down my cheeks. As they come alongside the boat, their smiling faces looking up at me I realise they're the ones giving the welcome though. Amazingly, they're welcoming me to the Southern Hemisphere. After weeks of absence, my Spirit Guide is back and I'm in awe.

We make our way to the bow where my dear friends surf the bow wave, constantly looking up, our smiling eyes meeting as they jump out of the water and our souls connecting at the deepest of levels. The whole scene lasts only about 5 minutes, but it will last a lifetime in my heart.

As I wave goodbye to my dear friends, I'm reminded by something my mum said to me a few days ago. "Just keep hope alive. Sometimes the most unexpected thing happens when you least expect it." And she was right. Sometimes the most unexpected things do happen when you least expect them. I was just welcomed to the Southern Hemisphere in the kindest, most beautiful way imaginable by my Spirit Guide and his family. What an experience.

Someone is certainly looking after me out here. It doesn't matter what name they're given, I felt it this morning. It may have been mysterious, but it was real, and I feel blessed.

My cup, as they say in the movies (and the bible), runneth over.

Postscript:

@James

Thanks Buddy. I can't see land yet, but knowing PNG is only about 30Nm south feels good. Given PNG is also one of the most dangerous places on the planet it's more a "curious" good than a "comforting" good though.

@Eileen O'Farrell

High fives to my fellow Shellback! Nice to join the club 😊

## Day 28 – The Doldrums

I was warned about the doldrums. The tropical convergence zone where the wind goes to die. I don't think anyone who spoke to me about the doldrums referred to them fondly, so I was surprised by how happy I was to be greeted by absolutely zero wind this morning. For me, the doldrums will give me some much-needed rest and I was thrilled to be here.

First up I got to work on sorting out both the boat and myself.

I cleaned everything inside and out (including scrubbing the toilet), did my washing, aired the bedding and opened all the windows to give the boat a good freshening up too.

I also did various small repairs. Nothing major, but things that with more wear and tear could turn into major breakages down the track. My plan for tomorrow (if it's this calm) is to pull the sails down and get out the sewing kit as there are a few more areas that need patching (not to mention my tear) along with a long list of repairs.

I've been sailing constantly for four weeks now, so even small amounts of friction over such a long period can run through a line, a sheet or a halyard, which is why regular inspections are so crucial. If picked up early, the friction point can easily be moved and there's no issue. It's all about having a keen eye and picking things up early before they become problems. In the hotel business we call it preventive maintenance. Out here its more akin to survival.

I also did a detailed inventory on my remaining fuel and further analysis on fuel consumption given the forecast for light airs the coming week.

Thankfully things are still in good shape:

- 200L in tank (full)
- 7.25 Jerry Cans = 145L
- 1 x reserve can = 20L
- Total 365L which gives me a good 4 days motoring through the doldrums if needed with enough (100L) to get me to Cairns (both power generation and motoring into the marina) not including the reserve

It's remarkable how flat the seas are today. They're so flat that when you're looking forwards it feels like the boat is stationary as there's no discernible movement. No passing waves. No benchmark to show you're going past anything. Its only when you look back and see the wake you realise you're not stopped. For a moment your brain has a little "wobble" while it tries to compute what it's seeing. It's all a little disorienting to be honest but also kind of fascinating how dependent we are on known "cues" for computing what's going on around us, without which the brain struggles to know what's happening.

With the seas so flat the horizon is even closer, probably less than 3Nm as there are no waves or anything at all in the distance to hint at a further point. It almost feels like the ocean is folding in on itself. I try and recall the formula for measuring the distance of the horizon and am fairly sure it's the square root of your height (in feet) times 1.2m but I'm not sure if/how that accounts for a completely flat sea.

Another interesting result of zero waves or ripples on the water meant the reflections of the sky and the clouds were like artwork. The main body of art in the sky still while the copy on the oil like water, shape shifting with the swell but still an almost perfect facsimile. I try to capture it on film as its unlike anything I've seen before, so hopefully it comes out – keep an eye out for my doco once I land in Cairns and get a chance to edit all this footage I'm getting too. 😊

My nightly routine now is to star gaze for hours before falling asleep on deck as the boat and seas are so calm. I realise how much I'll miss this when I'm back on land and commit to spending as much time gazing into the night sky as I can in the days (or nights) ahead.

Postscript:

@James

Thanks Wilso!! Yes, Gill and Hazza were thrilled. Nice how involved they've been with the whole journey

@Jamie McWilliam

Thank you sir! Another 16deg south to go 😊

@Eileen O'Farrell

Many thanks Eileen. I promise I'll make it up to Neptune and Ahyoka when my fridge is a little less bare.

@Meeta Ashit

Thanks Ashit!! Big shout out to Living group 7B

@JoAnne LaBounty

Thank you JoAnne. That's very sweet of you to say that.

Ahyoka is a Beneteau Oceanis 43' built in 2008. She's definitely not a blue water boat, hence why I've had all the gear failure issues but hey, all things considered she's doing just fine.

@Aisha

Thanks dear Aisha.

@Douglas Farrell

Thanks Dougie. As I watch the night sky out here I often I think about the time we hiked around the entire coast of Stuart Island, which has equally epic star gazing. Such a great memory.

@Innes & Sue Garden

Thanks so much Uncle Innes. I hope there wasn't any hazing for your both when you crossed ;)

Give Sue a big hug from me and thrilled you're both following along.

Love Rory

@Fergus Gibb

I'm so happy you're following my journey Uncle Fergus! I can't believe the last time I saw you was at Monikie, all those years ago. They're still some of my fondest memories.

Much love,

Rory

@Amit Kalyani

Thanks brother!! Thrilled you're able to join me on this adventure.

## Day 29 – Helloooo PNG!

The breeze freshened after breakfast and by 9am was blowing a constant 20knts, you guessed it, exactly from where I wanted to go. A localised weather system it seems and certainly unexpected after the previous days calm airs. I reefed the sails and bore away and sailed towards my first Papua New Guinea islands. After so many weeks of blue, upon seeing these densely forested islands, what struck me first was simply the amount of green I was able to take in. So many shades of this beautiful colour in these densely forested remote islands. So full of mystery and intrigue.

It reminded me of my early days in Cambodia, almost 15 years ago when we would explore the islands and beaches. So many beaches. Naming each one (some of which have lasted and entered common use) and having the entire place to ourselves. Such a special, magical time.

I pass an island called Lihir Island, where I can see a large open cut mine. It seems like a fairly significant operation with some delightful looking housing on a cliff overlooking the water. I wonder who lives there?

This is my first time seeing a human settlement in a month so I decide to sail up close so I could feel as connected as possible to these people, whoever they are. I learn later that it's a gold mine which has a somewhat controversial back story including a piece on ABC's foreign correspondent, which I look forward to watching when I get home.

