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The wind began to lessen with the dawn, and that seemed the perfect cue for me to give me a good talking to about Fate and the wearing of a brave face – if mostly for the yacht’s sake. Then, ready for a shock, I shook out some of the mainsail. It made for a sobering look in the light. Only a handful of threads hung loosely together across the middle of the sail and saved it from being two sails. The gape looked even wider than last night. The mainsail, as the name implies, is the main driving force of a yacht, of course. It’s the sort-of engine. This tear presented the vessel and her skipper with quite a problem.

A sail loft was needed right now, but getting to one ... that’s the challenge. We can’t sail into the wind, we can’t beat. We share the failing of sailing ships of old – off-the-wind was just about the only way they could progress, and now, all of a sudden, it is our only direction. The Admiralty chart shows that the nearest downwind landmark is Ponta da Ferraria, on the corner of Sao Miguel Island, about ninety-five miles south. Coincidentally, it’s the headland that signposted the path to my old race destination, Ponta Delgada, which lies about thirteen miles further on. If light winds follow the present cold front, quite likely given the high barometer, we’ll depend on the engine. However, our fuel is strictly rationed, has to be. And if we use it now in a manoeuvre that isn’t part of the plan, how much fuel will be left when we might depend on it? Comparing distance with the stock of diesel, it’s obvious that a torn main plus a calm promises a king-sized challenge. Without the right breeze, we’re likely to flop about *adrift*. I all but majored in that torture a few years earlier when the open boat *Homeward Bound 2* overturned and dismasted in a storm. I had a whole month of it, and to emphasise the dawdling nature in the effort to reach St Helena island, only nuts and raisins survived the inversion. I could do without a rerun of anything like that disturbing passage, albeit that this time there would be relative comfort, protection from the elements, food and fluid. For my preference

though, once was quite enough.

I recalled none too happily the reassurance of the toothy gent back in Barbados. With the mainsail stretched out on the loft floor, the fraying and the severe wear must have been very obvious. Why not offer to replace the whole section? It was the professional thing to do, and besides would have made the repair far more profitable. Of course, no answers are offered out here and nor a hint, naturally, that this sail problem would reappear back on dry land and then be put to devious use to promote extraordinary tragedy.

Ponta Delgada seemed the best destination. With so little sail and fuel, it wasn't going to be the world's easiest port to enter. The name announces the challenge - a narrow or slim harbour. However, first things first. The getting there ought to be enough of a hurdle for the moment. As it is a popular yachting haunt it must have a sail loft of some sort. As for getting a rope ashore, *Sal* and I would manage it one way or another.

However, instead of the expected calm, a handsome westerly followed the weather fault line. What luxury! What a godsend and in place of a maddening struggle, we were soon all but flying towards Sao Miguel. The speed felt wonderful - *Sal* might have imagined she was competing in a top Royal Ocean Racing Club race. The pace and the progress felt glorious. By breakfast I could write 'Land-ho!' in the logbook. Bob's friend, the self-steering gear, handled the demanding conditions well. Lively wind fluctuations required almost constant sail changes, even with such a small amount of canvas available now. The gear took over the steering often and won enthusiastic shouts of praise from various points about the deck.

The sea swarms with squat rollers, row after row, as far ahead as I can see - at least to the horizon, and all remarkably in line as if they trained in marching bands. The sky is back to its brilliant azure of old. The ears

are filled with the summery sound of a friendly tide on seaside sand. Usually out here ocean waves are in constant dispute, crashing into one another, boiling over the tops of frailer neighbours, hurtling forward as selfishly as assertive individuals. Now they are a surprisingly polite mass, keeping in near perfect formation, very nearly maintaining a uniform height, very nearly splashless. Best of all, they roll in our direction. It's as if we are enjoying a piggyback. *Sal* loves it. She seems to play with low rollers, often darting ahead of a column, or doing her best to, slipping back for a moment and then overtaking. Hours later, an orderly and helpful sea keeps *Sal* racing, surrounding us with a cheery roaring and rumble broken by gentle hissing as if bottles of sparkling water open around us. The day progresses, the sun races for the zenith as if determined to prove the accuracy of the Admiralty nautical almanac. Now fat-lady clouds too weighty to float wobble along in company. Their dresses, kept only just clear of wave tops, look fabulously bleached. A thunder collection lurks furtively resembling a throng of muggers. It recognises disdain all around and cringes down to leeward. Our scene looks all too good to be true. I try to prepare myself for the grim news that's bound to come soon. *Complications, challenges, contrary motion. Bound to be - it's the way of the sea, after all. But we'll manage.* I try to fool the inner being that I am up to challenge. The act isn't very convincing.

