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An Ocean Away

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with John Holloway

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Extract

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Chapter One

Sharky's Reincarnation



The spray, the wind rush, the sheer thrill of being alive.

SHIP'S LOG, 14.15 HOURS, Tuesday 21st July 1992, Falmouth. The first words I ever wrote on my transatlantic voyage were:

> 'Cast off! Well, here goes. Absolutely unsure of what's ahead. Self-steering is not working very well. Dinner time!'

Looking back, it's good to know I had my priorities right. I couldn't do much about the trip ahead but I was damned if I was going to do it on an empty stomach. Imagine the embarrassment of a worst-case scenario and the post-mortem declaration: 'Stomach contents – none.'

I'd been sailing for a few years by now and, somehow, at the age of twenty-eight, I'd gradually talked myself into sailing across the Atlantic. Now here I was, on the threshold of a great adventure that I hadn't really planned to do. It just seemed to have happened, just like that! I'd spent the few days before departure in a state of excitement and anxiety, checking and stowing gear and food, then re-checking and re-stowing. I wanted to start, with part of me not wanting to leave. Looking out at the sea swell beyond the harbour

wall I didn't quite believe that in a few hours' time where I was now would be out of sight. I'd be at the mercy of the elements and thrust on my own skill and resources, or possibly a lack of. Mentally I recalled the cold facts and figures about the Atlantic. The second largest ocean, slightly more than six times the size of the USA with a total area of 76,000,000 square kilometres. Seventy-six million! Oh, and deep – down to eight and half thousand metres. Perhaps this was not the time to make an unfavourable comparison with statistics closer to home. Dave Clarke, 1.9 metres tall in a sloop ominously called *Sharky*, 5.5 metres long. It didn't seem like a fair fight to me but I'd never been in a fair fight in my life.

It was odd, I thought, that at that moment, and that point of departure, the hundreds of people milling around Falmouth harbour had absolutely no idea what I was about to do. For all they cared, if they cared at all, I was just another seafarer about to cast off on a trip around the bay. I liked that sense of anonymity as I was never one for publicity or the big occasion. I was happy to be there for me, because this was my adventure and I didn't want any emotional farewells. I relished that sense of obscurity. I relished the sound of 'seafarer' even more. It rolled around my tongue and tasted of history. I was about to undertake a huge adventure and I required an appropriate name – 'sailing' was for inland and coastal waters. In the supreme arrogance of the moment, I pompously declared myself a seafarer.

I'd caught the sailing bug in dribs and drabs as I'd been growing up. There hadn't been a single flash of insight, no instant jolt of enlightenment, no sense of life ambition. As a youngster born in the steel town of Sheffield, then growing up around the hills of Buxton, I'd been more into moorland and rolling hills than boats, but bit by bit, as my life evolved, I found myself in their company. I think much of my fascination had come from reading. Despite struggling through my school years – and later diagnosed as dyslexic – I found an escape in books as I grew into my late teens and beyond. Reading helped improve my use of language and stimulated my imagination. Books became just more than pages and print; they became accessible kingdoms where dreams were realisable and nothing seemed

impossible. I was drawn more to travel and factual adventure books than fiction and avidly sought out stories of exotic wanderings, from Mark Shand's travel with an Indian elephant to Ranulph Fiennes' Arctic treks. I even tackled the Bible, the Koran and Aldous Huxley. Imperturbably, I began to include books about sailing exploits. Without realising it, I was challenging unsettling life experiences, and my random interaction with boats, as a child and later a teenager, began to coalesce. Two authors in particular stand out in my mind from those days. Bernard Moitessier, an unassuming Frenchman, had penned an account (*The Long Way*) of his entry into the 1968 *Sunday Times* non-stop solo round-the-world challenge. Out on the Pacific Ocean he had had a life-changing experience when competitive sailing no longer held any meaning for him. Literally, in mid-stream and in a winning position, he changed course, disengaged himself from the race and sailed off to find his own sunset in Tahiti. I remember being deeply affected by his story, trying to understand the man behind such an amazing decision. It was one I realised I could identify with but wondered whether I would ever have or want the same resolve.