Looking through my binoculars, I was eager to soak in all I could see of the human activity in front of me and I imagined what sort of people worked here, what their lives were like and how often they went home to see their families. My sense was my imaginings were far more romantic and interesting than the reality, but hey, when you're on your own in the middle of the ocean, your imagination is an important ally so no need to curb its enthusiasm. At least not until I get back to terra firma.

There was even mobile phone coverage on the island, though thankfully I had my global roaming turned off for this very real possibility. Whatever is waiting for me online can wait another 10-14 days. If it's important information it'll work out how to find me, the rest is simply not welcome on this journey of mine and would defeat its entire purpose.

In the stronger winds my gooseneck repairs aren't holding very well, and I need to head to the mast and hammer the pin back in. I work out plans to fabricate a steel plate to go under the connection to stop the pin from dropping but before I can get to work on this, I stub my toe on the way back to the cockpit. It's the second smallest toe on my left foot so certainly not an important one, but it's still painful, nonetheless.



A few hours later, once the wind settles down a little and I can take stock, I look down and see my toe is a mottled purple and blue. When I take a good look at it I realise its actually quite sore and is either broken or very badly bruised. I break out one of my ice packs (which don't need refrigeration) and follow the RICE principle: Rest. Ice. Compression. Elevation.

I tape the toe to his larger buddy next door and lay down in the cockpit with my foot elevated and accept that I've done some decent damage and that it really needs some rest. I guess the gooseneck repairs will just need to wait to tomorrow, though I'm worried about that pin falling out.

It's certainly never a dull moment out here.

I take some Panadol and Neurofen and spend the afternoon reading. The ice and the elevation take much of the pain away, though I can tell I've done some harm.

I watch Forest Gump under the stars and sleep on deck so I can keep a constant eye out for fishing vessels and to ensure I stay on course and away from any islands/reefs, though I don't get much rest as I'm constantly worried about the risks of land. I just hope I can get some better rest tomorrow.

Postscript:

@Henrik Naujoks  
Many thanks Henrik!

@Steve Rich  
Thanks Steve! We'll just have to go for a Surf Ski when you're in Sydney next.

@Athol & Liz  
Hi Uncle Athol,

So wonderful that you and Liz are enjoying the journey and the blog and that I'm able to be a part of the "ladies that golf" lunchtime conversation.

Hope you're both well.

Much love,

Rory

@Jonathan Rake  
Enjoying it very much thanks Rakes!

Maybe you should jump on the roof one night with Gems. I'm sure you'd be able see a few stars...

## Day 30 – “Watch” fatigue

Because I'm navigating near land and have various islands and the risk of fishing boats and nets with no AIS nearby, I haven't slept longer than 30 minute stretches the past 2 nights and am feeling the effects. When you're on the open ocean, as long as the weather is OK, you can almost always find sleep, as the risks of hitting something are incredibly remote (unless you come across a wayward bouy or underwater volcano of course). As soon as you get near land the risks increase by significant orders of magnitude and its these times when I really wish I had someone to share the watch duties with as, call me crazy, but I'd chose sleep deprivation over running aground any day if the week. The results though are tiredness, poor cognition, low mood and depleted energy so it's not something you want to be doing for long stretches of time. Thankfully, I'll be heading into more open waters later today so I know that by this time tomorrow I should be back to my usual self.

As well as being tired, my toe was sore this morning and as the wind was still on the nose, I felt quite frustrated. I decide to have a mid-morning nap on deck at 9am so I can recalibrate. I close my eyes and was asleep in minutes. I really am very tired and sleep of any kind or duration is extremely welcome. I manage to get a solid hour in, which is enough to get me going and I feel all the better for it. It's remarkable how different the world looks through a well-rested lens, or even a partially rested one.

My companion for the day is the north western section of New Ireland, a large mountainous, rugged and heavily forested island on PNG's western border. It's a spectacular land mass and I take great joy in exploring it with my eyes as we slowly pass by. I wonder what sort of tribes live there (if any). What their practices are and how often they interact with “modern” society. Such a contrast to the world I left behind in Hong Kong. I mentioned to Naryth (my oldest son) about the history of head hunting and even cannibalism in PNG when we spoke a few nights ago and it may have been a bit of a “dad failure” as he immediately jumped to the idea I was sailing past zombies and he told me it was way too risky and that I should stay away from land. Well... I can safely report that, so far at least, New Ireland is Zombie free. Let's hope the rest of PNG I'll be passing is too.

As I reach the western tip of New Ireland, I start heading due south and will be for days now. It feels good after hunting east for so long to be on a different compass bearing. Even just the change in where the sun rises and sets in relation to the boat is a welcome change, though I'll have to relearn where the primo shaded spots are at different times of the day as I'd had this well and truly sorted after a month on the same bearing.

I spend the afternoon working on my repairs to the gooseneck as the initial system I put in place to stop the pin from falling out is just not working and given the wind strength forecast for the Coral Sea (20-30knts) in a few day's time, it's imperative I have a more permanent solution in place well beforehand. What's needed is a steel base plate under the frame (and therefore the

pin), that's supported from above to counter any downward pressure from the pin wanting to escape the housing.

I spent the last few days looking through everything I have on the boat and think I've got a workable solution. The "plate" will be the remains of a steel cheese grater/knife (like a small, fancy spatula). Under this I've made a cross out of two backing plates from unused clip on points as a brace to push against the pin with both pieces held together with wire. I then connect dyneema to a shackle which goes under the plate and brace and then connect the dyneema to a spare halyard. Before I take up the tension on the halyard, I put another loop of dyneema around the shackle, perpendicular to the halyard around the mast. Once it's tightened the plate is firmly in place. All that's left is to put the halyard on the winch and then grind away (but not so much I pull the entire gooseneck off the mast). It's certainly not pretty, but it's solid and I think it'll hold, or at least I bloody well hope so.

@Sara Sutton

Many thanks Sara! Having a good couple of "smooth" days before I tackle Jomard Passage and surrounding islands then hit the Coral Sea.

@Eileen O'Farrell

I'd have gladly welcomed you on board to help with a watch today Eileen!

Thanks for confirming the math too on distance to horizon and yes, I've got a "palm" on board so am all ready to earn my sail maker stripes tomorrow.

@Sherry Pedersen

So lovely to hear from you Sherry!

Looking forward to catching up when I'm back on land.

## Day 31 – Fish on

I awoke feeling stronger and more energised than I had in days, thanks to my saviour, sleep. Sweet, restful, wonderful sleep. It's almost as good as breathing.

Price, according to my business school professors is a function of "value" and "scarcity". For example, oxygen is immensely valuable but not scarce, hence its price is zero. Right now, the scarcity of sleep is so great, that I'd be prepared to pay a high price (in dollars that is, not at the expense of safety, which is even more valuable) for even a few hours and am counting the moments till I arrive in Cairns and can sleep, sleep, sleep.