Hours later and the negative prediction hasn't happened. It's hard to believe what I'm witnessing tonight and it might be calm before the storm and all that, but we are being propelled by a really good breeze. And it is obliging and orderly and continues helping even into the next day. Progress is so good, the sailing so exciting, I wonder now if a further change of destination might work. What if, supposing the wind holds as the unchanging barometer suggests it might, we change course for the Madeira group where good sail repair facilities are bound to exist? A voice from within groans: *Nice to dream. You might see the sea as your*

*mistress but you ought to know mistresses aren't always obliging.*

The powerful blow, warm and dry, sweeps us along the Sao Miguel coast. We're an arm's length from remote Azorean life, with the *deep deep* beneath the keel. Fields brilliant with red and pinkish blooms rush by, then yellowy crops glinting golden in the sun, now a khaki-charcoal blur of cottages clustered together as if in conversation, now a high mound like a gargantuan altar, tiny villages with narrow streets empty and enervated under the August blaze. Meadows rush past, clumps of woods with bare boughs signal secret semaphore, now a switching pastiche of greens and shade. Freshly mown clover perfumes the wind, a space of turf and trees, then another village, and now a communal clothes line of immense size, sheets and shirts and shorts surprisingly uniformly coloured, blue towels, beige bras with considerable cups, and yellow socks, scores of them pegged together in CW phrases, dah dit dit, dah dit dit, dah dit dit, and repeated on and on. I'm wondering why the letter 'D'? Pride over the cup size perhaps.

The wind keeps up the same brisk pace, the angle still perfect. Why not try for Madeira? The elements remain unusually obliging, the barometric pressure says no change, but that old *calm before the storm* alarm keeps ringing within. However, the good weather continues beyond the island, and across the open passage to the next archipelago. As if to hint that this is a very special treat – which sea experience reminds me really is a very rare thing indeed - the waves maintain their extraordinary discipline. The icing on the cake, to borrow the expression, is a night of fabulous stars, each reflected on the curls of waves in huge and shimmering silver. Dawn raises a massive sun, an instant reminder of Hayden's first sunrise in *The Creation*. It is gigantic, breath-taking. It shimmers with geysers of fire, quite sufficient on its own to terrify weather-conscious shepherds. It followed a sailing night that offered the chance to dream in peace, yet possessed too many attractions, seemed far too attractive to squander in

sleep.

A smudge of green appears far off, then a shape like a welcome salute which gradually grows more political – *Viva Funchal* - and becomes Madeira climbing slowly from the sea, right where the sextant predicted. The ancient harbour and its mountainous guardians, giants ensorcelled to stone, hove into sight. A brief tropical gloaming begins as *Sal* finds a good anchorage near a harbour wall, below an imposing church on a cliff. It could be a cathedral. As the anchor sinks, church bells ring magnificently as if in welcome.

I fold away the genoa, smiling and singing. It has been such an enchanting ride, one of those very, very rare events, heightened, of course, by disaster, that grim discovery of the mainsail rendered next to useless. I wonder why I am being treated so magnificently. A gift from the gods? It must be, but I know that at sea gifts come with a price. *Nuffin's for nuffin'*, as my neighbours say. An admonition replays from childhood about responding to a gift horse. Perhaps, you never know, it's to ease frustration of the ruined mainsail. Or ... I'm chewing this over while looking beyond the harbour wall into a busy marina where groups chat and pose around yachts. Right in the foreground, a blonde person opens the curtain of an intricate shower arrangement on an aft deck. Like some sort of glamorous Houdini, she slips out of her clothes and reaches for the tap. I think: sometimes it's churlish not to be superstitious. I might have been admiring the model for Ernest Laurent's famous canvas, *Beautiful Shoulders*. I hope I'm not ogling. It is the most surprising scene to encounter after sailing alone for many sea miles. She seems a perfectly symmetrical sculpture. It's very good to have returned to civilisation.

We were snug on an anchorage, *Sal* and her cheered voyager, happily weary yet alert to the vulnerability of a yacht at anchor – from opportunists, careless navigation, and sudden changes of weather.

Happily the stay turned out well and after breakfasting on toast and coffee, I motor onto the Customs' jetty. Madeira might be a Portuguese outpost, but it has left aggressive bureaucracy at home. The pleasant fellows examine the yacht politely and thoughtfully, and *Sal* and I join the international crowd.

The difference between marinas in Europe and the Americas strikes me immediately. You don't see a lot of semi-nude showering on the other side, that's true, though I hadn't spotted it here before either. Like homes in the home countries of these sailors, the jetties and berths are closer together. People here sunbathe, eat, and share sailing experiences, and hang out their washing, almost on top of one other, and quietly. On the western banks of the pond, moorings seem much more spread out, and perhaps because of it, conversation like the clothing, seems louder. Another noticeable difference is that Americans often sail away when they are older, at a grandparentish stage. In Europe, it looks as though people dream-cruise in mid-career. Unlike visits to the western side of the Atlantic, here I might be the most ancient mariner in the marina.

Funchal wasn't on the list for the last voyage. Yet looking about me, it seems a perfect place to prepare for the revised route. I'll have the mainsail repaired, restock the larder, and decide where to go on this last voyage. Unexpectedly, I can conduct these preparations on a safe and civilised mooring. The photo back in that café ensures that I will stay till the end of the hurricane season. *June, too soon / July, stand by / August, come she must / September, remember / October, it's over.* Well, true, it means I'll have to endure the grip of port rot for more than a month. I'll try to be brave.