The other book that gripped me intensely was *Shrimpy* by a little-known guy called Shane Acton. In 1972 he'd bought a small eighteen-foot Caprice-class sloop and for the next eight years circumnavigated the world, mainly on his own; he still holds the record for this trip using the smallest boat. What appealed to me was that Acton was not a professional sailor, he had extremely limited funds, and he seemed to be just an ordinary guy who wanted control of his destiny. Both men were sea gypsies, independent thinkers who went their own way in life against the odds and convention. I read both books many times, drinking in the atmosphere and finding something that went deeper than just a good read. The strength of their self-belief had struck a chord within me. The chord had yet to find a tune but my love of the outdoors, of nature and travel, had been given a new and different impetus. It's true to say that these accounts created a pleasant but unsettling ache in me. I was beginning to experience what comedians would call a long-felt want. Still unfocused and ill-defined as these thoughts were, I began to wonder whether I should

consider buying a boat. Then in my mid-twenties and heavily involved in a retail business, I was far from plans to sail the Atlantic, let alone do it on my own, but through the magic of reading I began to harbour wistful and impossible thoughts about the notion of a great ocean journey. A tiny seed had been planted and was plucking up courage to germinate.

I remember the date well. The 29th October 1988; the date I fell in love with a flirty temptress from Chesterfield. A wreck turned sea mistress that would turn my life upside down. The more I thought about the idea of owning a boat, the more convinced I became that it was imperative. My retail business was a confectionery, tobacco and newsagent's shop in Buxton. This meant I could regularly order a number of sailing magazines and scan them to see what was available, particularly something that would fit my bank account, which seemed to hover permanently and stubbornly just above red. I hadn't done much in the way of deciding what sort of craft I wanted though the notion of a Caprice – the small boat used by Shane Acton – kept recurring. Whether I had mentally stepped into his shoes I'm not certain but my eye was always drawn to the pages where a Caprice was for sale. All I had to do was find one that was up to the task.

After a few months of scanning papers and trade journals a phone call led me to a Chesterfield boatyard, an improbable, landlocked gravel-patched couple of acres sandwiched between the A61 and an industrial estate. The owner assured me he had 'just the thing'. Boatyards are strange places, where the term 'fish out of water' neatly applies to boats out of their natural environment. Chesterfield, being on the edge of the Peak District, is not exactly the centre of maritime activity, the nearest decent stretch of water being at least thirty miles away. As I entered the yard I was greeted by a forlorn showing of distressed little boats, perched on their cradles, all seemingly longing to be back in the water again. The place felt like a Dr Barnardo's for orphaned vessels.

The 'just the thing' was a pitiful, despondent wreck unceremoniously jammed in between two quite decent yachts, making her look even more miserable, and, as so often happens, I took to her straight away. I had found my sailing companion. The technical

description confirmed she was an eighteen-foot yacht, built in the 1970s of fibreglass and wood with two steel-and-timber keels and a beam (width) of around seven feet at her widest point. She had a single cabin, a self-draining open cockpit aft of the cabin, and a single twenty-foot mast. The non-technical description, about which I could bore for Britain, was that she was gorgeous – in an extremely beat-up sort of way – painted in filthy white on the topsides and deck, with acres of dried weed and ancient anti-fouling paint below the waterline. The cabin was – well, I suppose 'cramped' would be generous. Imagine less room than the inside of a Ford Fiesta with a working height of about four feet. It felt claustrophobic but I put that down to the dark paintwork, and, while there wasn't much stowage, I reckoned I could cope. The top deck was coming away from the hull, the rigging was useless, the boom was a piece of rough wood and there were no sails, otherwise she was perfect! Mentally claiming her there and then I decided to call her *Sharky*, a nickname given to me a few years earlier when I was grubbing for money through hard-nosed deals. *Sharky* needed some work. Actually she wanted a *lot* of work, but by then I had been smitten, blinded to her condition, captured by her potential. I wanted her as badly as a teenager wants his first real kiss.

I must have spent over two hours crawling over her superstructure, examining her hull, planning the cabin layout, just lovingly rubbing my hands over every inch, all the while convincing myself I had the skills to restore her to her glory days and kit her out for the worst weather conditions I could imagine. If she'd been a car I would have walked away without a backward glance; but she wasn't. She was affordable (just), she was available and she represented a challenging opportunity that threw any ounce of reason out of the window. I was convinced I had the practical skills to spruce her up and I had the arrogance to assume that learning to sail would be simple. I spent the inspection time wisely, carefully appraising the work I needed to do, pretending that I would be objective in my final decision, but the illusion was skin-deep. *Sharky* had got her teeth into me and wasn't about to let another suitor stand her up. I was the master of the moment but she was the mistress of my future and so, at last,

I wandered over to the boatyard office and did the deal. On a date forever etched in my memory I parted with an ill-affordable £950 of hard-earned money, but gained a key to the gates of freedom. I trailered *Sharky* back home to Buxton and parked her by the side of our shop, where, living in the flat above, I could keep an eye out for her. I formally registered her as mine and eagerly bought a red ensign flag, proof of owning the most cared-for boat in existence. I was in love.

