Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Extract from...

Solo

Written by Dave Clarke

Published by Blue Dolphin Books

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Copyright © Dave Clarke 2012
First published in 2012 by Blue Dolphin Books,
www.amolibros.co.uk

Distributed by Gardners Books, 1 Whittle Drive, Eastbourne,
East Sussex, BN23 6QH
Tel: +44 (0) 1323 521555 | Fax: +44 (0) 1323 521666

The moral right of Dave Clarke and John Holloway to be identified as the authors of the work has been asserted herein in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

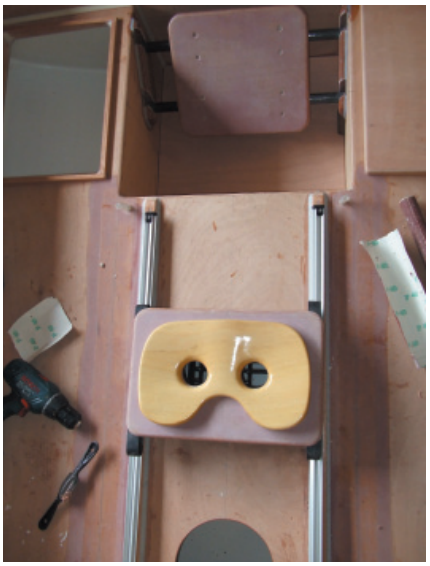
British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data.
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

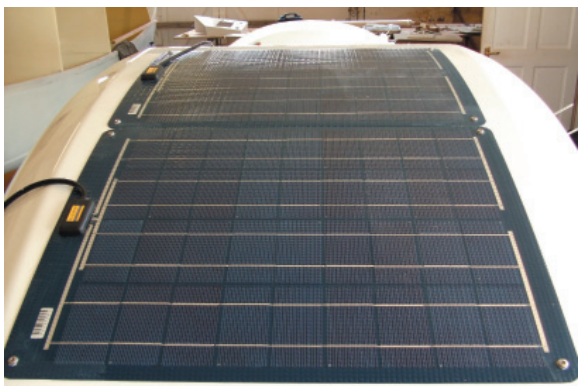
ISBN 978-0-9555124-1-4

Typeset by Amolibros, Milverton, Somerset
www.amolibros.com
This book production has been managed by Amolibros
Printed and bound by T J International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall, UK

Contents

List of Illustrations		ix
Acknowledgements		xi
Foreword		xiii
Introduction		xiv
Chapter One	A stage is set	1
Chapter Two	Birth of a project	11
Chapter Three	Gathering pace	15
Chapter Four	Continued preparation	24
Chapter Five	She's mine at last!	32
Chapter Six	Stuck in Mayfair	37
Chapter Seven	Positive Outcomes	43
Chapter Eight	Launch time at Rudyard	49
Chapter Nine	A broken back	56
Chapter Ten	New Year in La Gomera	64
Chapter Eleven	Final preparation	70
Chapter Twelve	Delays	79
Chapter Thirteen	Away at last	84
Chapter Fourteen	This weather	95
Chapter Fifteen	Happy sadness	105
Chapter Sixteen	Whale attack	114
Chapter Seventeen	The pressure builds	123
Chapter Eighteen	Destination Barbados	131
Chapter Nineteen	Milestones and turning points	138
Chapter Twenty	Mixed emotions	145
Epilogue		158
Appendix		162





4. Above left: Checking measurements.

5. Above right: Fitting the rowing seat.

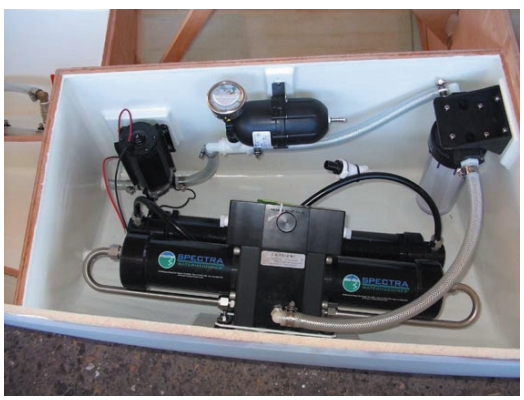
6. Left: Fitted solar panels.