The morning skies are grey, and the forecast is for rain. It's even a little chilly. What happened to being in the southern hemisphere dry season...? This is definitely not what I was dreaming about a week ago when I was in the northern lats. I even thought I'd have a calm day with wind and

seas, but the swell is 1.5m and its blowing 7-9knts TWS, that's right, dead on the nose. I'm getting fairly good at simply accepting my circumstances though and happily get on with my routine.

My focus is now well and truly on the final leg of the trip across the Coral Sea in a few day's time. With challenging conditions forecast, it feels a little like the Coral Sea leg will be like the final, strenuous "pitch" to climb before I reach the "summit" of Cairns. As such, I'm completely focussed on getting the boat in the best shape possible as well as my life on board in order so I'm psychologically prepared and feeling strong.

I enjoy organising things and get to work on listing everything required to be done. By mid-morning my "to do" list grows, and I feel confident that with a couple of busy days, Ahyoka and I will be ready. I know that when I enter the Coral Sea from Jomard Passage it will be a heady mix of nerves and excitement, but I put the thought aside as there's a lot to do between now and then.

In fact, I don't think I've updated you on my revised passage plan dear Reader. Rather than heading SE towards Rossel Island, as you can probably see, I've been heading due south towards a series of islands which have a channel that culminates at Jomard Passage. The wind angles forecast to get there are much better (i.e. easier) than Rossel Island in the coming days. It also shaves about 100Nm off the journey, though it does tighten the wind angles when I enter the Coral Sea and the winds pick up. To counter this, I'm planning on heading due South when I enter the Coral Sea (CS) on the first day (if possible) as the wind isn't too strong until the 24<sup>th</sup> when the pressure picks up above 30knts. The idea being that I'll have TWA of >110 degrees for the final 3 days which should make the conditions bearable (albeit rough).

For the sailing nerds amongst you, below is my revised navigation plan:

Jomard Passage Route:

Mark	Latitude	Longitude	Bearing (°T)	Variation	Range (nm)
Madau Island (NW)	08 56 00s	152 19 00e	198	7°e	289
Lunn Island (E)	10 47 00s	152 8 00e	186	7.2°e	112
Jomard Passage (N)	11 13 80s	152 9 70e	176	7.3°e	27
Jomard Passage (S)	11 16 70s	152 9 90e	176	7.3°e	3
Grafton Passage (NE)	16 38 147s	146 12 891e	226	6.5°e	473

While it took a few hours, I get my sewing repairs to the sails "stitched up", dropping both sails in the process and giving them a good look over. With the repairs complete, I'm confident the rest of the sails are robust enough to withstand the coming week as are their halyards with no visible

chaff points. Sheets are re-run and retied. Blocks checked and a few replaced (and all silicone sprayed). The preventer was also rerun, and I've made new reef ties from my remaining bungy, so the third reef (which is what I'll use on the CS) is well contained. I'm also really happy with the gooseneck repairs and am feeling far less anxious about this than I have previously.

My current ETA for reaching Cairns is sometime late Friday 26<sup>th</sup> June. With timings now somewhat firm, I get in touch with the good folks at Australian Border Force so they're aware of my impending arrival as well as Marlin Marina where I'll be mooring Ahyoka and the Shangri-La Hotel to book a room for me. It feels rather final doing these tasks and highlights that my great adventure is now well and truly on the homeward stretch.

Late in the afternoon I have a little lay down on deck after the day's work but after only 5 minutes, I hear the buzz of the fishing line take off. I jump up and immediately tighten the drag. It's clearly a decent size fish as the reel is spinning like mad. I try not to get too excited and work through the "safety protocol" I've developed when reeling in fish as my big worry is I get so excited I forget to put my harness on and clip in and in the moment fall out the back of the boat given the lifelines need to be let off to bring in a fish.

Once I'm secure, I start reeling in what is clearly a large, strong fish. He puts up a valiant fight and it takes a good 20 minutes to get him close to the boat after successive runs. When the fish is about 20m away I see the unmistakable silver and blue flash of a tuna, just under a meter in length.

It's a beautiful animal. Majestic even.

I find myself gripped in an emotional and moral dichotomy. Does it deserve to die? I have enough food on board so it's not crucial that I take its life. Everything happens so fast though. I need to move quickly and reflexively grab the gaff and haul the fish in.

Tuna need to be bled straight away so I grab the filleting knife and slit its gills. The transom immediately turns scarlet and I push aside my internal uncertainty about taking a life. I robotically fillet the fish and focus on the process of harvesting its meat. It's a messy job and the boat and I are filthy at the end of it, but we have food. Lots of it. Too much even. I can't eat all this, even if I try really hard.

Did I just take a life for sport?

I thought I would have felt elated after catching my first fish of the trip, but after being so removed from life of any kind for a month, I'm devastated that I killed the first soul to enter the boat.

I feel ashamed and saddened by my actions.

I have tuna for dinner, but it's a joyless meal. I'm alone, on deck. The sky is grey. There's no sunset and the air is chilled.

I put my rod away, downstairs.

In the dark, I reflect on the choices we make and try and reconcile my actions.

Knowing I don't have any answers, I decide to go to bed early at 7:30pm as this is the last night I'll get to sleep properly before Cairns. I wonder how tired I'll be when I arrive?

I also wonder if I'll have changed. I've never felt like this about killing a fish before. Will there be other unexpected changes...?

I guess I'll find out in time. For now, I focus on the basics, sleep.

Sleep.

Postscript:

@Donald Hunter

Hey thanks Uncle Donald! I'll be sure to keep an eye out. Would be very special to see an eclipse out here, though I'll be sure to keep an eye out for any WW2 mines 😊

@Gaurav Anand

Thanks so much brother! Wonderful that you're enjoying the journey.

@Marie-Clare Elder

Well MC... head and shoulders above all else would be sleep. I really, really miss the deep, restful, uninterrupted sleep that comes from laying in a clean, still and quiet bed.

Next up would be having someone to talk to, in particular to laugh with. I really miss laughing as other than listening to 12<sup>th</sup> Man today, there hasn't been a lot of humour out here and laughter is such a tonic for the soul, particularly when its shared.

In third place it would be a tie between stability and a shower. The boat is constantly moving, and I'm being thrown about the place, so I really look forward to having a solid, flat world under my feet, so I don't always have to think about where to hold on to, so I don't fall over. That and being clean. I feel like I'm constantly covered in sweat and grime out here so that first, warm shower is going to feel like heaven.

@Eileen O'Farrell

Sounds like a terrific use of a muffin tray!

I'll do my best to get back in time for your zoom but at this stage my ETA in Cairns is late 26<sup>th</sup> ETA – hopefully in time before the pub closes.

Give my love to the ladies and enjoy the Sun!

Oh, and the toe is healing well and I'm much nimbler than a few days ago which is reassuring.