Having now bought *Sharky*, I was in a state of fevered enthusiasm to get her shipshape and perfect. I would look out of my landing window each time I went up the stairs, the mast looming up to the pitch of the roof, and I could never pass by with a momentary glance down to the boat. It was more a bonding action than a security check; a fond peek at what I'd bought and a pensive distraction from the business to hand. Sometimes I'd just rest my hands on the windowsill, look down wistfully and imagine myself riding the ocean waves, a free spirit with few cares. It was soppy, puppy-love stuff but I relished the bitter-sweet feelings within me.

To the rear of the shop were the garage and stock rooms, soon to become *Sharky*'s workshop, the makeover department that would turn the ugly duckling into a fine swan. Customers to the shop must have wondered why a boat was beached in the middle of a Derbyshire town. My mum and step-dad Norman had a general understanding of my interest in sailing, but only I knew the level of determination I had to master this new pursuit. Within a month of buying *Sharky* I'd enrolled for a five-day beginner's sailing course down in Warsash, a little place near Southampton widely regarded as the gateway to the Solent. This was no fit of initial enthusiasm. I approached my new interest with all the focus and intensity of a surgeon in an operating theatre, and I was determined to absorb as much technical knowledge and competence as I could. The problem was time and money. The shop took most of my waking hours and most of my spare cash as well. It had been bought between my mum and me, as we'd had previous experience in the trade. It gave her something to get her teeth into while Norman was at work, and it gave me the chance of settling down to a steady job. Small shops though

require a large investment of time and while we employed some staff it was still taking up a lot of my hours, which I would rather have spent on my boat. I was beginning to despair that I would never get *Sharky* in the water.

Working on her moved at a snail's pace. I soon realised that just cleaning off the weeds, barnacles and other detritus from her hull was a major operation, and I was in no mood to compromise. Despite my urgency to get her afloat I was not going to cut corners and I lovingly tended to her as a parent does a child. Much of the superstructure was unsound and going to require many hours of fibreglassing, much of the external woodwork was rotten to the point of replacement and chips and cracks to her hull needed serious attention. The pint-sized cabin and cockpit lacked charm and cosiness and I was going to need all of my design and woodworking skills to manufacture new wooden storage lockers. Slowly, slowly over that winter, I bought *Sharky* back to something approaching her former glory. Fresh paint added a glow to her features and new wood, brass and stainless-steel fittings completed her restoration. Most of the work I did myself, calling in favours from skilled mates when required. I fully owned her when I made an elegant sticker of her name and lovingly eased it onto the stern. *Sharky*. From waif-like beginnings to a christened child she had become a part of my family. The eight-month travail, long on frustration, had finally been worth the wait: she was ready for the water.

Two months into my project, however, the practical repair skills were set aside for more cerebral ones as I took a precious week off work and motored down to Warsash to attend my Competent Crew course; five days of intensive study, with four other novices, that would inculcate me into the mysterious world of sailing. I approached the course with a mixture of anticipation and apprehension. I fretted a bit about mastering the theory part but felt I might not fare too badly with the sailing. As a boy I'd grown up in the United Arab Emirates when the family followed my dad's job, so I'd been exposed to the delights of sailing in the Arabian Gulf. However, Warsash was different. Warsash demanded discipline, technical understanding, adroitness in the reading of charts, currents and positioning. Warsash