7. Below left: Water desalinator built into the construction of the boat.

8. Below right: Control panel for the electrics.

9. Facing page, above: A final pose in Jamie's workshop.

10. Facing page, below: On the trailer and ready to go.



Chapter Fourteen

This weather

A boat over troubled waters

AFTER A HEARTY MEAL and some much-needed calories my mood lifted slightly, and with gradually calming seas I enjoyed relaxing in my cabin listening to a little Simon and Garfunkel, perversely messing with the lyrics as I sang: '…like a boat over troubled waters'. I was a little concerned about the depressive feeling that was washing over me, and perhaps unwisely tried to analyse why it was occurring. I'd been working towards this opportunity for more than a year, from a seed planted decades earlier: a germinated dream blossoming into reality, yet I felt sad. Why? I was now master of my own destiny with an ocean for playground and enough freedom to lose myself in. But I couldn't shake the latent sadness off. Perhaps I needed a good night's sleep.

The morning started early and after a quick breakfast of muesli and coffee I was ready for dawn to break so I could get on the oars. The sea had been gradually increasing throughout the night, nevertheless I felt my spirits lifting. What was needed was to get stuck in and do some rowing. If sleep hadn't fully cured my oppressive mood, then maybe exertion would. I rowed hard for three solid hours before taking a break. Shoving a Mars bar in my mouth I rummaged for the

jet boil, turned the gas on, flicked the ignite switch and placed the stove between my bare feet. As I lifted the coffee jar from the locker the lid flew off and the contents ejected, resulting in three-quarters of a large jar of Nescafé blowing around the wet boat. The damned powder blew everywhere, swirling around the boat in a vortex, then adhering to every surface it touched, a distinctly aromatic coffee cloud that was momentarily pleasant until its sticky demise. Instinctively I wanted to blow my top but fought back the anger and tried to see the funny side, not easy with a gooey brown mess everywhere and a wasted half an hour cleaning the locker and its contents. The decks were soon washed off by the sea and eventually I managed to make some coffee, finish my Mars bar and assess the damage. I was down to one jar of coffee and with still no sight of the elusive teabags I feared I might have a major crisis on my hands. 'Mutiny no less, Captain Clarke!' I shouted out loud, releasing some inner tension. I chuckled. Either I was starting to go mad or slipping out of the disgruntled atmosphere I was orbiting in.

The wind continued to blow from the southeast and every time I stopped rowing I would begin to be blown northwards. By the end of the day there was a good force-five coming directly from the south, so much so that I needed to deploy the para sea anchor to help counter the threat of being blown back to the Canaries. It also started to rain heavily with huge thunderclouds bringing on early darkness as I fumbled with the anchor lines, a ghostly sky cloaking the remaining light.

The sea anchor is like a parachute. It has a diameter of three metres and is on a seventy-metre length of rope from a harness at the front of the boat. I had set mine with a buoy and a length of line to keep the anchor steady ten metres under the sea. I also attached to the buoy eighty metres of thinner rope to act as a tripping line. This would enable me to collapse and retrieve the chute when required. Lots of rope, all different colours, and it had to be deployed slowly from the boat in such a way that it wouldn't tangle and wouldn't get caught on the rudder.

It was a challenge, but eventually it was out and all secured. *Solo* now turned her head to the wind and rode high on the breakers as

they blew up from the south – at least they wouldn't be slamming me side on. The para anchor is good to use in heavy seas, as not only does it slow the boat in drifting the wrong way, but by keeping the head to wind it is slightly safer and stands less chance of being rolled.

I switched on the spare GPS. I was still going north slightly but I reckoned in this wind, without the anchor, I'd be off back to La Gomera at about a mile an hour. Even at anchor in a rough sea my mood continued to rise. I was getting desperate for a decent brew of tea and realised I hadn't yet checked the front of the two forward lockers. These were mainly packed with emergency food rations and spares that I might not need. The extreme front of the boat was awkward to get to, as I needed to climb halfway into the forward storage compartment then access the lockers via a small diameter locker seal. I wasn't building my hopes up that the teabags were there but felt I had to look – if nothing else it would confirm they weren't onboard. Twenty minutes later I let out a whooping sound and a great cheer! I was ecstatic, I'd found the damn brew bags. For the second time that day I'd also caught myself speaking out loud. I guessed it was more down to tea deprivation than the beginnings of madness, at least I hoped so.