## Day 32 – Final Prep

There are many “non-calendar” ways for knowing you've been at sea (and away from the internet) for a month. The length of your beard. The number on your daily food bag. Your morning video diary entry number. Or... the fact Spotify ever so kindly tells you to connect to the internet so it can verify your premium membership. What the...? All my playlists, music and podcasts are now shut off.

ARGHHH.

Now that was unexpected and unplanned.

After a moment's panic, I realise I have a little music on my iPhone and scroll through to see if there's anything worth playing as it's been years since I've used iTunes. Hidden amongst the Wiggles and Hi-5, I come across some decent music and something else I hadn't heard in eons, The 12<sup>th</sup> Man from 1989. It's a cricket satire from my youth, which any cricket tragic will know all too well. I put it on and was immediately in hysterics. It was the sort of laughter that emanates from your belly and crescendos in tears cascading down your cheeks. I revel in the humour.

I also revel in the childhood memories it brings up. I was (and still am) a huge fan of cricket and growing up my heroes were Alan Border, Merv Hughes and David Boon amongst others. It brought up so many great memories of school yard (and backyard) cricket games where we'd pretend we were the great players we watched on TV and looked up to so much. I remembered the smell of freshly cut grass, the hot summer sun and laughing with best mates. The sort of mates you can only have when you're 13 years old. My time at school. Learning to become a man. And Laughter. Lots of laughter. Mine was a good childhood.

Being the father of boys, it made me realise the importance of childhood heroes and how hard it is to find them when you're an expat. You're removed from your own culture and role models and it's hard, even impossible to connect at the same level with local equivalents. Certainly, in places like Hong Kong or Cambodia there are no sporting heroes for my boys to look up to. Global icons like Ronaldo and Messi fill the void, but I'm not sure it's the same. I resolve to take my boys to the cricket when they get to Australia and hope they grow to love the game as much as me. How fun to think of all these new experiences we'll be able to share together once I'm home.

I spend the day sailing through various archipelagos, comprised of small islands and atolls and once again I'm disappointed I can't stop. That's one of the biggest changes I'll make to the next trip I do. I'll stop along the way and get to know these wonderfully fascinating places (and the people who live there) that can only be reached by boat. I've now sailed over 3600Nm and it seems like such a shame to not be able to explore these inordinately remote lands. I know I'm not legally allowed to stop, so it's a false narrative to even entertain, but still, one can dream right?

One thing I notice in these archipelagos is there are more flying fish than I've ever seen. Generally, you'll see one or two fish take off in unison when you pass by, but today I saw countless schools (or should it be flocks – not sure which is the more appropriate collective noun) take off in front of me and fly into the distance. Some of them comprised hundreds of fish and it was quite a site to see.

In the evening I watch a movie called *The Mercy*. It's the story of Donald Crowhurst who is a participant in the Golden Globe Race in 1968 for the first person to circumnavigate the world solo, non-stop. The same race Moitissier (who I was reading earlier in the trip) raced in alongside another hero of mine, Sir Robin Knox-Johnson. The story of Crowhurst is a tragic one so I wanted to wait until the end of the trip to watch it. I waited until I knew I would make it home. He ultimately goes mad and kills himself, but what I find so sad, but also fascinating is how easily this could have been averted. How his dreams were usurped by others and a metaphorical gun put to his head by unscrupulous financiers. It's the children he leaves behind that touches me the most and I think of my own boys and how much I can't wait to give them a big cuddle.

The first I learned of Crowhurst's story was when Mel and I were having dinner on the beach at Song Saa with the actor who played Crowhurst and his family a number of years ago. Naryth was playing with their kids in the sand while we talked of sailing and adventure over a nice bottle of wine. Colin learned to sail at Song Saa before filming started so it's a movie I've always wanted to see, though I could never have imagined at the time that I'd be doing my own solo adventure in the not too distant future.

Solo sailing, as I've learned all too well, is one of the toughest tests for any man or woman to go through as there's nowhere to hide. It's just you, your wits and your fortitude against nature. The brightest of spotlights is shined on your soul in a way that's impossible to do on land. There's nowhere to escape and all your weaknesses, foibles and deficiencies are laid bare. Success is survival. There's no trophy. No recognition. Just the knowledge deep down of whether or not you had what it took and what was needed when it counted.

I have 5 days to go till I get to Cairns. 5 more days of tests, spotlights and challenges. Perhaps some of the biggest of the trip. The greatest reward will be stepping on land for the first time. But not simply for having survived, but for having lived. That's the barometer of success I set at the beginning of this adventure and one I hope to have lived up to when I make it home, safely.

There's a long way to go though, so I resolve to continue simply focussing on each small task in front of me and doing the best I can, knowing if I do, the big picture will take care of itself.

@Campbell Mackie

Many thanks for the well wishes Campbell and don't worry about relaxing – between you and me I'm a little nervous about this final leg, particularly if the European model forecasts of gusts of



35knts+ and 4-5m seas mid to late Wednesday eventuate. Seems I'll be book-ending this trip with similar weather to how I started...

Thankfully I'm going through Jomard Passage during the day and will be well out of converging shipping lanes come nightfall.

### Day 33 – Game time

(written from a windy and bumpy Coral Sea)

I awoke with the feeling of butterflies in my stomach. You know the ones you feel before a big game or before you're about to start something challenging, big, or, dare I say, epic?

These nerves, if used well, can be a great tool to ensure your physically and mentally ready for what you're about to embark upon so I harness the energy and get to work on the final items on my lists. I ensure my grab bag has everything in it that's important and add a few extra items. I put a dry bag next to the chart table so I can pack my computers at short notice if needed and basically have everything in place for a worst-case scenario – winds of over 45knts.

I then clean the boat, likely for the last time before Cairns (other than the daily dishes) and do a full inspection. Everything is in order and my gooseneck repair is holding nicely. I run the storm trysail sheet, so it's in place in case it needs to be hoisted (if gooseneck breaks) as well as an outboard block for the jib sheet in case the car breaks and attach the preventer to starboard.

Basically, I'm as ready as I'm ever going to be for when the pressure hits in about 36 hours. I'm grateful I did the bulk of the work in the previous few days as it means I can spend all afternoon enjoying the sail towards Jomard Passage. It's a glorious day with winds at 10-12knts so delightful sailing.

I see what I think is another sailing boat for the first time, but upon closer inspection with my binoculars, it's actually a local outrigger. I almost consider steering closer to say hello, but think better of it and keep a watchful and fascinated eye on them with the binoculars. I assumed they were off fishing, but maybe they were headed to another island for a ceremony? A meeting with a tribal chief? Perhaps a wedding? Or maybe to share some Kava with a nearby tribe... I wonder what they thought of me and the different universes we exist in?

As I get closer to Jomard Passage, the boat traffic increases significantly and I'm very grateful I'm doing this in the daytime. I haven't seen this many boats since Hong Kong and my AIS alarm is constantly going off. There are two channels to the passage and small craft are to take the eastern channel and large vessels the western one, so while I see the boats in the distance, it doesn't make it any more challenging for my own navigation.