demanded I have a damn good time – so I did. Four other people and I went aboard our thirty-six foot sailing yacht on the Monday morning and nervously awaited our skipper, Adrian Donavan, a world-class competitive yachtsman. The first thing that struck me was the incomprehensibility of the thousands of feet of rope, some of which wasn't called rope, and the seemingly awkward way it all jumbled together to make something happen. It was as though a spaghetti producer had teamed up with Heath Robinson and chosen the most intricate and most complex way of moving sails about. Although I'd read about the fundamentals of sailing and generally thought I could understand the principles, I was totally unprepared for the aesthetic design and grace of this yacht. As I stepped on board for the first time, my apprehension disappeared, to be replaced by an almost uncontainable excitement. The course had cost me a king's ransom but I knew the experience was going to be worth every penny. I bubbled inside at the prospect of five days in a new element but outwardly I was careful not to appear overly ignorant. Whenever I had some spare few minutes to myself, I would quietly walk the deck and marvel at the sleek lines, the symmetry and elegance of her design. The simple act of running my hand softly across a deck rail, part of the gunwale or folded sail as I gazed out on a watery horizon, stirred inner feelings, a lust to sail as much as I could. The simple pleasure of rising before dawn, to stand on deck as the pastel colours of a new day stealthily conquered the night, and to hear the gentle slap of water against the hull, had a profound impact on me. I would stare into new horizons in my mind's eye, and so in that crucible of awareness began my resolve to sail the oceans.

Sailing is a mixture of passion and brass tacks. I had sentiment aplenty but needed all my concentration to assimilate the seamanship, navigation, meteorology, safety, manoeuvring, crewing and skippering that we were bombarded with. I learnt how vital teamwork was and as we slewed through the Solent quietly wondered whether I would ever be able to sail *Sharky* on my own. I did a lot of listening to others and asked questions I hoped didn't sound foolish. The highlight of the course was inevitably the thrill of each day's sailing. To be part of, and partly in control of a living entity that responded to

wind and sinew was like being a kid with unlimited ice cream. The spray, the wind rush, the sheer thrill of being alive – I wanted to whoop out loud and scream my joy at the top of my lungs. But I didn't. I battened down that primeval urge and focused on being a competent crew member, but resolved that the first time I sailed *Sharky* on my own that was what I was going to do – shout the top of my bloody head off!

Towards the end of the course I was having my second pint of Guinness with the skipper. I was light-headedly waiting for dinner and he casually asked me what my plans were after the course. I explained that I'd just bought a small boat and, without any sense of intention, I blurted out, 'I quite fancy sailing solo across the Atlantic.'

I remember him looking at me with serious eyes. 'I once took a crew in a thirty-footer down to Madeira,' he said. 'The weather turned bad and we nearly didn't make it.'

Suddenly I felt foolish and awkward. I grinned and laughed it off. 'Yeah, well, just a crazy idea, y' know.'

I lay in my bunk that night, the short conversation running over and over in my head. Why had I said I wanted to sail the Atlantic? Where on earth had that thought come from? Was I being given a friendly warning to keep off the big stage? I suppose the whole exchange had taken less than two minutes but I couldn't let it go. I had only the rudiments of sailing, I'd bought a second-hand boat in a state of disrepair, I'd last been in a boat as a fourteen-year-old lad and now I'd made a stupid remark to a seasoned yachtsman that I intended sailing across the Atlantic. As the boat creaked and settled around me I thought about the line between ignorant blockheadedness and self-belief. I'd become independent, stubborn and decisive as I'd grown up but this course was raising new questions. I was beginning to understand just how dangerous the sea could be. Did self-belief have a thin line that hovered as an epitaph for the irresponsible? Did I truly think I was capable of sailing one of the world's great oceans? I drifted off to sleep with a single thought in my head: why not?

Returning from Warsash with my first seamanship certificate and a lasting determination to learn more, I immediately signed up for

a yachtmaster correspondence course. I was impatient to get *Sharky* onto water, and at long last, in mid-June the following year, I hitched her to the car and towed her a dozen or so miles down to Rudyard Lake. Rudyard is a two-hundred-year-old, two-and-a-half-mile-long narrow reservoir built to hold water for the canal system, and lies majestically in a steeply wooded valley in the Staffordshire moor land. On a beautifully sunny afternoon, surrounded by sparkling water, trees and abundant wildlife, I eased my boat onto the public slipway by the dam wall and into the water; my first boat and my proudest possession. She shot into the water as if eager to return, then, held by the ropes, bobbed gently, looking tiny and a bit overawed in the immensity of the lake. Having been tarmac-bound for months, and hemmed in by the confines of grey stone houses, now that she was unencumbered from those closeted conditions I couldn't help thinking that she was indeed quite diminutive. Nevertheless, here she was, here I was; it was time to get nautically acquainted. Clambering onto the deck I began to recall the training I'd received at Warsash, which seemed ages and ages ago. There was a light wind blowing and I fumbled awkwardly with the sails, messing up the cast-off and hoping no one was taking too much notice. At last I headed into the water and turned *Sharky* into the wind. I was nervous, exhilarated and uncertain but overall I felt great. A huge grin spread over my face and I picked up confidence, noticing especially how quiet and peaceful my surroundings were. I eased back against the gunwale and draped my elbow against the coaming. Tension and anxiety dropped like heavy weights as I felt the wind, felt my boat ride the water's motion and felt near contentment. At the back of my mind still lurked the fear that I was now alone. The shoreline was all around but I was now solo in a boat for the first time in my life, and I needed to tack. As the shore side rapidly approached I rehearsed the drill mentally, apprehension rising, a sensation I felt in my mouth. Grabbing the tiller and spreading my feet, I half-stood, pulled the sail in, ducked under the boom and stumbled to the other side of the stern. *Sharky* responded as a seasoned horse to an apprentice jockey – I'll go along with your instructions but don't expect me to like it. I couldn't get the hang of pulling the mainsail in and releasing the jib at quite