I celebrated with several mugs of hot sweet tea and all the biscuits I was able to dunk. Amazing how such a simple thing like a teabag could make a difference. I actually felt a bit guilty on the last of my second pack of jammy dodgers, as I'd never eaten sixteen in one sitting before, though I was keen to eat as much as I could muster to give me energy to burn the next day. I'd calculated that a daily minimum of 5,000 calories was required but assumed that might not always be possible, hence I'd bulked up before leaving home. It was inevitable that daily rowing was going to make an impact on my body fats at some stage, so all the food I took was carefully considered. Apart from high-calorie meals, I was reliant on energy drinks and chocolate bars, the latter providing about 500 calories each. Sunrise the following day was a dirty affair with sullen rain clouds all around, the only difference being their level of blackness. Clearly the weather had caught my earlier moodiness. I breakfasted on a bowl of hot porridge

and sultanas, another ready meal in a bag, but after adding the hot water and with a quick stir it was ready to be eaten straightaway. It was quite delicious and I added a good tablespoon of sugar to set me up for the day. Checking the GPS brought bad news. I'd been blown back five miles towards La Gomera in the night. Sod it, I thought, but it was out of my hands. I made a brew and dismissed any dismal feelings. Going backwards now and again was all part of this challenge. I just had to keep a strong mind and deal with it head on.

It took me about thirty minutes to get the sea anchor in and stowed. I tied it all down on deck ready to deploy quickly as the wind was still in the south and I just felt it would be necessary again before nightfall. The day was tough going, the wind continuing from the south, bringing squall after squall. No sooner had one given me a soaking than another charged in, ready and poised on the horizon, lulling me into a few minutes of comfort before it began its charge and unleashed its concealed cargo of rain. Cold, biting rain.

Days ticked by and one by one the diary pages were turned over. As the miles travelled increased, so the miles to my destination decreased, a useful thought to keep in the back of my head. More was less. Week two was nearing its end and routines onboard now fitted neatly into a timetable of events that seemed to be running smoothly. The rowing remained hard with the wind rarely in the same direction from one day to the next, kicking up chaotic swells, a cauldron of confusion with *Solo* and me doing our best to travel southwest and find some stability from the trade winds. It's difficult to describe the act of rowing for long periods of time, but despite the pain from blisters (not helped by salt water) and a constantly aching body, after a while both mind and body adjusted well. Pain became the norm and was often ignored. It was the relentless regime of doing the same actions every few seconds that hit hard and dulled my mind, unless I channelled it into inner thoughts that blocked out the enduring forwards and backwards motion. Even then there was guilt if a rest break spilled over its allotted time – usually about fifteen minutes – and then my longed-for freedom became a driven treadmill. Row, break, row, break, row, break, each stint keeping me going with the thought of little rewards of tea and chocolate bars until the thought

of that huge, mouth-watering feast at sundown became a reality: a real carrot at the end of the stick.

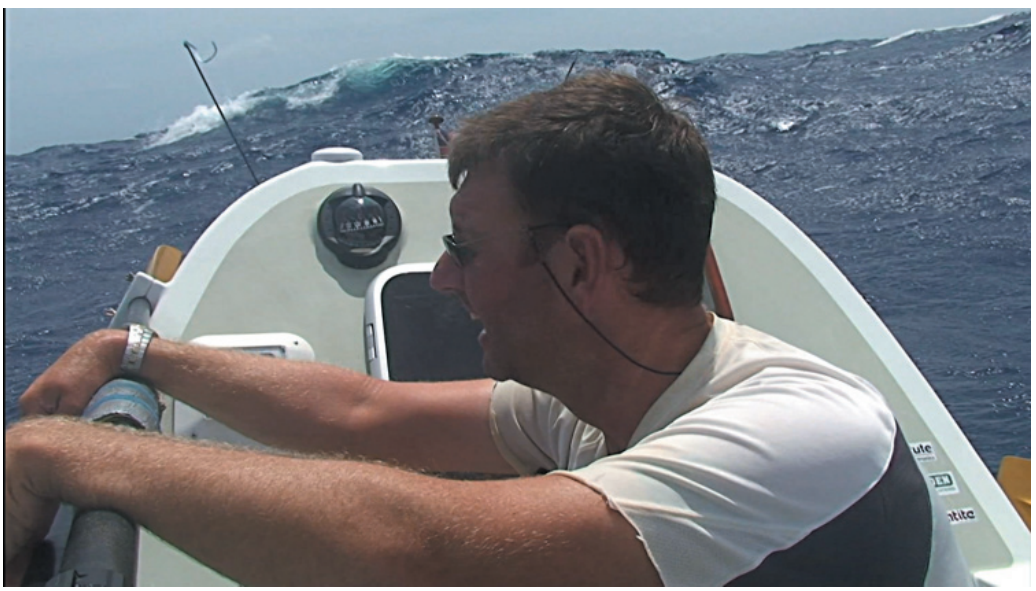
Rain squalls passed through and were followed by fine western Saharan dust, dragged airborne and carried from the desert by the wind constantly in the southeast quarter. Sand got everywhere – in my eyes, hair, cabin, in my food. Everywhere. *Solo* looked like she'd been sprinkled with a dusting of brown icing sugar by an over-zealous chef. It turned the air grey, catching dry on the taste buds, therefore providing an ideal excuse for more brews. That was fine by me. I had several days of tea-drinking to catch up on.