The eastern passage is bordered by two exquisite islands, each more beautiful than the other. Like sentinels guarding the way. It reminds me of the that scene in Never Ending Story where Atreyu

passes the huge rock guards as part of his epic adventure. Its 3pm by this stage and the sun has started its journey towards slumber. The colours are enhanced at this time of day and the blues of the water, the greens of the islands and yellows of their beaches, the turquoise of the fringing reefs and oranges of the sunset make for a magical afternoon. I couldn't have imagined a more spectacular transition point into the Coral Sea.

Some passages are nothing more than open water, so you need to use your imagination to demarcate where one sea or ocean stops and the other begins, but not today. Not the entrance to the Coral Sea. Jomard Passage was more beautiful than I could have imagined, and I sat there on deck, keeping constant look out for waves and currents with a huge smile on my face. What a delightful way to start the journey home. Like crossing the equator, I spoke to loved ones and could feel the relief in all our voices that a safe harbour was now only a few days sail away.

Of all the legs in my journey, this is the one I've thought about the least. It always felt so far away. So many other legs had to be completed before I got here. I think one reason I didn't get excited about the Coral Sea was because I didn't want to be let down if I didn't make it for some reason. Now that I'm here, I feel a mixture of elation and anticipation. It's a big, rugged sea in front of me with plenty of challenging sailing to go, but I think of how far I've come. How many challenges I've dealt with and what a ride its been.

As dusk crept in, I stood on the side of the boat and looked ahead. The wind was 18knts and we were sailing well and about 20Nm passed Jomard. The waves were a dark grey and the black of night sky was encroaching by the second. Just above the bow I could see some stars coming out, so I cast my gaze in their direction and looked straight at the Southern Cross. Our bearing was 180 degrees and I used the constellation's methodology to confirm that we were indeed heading due south. I smiled. The next land mass I'll see will be the great land down under. What a wonderful thought.

Late at night, as the wind and waves pick up and I'm tossed around like a hot potato with no chance of sleep anytime soon, I re-read a poem my beautiful sister sent me earlier in the day. It's about the virus and isolation but there was also much I took from it from my own experiences the past 5 weeks. The appreciation of the important things we all once took for granted and that we'll soon have back. It gave me comfort as I sat there in the darkness listening to the howl of the wind, clipped on with PFD, wet weather gear, boots and headtorch, eyes open wide at 2am. Feeling each yaw, creak and groan and willing Ahyoka onwards.

It's the home stretch, my girl. You got this.

In the morning  
We will intertwine fingers  
I will hug you for too long  
And then dance  
In the reawakened street

I will hold your cheeks in my hands  
And note every freckle on the faces  
I have missed so much

The sunlight will warm us  
As we shake off  
Our Autumn scarf of fear  
And Winter coat of misery  
As we appreciate the sun  
On our shoulders  
Like we never have before

For now we are in the dark  
With so few candles  
But I know that if we wait  
If we just hold tight  
It will soon be morning

Postscript:

@Eileen O'Farrell

You know what, I'm going to really miss your supportive, positive, helpful and happy messages in a few day's time Eileen. They're a highlight of my morning, so thank you for sending them.

@Marie-Clare Elder

Love the idea of sailing on the beautiful Sydney Harbour in winter, all rugged up...

@Campbell Mackie

Many thanks Campbell!

My blogs are generally 36 hours behind as I write them the morning of the next day, send them to my friend in the US then he uploads them when he gets up. Rest assured I'll keep them coming in the next few days, though they don't correlate to the track very well.

@Marc Castagnet

Thanks Brother. I've thought about your stories of rounding the Horn while I've been out here in big seas and how amazing that must have been.

Look forward to sailing together one day soon.

@Stephen Higgins

Haha – love it. So great your able to join the journey mate. Give Hillary a big hug from me.

@Jo

Thanks Jo! Will be lovely to catch up when I get to Sydney.

## Day 34 – Coral Sea

As I sit here and watch the waves roll by, cup of tea in hand (my coffee ran out weeks ago) the seas building and pressure increasing, I'm transported back to those first few days of this trip and my "baptism by fire". So much has happened since then. To start with I'm much more confident with Ahyoka and what she can and can't handle. I've learned to listen attentively to all her subtle messages, both audible and tactile and most of the time can adjust course and/or sails to take the pressure off where it's needed. This in turn reduces the anxiety levels dramatically and rather than worrying so much about the "what ifs", I'm much more focussed on the task at hand and thinking through all that's in my control and what needs to be done to keep both Ahyoka and I safe.

I'm also a lot more tired. What I'd give for some of the energy that chap had a month ago... I feel like a husk compared to him. When I'm tired, for some reason, I close my left eye which my mates never fail to give me a hard time over. I find myself with one eye closed more often than not right now.

However, rather than the 4000Nm of open ocean my prior self had in front of him, I have only a couple of hundred miles until I get home. I'm almost in range of motoring (yes, I have enough fuel, circa 120L). If there's a rig failure or I had to abandon ship, I'm in rescue range from the Australian government if. In short, it doesn't really matter what the conditions are in the coming days, I'm confident I'm going to make it home in some way shape or form. This doesn't fill me with any elation or joy though, just simply the energy and the will to continue with my mantra of:

Just. Keep. Going.

The hatch and companionway doors are now permanently shut and when I go outside, I always wear my PFD and clip on. A far sight from the doldrums, only a few days ago where I was lucky to even wear clothes outside.

The cockpit, a bastion of rest and relaxation only 36 hours ago, is now wet, wild and inhospitable and I don't linger there any longer than I have to. I simply do what's required and head back downstairs. By mid-morning TWS was 20knts with gusts of 25knts. By 2am when a front came through it was sustained 25knts and gusts of 35+knts. My tactic of hunting south has well and truly paid off as my wind and wave angles are manageable for these conditions I have very little sail up. Even still I move along at over 7knts, now bang on my bearing for Cairns of 240 degrees.

With the course and sails set, there's really very little for me to do other than keep an eye out for any changes in the weather. With my daily inspection and chores complete I focus on the basics. I have a shower and clean myself up as it may be the last time I get a chance to do this

before Cairns. I make myself eat and try and get some rest (which is easier said than done inside this humid Mexican jumping bean).

Around midnight, as forecast, the pressure picks up considerably and peaks between 2am and 4am. As I lay in my bunk, hearing the rain beat down, the wind howl through the rigging and waves break over the bow and cover the entire boat, I feel alone. Not lonely and not scared (well, maybe a little). Just very, very alone. Alone in a way you don't feel on land (unless perhaps you're in Antarctica). If something goes wrong, help is days away at best. There's no one I can call to come and help out. No ambulance. No Police. No first responders of any kind. All those institutions we rarely give a thought to, but which are crucial to us living comfortable and safe lives.