the same time, so the boat lurched rather than turned smoothly. I felt clumsy in my movements but I had done it! Achieved my first solo tack, not perfectly but competently, and I knew I would get better with practice. Confidence restored, I spent all afternoon putting in more tacks and gradually improving my technique with the sails and tiller. I felt like a fledgling bird leaving the nest for the first time, awkward and gawky but gradually I was rewarded for my efforts as *Sharky* began to turn more smoothly in the water. I now needed to fulfil a promise I had made to myself some eight months before down in Warsash. Self-consciously I looked about but there was no one in the vicinity. Drawing in a deep breath I let out a great whoop and screamed my bloody head off!

The next day I was back at Rudyard, eager to recapture the thrill. This time I brought along my mate Ian, a complete landlubber but someone I thought might be useful on the helm while I tried out routines with the sails. I was in a rush to learn quickly and get in as much practice as I could. I'd wangled a couple more afternoons off from work and so wanted to maximise my learning. With a crew aboard I had a bit more time to check *Sharky* out and was delighted to discover that she was as responsive, sturdy and reliable as she had been that first day. Best of all there were no leaks and the winter repairs seemed to have been effective.

An unconventional upbringing had taught me self-reliance and an ability to be a quick learner. Over the next few months, whenever I could grab a rare afternoon, I'd get myself ready for the short twenty-five-minute drive to the lake, eager to release *Sharky* from her mooring. I'd impatiently race through the paperwork, sort out the staff then dash off quickly before any problems arose. Each time it was as though I'd been released from a stifling prison – time out for good behaviour, even if only for a few, short precious hours. It was dawning on me that the art of sailing was more in the 'feel' than the technical expertise. Rudyard was a good and sometimes harsh teacher, a place where the wind was unpredictable, where a blow would spring up with a suddenness that would catch me unawares – on one occasion a near knockdown submerged the port cabin window and flooded the cockpit – giving me salutary lessons in over-complacency.

But what I learnt I absorbed. I got to know every inch of *Sharky*, who continued to delight. I began to understand and sense the wind. I could feel the water through the rudder. I practised routines for raising, dropping and reefing the mainsail and changing the jibs every few minutes until I could do them without thinking, then tried them single-handed. I sailed late into the evening to experience the sensation in the dark. Sometimes I sailed on my own, sometimes with one of a few like-minded friends; once I bought my new girlfriend Elaine for a romantic afternoon. For all of us they were fun days with some hairy moments, but for me there was an additional factor. Deep, deep down in my mind the little ocean sail seed was growing, pushing at my psyche as a flower bulb pushes the earth. As I continued to gain love, respect and knowledge for this wondrous new environment, so my thoughts were turning ever more ambitious. Already after just a few sailing hours, Rudyard was beginning to impose its restrictions and I found pottering around the reservoir a tad boring. I'd listen out for weather forecasts announcing strong winds or gales, then dash down to Rudyard to test myself and *Sharky*. Impatient as ever, I wanted to break free of the landlocked boundaries and measure *Sharky* and myself against a greater force. I was sensible enough to know that more work was needed and more money would have to be spent on my boat, but determined enough to know that was what I wanted to do. These thoughts I kept to myself but the trap had been baited with salt spray and I was willingly walking into it. When someone called me a 'puddle sailor' for the first time it was as though the trap had been sprung. Rudyard had been my nursery, now I wanted my sea legs.