It's just me.

It's a funny feeling. Definitely one I don't want to get used to. You can feel it in the pit of your stomach, and it takes all the mental fortitude I can muster to manage it and hold it at bay.

The secret to our success as a species is co-operation. We co-operate with people we don't know in a multitude of manners every day in a way that no other species has done. It's in our DNA to behave this way so it's an unnatural feeling to be so alone so I'll be very grateful to reintegrate with society in a few day's time.

As I lay there in the darkness, I watch the bundle of sail ties hanging on one side of the companionway and my PFD on the other, swinging from side to side as regularly as a metronome with each passing wave. Their unnatural angles highlighting the extent to which we're being pitched and tossed.

All that's left in these situations is to breath.

Big. Deep. Soothing Breaths.

Postscript:

@Eileen O'Farrell.

I love that quote from Mark Twain. Thank you for sharing. I've found words take on so much meaning and power in a world where you don't speak to anyone. It'll be interesting re-reading these poems in a week's time and see what I take from them then.

Well picked up on the timing of the blog posts. Lachie is currently camping and away from the internet, so he has a colleague in Europe helping out.

Q Flag and Aussie Ensign are all ready to go. Rather than a bugle though, I'm thinking of blasting Men at Work (I come from a land down under) while I hoist them, perhaps with a bit of Peter Allen (I still call Australia Home) to close. Cheesy? Yes. But oh so good.

Thankfully no contraband on board. I threw out my remaining (rotting) lemons yesterday. The good folks at Border Force, the Harbour Master, Police and Quarantine have been so great to deal with that I'm looking forward to seeing them. They'll be the first humans I'll have seen or spoken to in person in over 5 weeks. I do hope they're smiling though...

And yes, engine is all good. I used it to navigate out of Jomard Passage a few days ago.

@Henrik Naujoks  
Thanks Henrik!!

@Campbell Mackie  
I do think you're right about the post trip depression and it's something I've thought a bit about lately. I've got time in Cairns on my own while I get the boat fixed before I fly to Tassie to see my parents and I plan to use this time for lots of reflection, writings and recuperating.

As for getting to Jomard in daylight at slack tide, it was pure dumb luck. Even then the tide was running at 4knts with a confused sea state and I needed to keep my wits about me. Coming through there at night with more pressure and tide would have been quite a different experience.

May I ask what a Rona environment is?

@Roberto M Casso  
Would love to catch up brother. Let's tee something up late next week once I've reintegrated with the world.

@Castagnet  
I look forward to hearing that secret along with sharing the moment sometime soon my friend.

@Michelle Montgomerie  
That's very kind of you to say Michelle. I guess I'll see you at Mum and Dads in a few weeks then.

@Tom McWilliam  
Many thanks Tom!

I was very close to putting the Trysail up when I entered the Coral Sea, but I decided against it given I wanted to sail high for the first 24 hours (TWA 70deg) and get as good an angle as possible for when the winds picked up (as you'd know there's a big difference between TWA of 100+ compared to <90). Given TWS is now over 25knts(TWA of 120deg) I think I just need to pray the gooseneck holds and then accept my fate if it doesn't.

## Day 35 – Penultimate

While it may be bumpy and blowy out here, it's a blistering pace we're setting, with a new record today of 165Nm in a 24-hour period, which takes the total log to 4000Nm. I'm going so fast in fact that by the time you read this, I'll be almost finished.

I hardly slept last night so I'm very groggy in the early hours. I ran out of coffee when I crossed the equator and I pine for an energising brew. Tea is great, but when you're exhausted there's no substitute for a strong coffee. As I slowly regain the world of consciousness, I realise that, barring a disaster I'm now less than 48 hours from Cairns and I need to prepare for my arrival. I reach out to Border Force (ABF) and confirm my ETA, speak to the Marina and do the same thing. Confirm my hotel room and also confirm an anchorage for the early hours of Friday morning as it's now looking like I'll arrive in Cairns in the middle of the night. Everyone is super helpful, and I plot the anchorage waypoint and my confirmed mooring at the Marina. ABF lock in 9am at the dock and I'm told to stay on the boat till they arrive. I almost ask whether they could pick me up a strong Flat White on the way but figure that's probably pushing my luck. There's be plenty of time for coffee when I get to the hotel.

I also relook at my pilotage plans for Cairns and map this against the wind forecast. I estimate I'll get to Grafton Passage around 9pm but there's still another 34Nm to go from there as I need to pass the Great Barrier Reef, where there'll no doubt be plenty of boat traffic in what's a narrow channel so it will be a challenging final 6-7 hours navigation. I'm aware that many accidents happen when land is in sight and one lets their guard down, so I commit to getting as much rest as I can to ensure I make it safely inside to the anchorage.

There's an air of realness. Of finality to this admin and final prep work. This journey is rapidly coming to an end and I want to make sure I finish it as well as I possibly can. I'm exhausted though, so once I'm on top of the detail, I try and get some sleep. I've always found it hard to sleep in hot, humid air but I fall asleep instantly and get a restful hour in.

I spend very little time in the cockpit today. There are waves breaking over the bow and the beam every few minutes and there's not a dry inch on deck. Its loud and intense. It's also exhilarating though, so to wake myself after my nap, I head to the foredeck for my daily inspections. The gooseneck repair is holding nicely. My cheese grater has certainly found a higher purpose in life. I look for chaff points and wear on the blocks and make small adjusts to the sheets and lines to minimise any damage. I see no issues though and head back to the protection of the dodger.

Looking out at the water, I notice how alive the sea becomes when its windy. Such a different persona to when its calm. It looks, sounds and almost feels like another place, growing in height, stature and intensity. It's been blowing 22-25knts with gusts of 35+knts for over 24hours and the height of the waves is over 3m. The periods are relatively long though, so they roll through at a manageable rate. There is white foam on the crests of the waves with lots of spray and streaks along the direction of the wind. The pressure on the rig, the sails and the hull is significant and a breakage now would have serious consequences. I've reduced the sail enough to ensure its

manageable (I hope) while also giving us good boat speed, so I head back to the relative peace of the saloon and hold on tight.

The boat is moving around far too much to be able to read so I put on a movie - Star Wars – and get lost in the wonderful story telling. Half-way through though, I hear a noise that seems to be coming from outside. I look up and see something moving. For a moment I think it's a containership bearing down on me but before I have time to panic, I realise it's a plane, no more than 100m in altitude directly above me. I run up-stairs, but it's passed by the time I'm there. I wave nonetheless and realise it was Australian Border Force, coming to check me out. I find it incredibly reassuring to know I'm now well and truly on the radar of the Australian Government and that I'm in range if a disaster happens. Good luck to any smugglers out here though! My sense is not much slips past ABF. What a contrast to the countries I passed on my way here, where no one at all seemed interested, or even aware, that I was travelling through.

My sunset was obscured by clouds, so I don't feel like I'm missing out by not being there to watch it – it's still too wet to eat upstairs so I put another movie on as I work my way through the classics. The Sound of Music - no judgement please :-)

The weather doesn't let up, though I manage to find some sleep. I guess I'm getting used to the constant battering... At 2am though my AIS alarm goes off and I wipe the sleep out of my eyes and begrudgingly get out of my bunk. 6Nm just off my port bow I have a massive container ship bearing down on me. Looking at its detail its 770ft long and 110ft wide, so basically two football fields. Our bearings are so tight that I'm not sure which way to turn to give him a wide enough berth. Just as I decide its safest and easiest to bear away, the captain gives me a call on the VHF. We both agree to alter course to starboard and pass to port. I wish him good night then sit attentively for 20 mins watching my instruments until he's safely passed, immensely grateful for AIS.

Surprisingly I'm able to get back to sleep easily. This will be the last sleep of the journey, so an important one, though no matter what, I think the excitement of the final day's sail tomorrow be enough to keep me awake all the way to Cairns.

Postscript:

I estimate I'll arrive around 2am Friday morning, not long after you read this, so I'll combine day 36 and 37 blogs and will make sure I post it once arrival formalities in Cairns are complete.

I'll then collate photos and send through over the weekend and plan on two more posts after that. One in about a week with some reflections once I've caught up on sleep and had a chance to digest all that's happened and then a final blog when I get the video footage edited with a link to YouTube.

If anyone wants to reach when I'm on land, below are my contact details:



WhatsApp - +61 408 322 184  
Email – roryhunter88@gmail.com

@Stuart  
Hi Uncle Stuart!

So wonderful to hear from you. I was worried about you for a while there but am thrilled to hear you're on the mend.

Give my best to Maggie and Kyle.

Much love,

Rory

@Hilary  
Thanks so much Hill!

@James  
I thought a lot about our trip to the Solomons when I was sailing by. Remember how we went spearing at night with those locals and they caught a turtle, which we had to buy from them to release, otherwise it was soon to become their dinner? Such an epic trip.

Great work on the open water swim mate. 1.2km. That's a long way with no training!

@Tory von Bergen  
Aww Tors, that's very sweet of you to say. So lovely you're able to share the tales with your boys. Will be lovely to catch up when I get to Sydney.

@Aimee McCammon  
Not long now Aims! So stoked you've enjoyed the journey. It's been lovely to share

@Campbell Mackie  
It's definitely a boisterous breeze! Nice to be blasting into port this way.

@Nick Hunter  
I love that suggestion Uncle Nick. I may just do that.

Much love,

Rory

## Day 36 and 37 – Cursum Perficio – We made it!

How do I put into words what it feels like to be home? To be safe. To have finished my journey.

When I sighted land yesterday, I was overcome with emotion. I was about 50Nm away so didn't expect to see land that far out. Turns out Cairns has some of the highest mountains in Australia (Mt Bartle is 1,611m above sea level) so when I popped my head above the companionway, I was greeted with a setting sun and the majestic Atherton Tablelands. After 5 and a half weeks at sea and 16 years living abroad, I don't think there was a prouder Australian on the planet in that moment. Tears streaming down my face, there was a melting pot of relief, joy, pride and patriotism. A moment I'll never forget.

The final 5 hours into Cairns were in the dark and I anchored just outside the Marina before midnight as I'm not allowed onshore before the various arrival formalities are complete, most of which happened this morning, though I'm waiting on Quarantine to come at 1:30pm and then I'm cleared to step on land.

Once the anchor was set and the boat safe, I turn off the engine and am greeted by an almost deafening silence and stillness. My senses are almost overwhelmed by the lack of noise and movement. It was a feeling unlike anything I've ever experienced, and I try and soak it in while I pop the cork on a nice bottle of red and call friends and family. Drunk on exhaustion and happiness my saloon feels like a palace it's so peaceful.

Can I tell you a little secret? When I started this trip, I had never actually done any real solo sailing. Certainly no over-nighters. That first stormy night on the South China Sea was my not so subtle introduction to solo-sailing, but at no time did I regret my decision cast off the mooring lines and sail into the distance. This trip will be a corner stone in my life. A transition point. A junction. A waypoint between two oceans. The Rory before who lived a great 44 years before the 21<sup>st</sup> May and a new version, one that, in a few short hours, is about to embark on the rest of his life. The shore that awaits me only meters away will be the first step into a new chapter. A new existence. How exciting to be about to begin a brand-new adventure. I wonder what it will hold...?

100 years on, we still talk about the great depression of the 30s and how it defined a generation. How it changed the behaviour of our grandparents or great grandparents. Why many were risk averse and thrifty. What they did during that time. Covid19 will have a similar impact, with generations to come curious to know what their parents, grandparents and great grand parents did during the "great shut down". While this trip was part adventure seeking, part grieving, I also didn't want to be defined by the virus. I wanted to choose my response so when my kids or their kids asked what I did, rather than say that I sat back and watched my personal and professional life implode, laying in the corner in the foetal position, that I chartered a different course. I followed a dream. I let my heart soar and, in the process, life took on a most wonderful hue.

Just what this new chapter looks like, dear Reader, I can't tell you. I thought I'd spend more time thinking about my business pursuits and personal aspirations out here, but it turns out survival

took precedence. Perhaps that's a good thing. I have many ideas and plans, but I sense I'll be landing in Australia a different man to the one that left. I plan on taking time to keep the space around me open, before filling it with commitments, obligations and deadlines and just see what unfolds.

There's no rush. The universe will sort it out.

One of the things I like most about the open ocean is the endless horizon. It forces you to focus on where you are at that moment in time. It doesn't matter if there's a squall about to come into view, calm airs, a moon set or a sunrise. All that matters is what's happening in that very moment. I've never been more present than I have these past 5 weeks and I hope to take that same "living in the moment" world view with me when I step on land. Life is lived in the present and that's where happiness is found.

You may wonder whether I found what I was looking for. In short, I think I have, but I'll hold judgement until I've had time to reflect, get some sleep and adjust to my new reality.

In Native American Cherokee, "Ahyoka" means "She brings happiness" and I can tell you that I arrive a very happy man indeed. She may have been out of her depth. Perhaps we both were. But she delivered. Well done my girl.

We all seek in our own way at different times in our life. Be it seeking meaning, love, happiness or truth. Starting the journey of discovery can be tough though. Once you're underway you'd be amazed at how adaptable you are. How resilient. How creative. I hope my writings and my journey have helped show you that anyone is capable of living a life that's extra-ordinary.

There's an inner adventurer in us all. Embrace yours, dear Reader.

Explore, Dream, Discover.

With Love,

Rory

### **Epilogue (and photos)**

"Heart" and "Disease" are two words you don't want to see together. They certainly don't look good sitting side by side on the screen in front of me as I type this. And I can assure you it doesn't feel pleasant when it's happening inside your chest.

Within 24 hours of arriving in Cairns, I felt unwell. I put it down to exhaustion and assumed it would improve, but after a few days, my condition worsened. I could hardly get out of bed and when I did, I found it hard to stand. My cognition was poor, and a fog had descended on my brain making it hard to think. My chest was heavy, and I was short of breath. I had a serious headache; lethargy was pervasive, and I felt depressed and anxious. Due to the border closures, no friends

or family were able to come up to see me and as each day passed, the elation I was expecting to feel upon my arrival was replaced with a deep loneliness.

Sadness even.

I had planned to spend the next month or two with my boys exploring the islands, beaches and waterways of Queensland during their summer holidays (HK is in the northern hemisphere) and I'm not sure which one of us was more excited. Due to the virus, their trip was cancelled though, and I found myself in Cairns alone, unwell and barely able to find the energy to leave my hotel room as the reality sank in that it will be a very long time until I can see them again.

Never once had I felt lonely at sea, so it was a sad irony that once on land, surrounded by people, albeit strangers, that I felt lonelier than I think I ever have.

By day 5 I knew there was something wrong and that this was more than simply exhaustion. After being refused admittance to a number of doctor's clinics because I had been outside Queensland within 14 days, the only option was to present myself at the Emergency Department of Cairns Hospital. I'm very glad I did. I was immediately put into isolation and given a raft of tests from an ECG to bloods to chest X-ray, blood pressure and a COVID swab.

Once the results were in the doctor told me I was suffering from extreme exhaustion, adrenal fatigue, poor kidney function and that I had something called a Pericarditis. I struggled to pronounce the word, let alone understand what it was. It turns out the heart sits in a sac called the pericardium and a pericarditis is an inflammation of the sac which results in severe chest pain, fatigue, headaches, shortness of breath and heart palpitations. It's not a terminal illness if treated early though, so I reminded myself to practice acceptance and to just go with it.

I knew there would be a price to pay for pushing myself to the very limits of human endurance, but I didn't expect it to be this bad. The prognosis was it will take months for the pericarditis to heal and that the best way to do this was rest. Lots and lots of rest.

I wondered if it was just my body's way of telling me take my time. That this was not simply 5 and a half weeks of stress, but 15 years without a break, rolling from one crisis to another. Sooner or later something had to break, and this was that "something". I postponed my plans to sail down the coast, left Ahoyka at the Marina and metaphorically set sail for the safest harbour I know. My parent's home in Tasmania.

With all the border restrictions in place it was not going to be easy as only Tassie residents were being allowed into the state and 24 hours before I arrived anyone who travelled through Victoria outside the airport was being refused entry, which made it difficult given the only flight into Hobart was from Melbourne once a day. I caught my first fly to Brisbane and overnighted there before catching a 6am flight to Sydney then onto Melbourne. Biosecurity agents screened all passengers getting on the flight to Hobart from Melbourne and many weren't allowed on. Thankfully dad and I had gone through all the requirements beforehand and I had my required paperwork printed

out and prepared, including my proof of residency, a bank statement with their address, which was my ticket to cross the border.

Almost as many police as passengers greeted us when arrived at Hobart airport and the screening process was extremely diligent. I could see mum and dad waiting beyond the security cordons, masks on, pensively patient, while I anxiously waited in line, hoping to be let through but far from certain I would. A number of those in front of me were escorted off to government run quarantine so the relief I felt when I was given the green light to quarantine for 14 days at their home was palpable.

Seeing mum and dad for the first time in 6 months, not knowing if we should, but letting our love for each other get the better of us, we hugged as only families can do and we headed home. Truly home.

It was time to curl up and heal like a wounded animal in a cave. Heal my body. My mind. My heart. My soul. And to do so in the safest place on the planet right now. My parent's beautiful home in a state that's seen zero infections in the past 2 months. I glowed with gratefulness the entire car ride home.

I miss my boys dearly and wonder how much of my pericarditis is simply modern medicine's way of labelling a broken heart. My mum, being the ever-thoughtful woman she is, printed off a range of recent photos of the boys and placed them around the house so their endless smiles are never far away and they always to boost my spirits when I glance their way, knowing that it won't be forever that we're apart.

As I reframe the months ahead, I realise this is a very special time. How many people get to connect, indeed reconnect with their parents in middle age? To share a home together again without the distraction of children or the competition of a spouse in way we once did when life seemed so much simpler and I was a child.

I don't know many people whose parents are still as in love and happy as mine. Who have the energy and the space to share their home and their lives again with their only son. This is a chance for us to be together again. "Be" being the operative word.

The days are luxuriously slow.

We share nice warm cups of tea together, slow walks in the bush or on the beach with Barney the Beagle and binge watch The Crown in the evenings all while eating delicious Tassie produce. I can't imagine a better way to convalesce and each day my heart gets a little healthier.

A little happier.

A little lighter.

What a gift this is to spend such quality time with my folks and for us all to be connected in each other's lives again.

How wonderfully Unexpected.

While the ocean is a place for poetry, so too are melancholic moments on land and I take great solace in Edgar Guest's words while I focus on my new mantra for the months ahead:

Thoughtfully Rebuild.

### **Don't Quit**

by Edgar Guest

When things go wrong, as they sometimes will,  
When the road you're trudging seems all uphill,  
When the funds are low but the debts are high,  
And you want to smile but you have to sigh,  
When care is pressing you down a bit...  
Rest if you must, but don't you quit!

Life is queer with its twists and turns,  
As every one of us sometimes learns,  
And many failures turn about  
When we might have won had we stuck it out.  
Don't give up though the pace seems slow...  
You may succeed with another blow.

Often the struggler has given up  
When he might have captured the victor's cup;  
And he learned too late when the night came down,  
How close he was to the golden crown.

Success is failure turned inside out...  
And you can never tell how close you are  
It may be near when it seems so far.  
So stick to the fight when you're hardest hit  
It's when things seem worst that you must not quit.

Finally, I wanted to thank you dear Reader, for all your kind, supportive and heartfelt messages both during the trip and when I arrived in Australia. Reading them each morning on the water often pulled me out of a funk. Gave me a boost when it was needed and lifted my spirits when they were low. My body was clearly hanging on by a thread given how much it (we?) collapsed within hours of arriving home and without your support I just don't know if I'd have made it to

Cairns as safely as I did. The will to survive is incredibly strong, but even more so when you have something to live for.

I started the trip seeking solitude, thinking this was what my weary soul needed to heal. In doing so, I learned that its human connection that I sought and that this was the elixir I needed. No man (or woman) is an island and it's love and companionship that makes our hearts whole and happy.

Thank you for teaching me this, dear Reader.

With love and gratitude,

Rory

PS - I've posted some photos of the journey online too if you're keen to take a look:

<https://seekingsolitude2020.com/gallery/>