I decided I'd wash *Solo* off later, as even with the odd wave splashing the decks the dust lay everywhere, congregating in the corners and sticking to the cabins and hatch covers. But as the day progressed a dense cloud layer started to build on the horizon, very dark clouds: menacing. The wind too was strengthening and increasingly gusty, identified as darker patches of sea rushing towards me. Before long, spits of rain bore in and as the blackened sky drew ever closer I decided to get the jet boil on, make a meal and then hit the safety of the cabin. I reckoned I deserved an early finish and guessed I'd less than half an hour of daylight left with the oncoming storm bringing on a premature night. The minute I'd stowed the oars the skies engulfed me, moving at a pace that scorched away the final minutes of daylight, robbing the sunset of its glory. The whole scenario felt ominous, satanic even. The rain began to fall in torrents and I moved swiftly to get the boiling water into the bag of food and get myself into the safety of the cabin. Eating dinner ten minutes later I was rewarded by a theatre of thunder that cracked and rumbled so loud it shook the sea. Venomous lightning scarred the skies, determined and constant, lighting the seas and illuminating *Solo*'s topsides as the rain pelted any remaining dust to the bottom of the ocean. Although an amazing and even exciting situation, I was also nervous. I was being thrown around by an ever-increasing sea surrounded by a massive storm, but while I felt safe in it the lightning unnerved me. How would *Solo* cope with a direct lightning strike, a real and very deadly possibility? How would I? I'd seen what lightning could do to trees. And there were no trees out there, just me and the boat as the only

30. Above: Some of the various sizes of flying fish, some so small they would fit on your finger nail.

31. Right: Final moments for the Dorado as the Blue Marlin swallows it head first.

32. Below: Having a rest from rowing on a challenging but enjoyable day.



36. Above: Enjoying surfing down some challenging seas (or going slightly mad!).

37. Left: About to be doused by a wall of water.

38. Below: Breaks just short of Solo so missed the brunt of it.

target. Once hit there'd be no time to abandon ship, and anyway, what precisely would I abandon ship into? I'd elected in the early stages of planning not to take a life raft. The design would have required a special compartment and life rafts are heavy bulky things. *Solo* was virtually unsinkable apart from lightning and fire, so it had been a calculated risk to exclude one. I stayed as still as I could in a rocking boat, trying not to move too much in case I drew attention to myself, a pawn in God's game of thunderous chess. I consoled myself with two packets of chocolate Brazils, daring not to rattle the bags too much. Silly, I know, but it made me feel slightly better.

The storm lasted most of the night, but thankfully the thunder and lightning moved off, leaving an exhausted and gnarled sea. As the sun fought its way through to a new dawn, heavy rain still lashed down. I felt relieved. It had been a long night with little sleep, and again I'd lost ground to the north. I was keen to get on the oars because at noon that day I could mark another cross on the chart. Two full weeks at sea. I rowed with renewed energy, relieved to be away from the grip of the night. Even though the rain was heavy it felt good to be in the fresh air, visibility was poor, giving the impression that I wasn't making much ground. Nevertheless things felt good.

The noon fix was marked on the chart. In comparison to the first week it had been a poor second seven days. As the crow flies I had only gained 30 miles further south and 160 miles further west, and I couldn't help but feel a tad disappointed. I picked at the blisters on my hand and gazed forlornly at the chart. It'd been a hell of a week and the rowing had been hard – most nights I knew I would lose some of the hard-gained miles earned that day. There was no point in being maudlin, the weather had its own destiny and had become the oppressor. I felt it was testing me, testing my patience, my resolve, my ability to see this through, and my determination hardened. I went back to the oars and spent the rest of the day hard at it, the exertion felt good and I was pleased that I was beginning a new week. Maybe this one would be better?

That first day of the third week I was especially keen to finish the last rowing of the evening, not because of food, though I was weak with hunger, but because I had it in my diary to call Elaine and the

boys. I'd set a day and time to call and now it had come. I removed the satellite phone from its waterproof case and set up the external aerial. The wire was fine enough to allow the hatch to be closed, and a strip of gaffer tape held the aerial in place outside despite the weather. I dialled the number from the comfort of my cabin and my son Bradley answered. We chatted about his days at school, what he'd been doing on his computer, what the weather was like and general inconsequential stuff. It seemed the family were getting into a routine without me, just as I was without them. I was bombarded with excited questions. How did it feel to row all day? Was I lonely? How long before I got back? Had I seen any sharks? Had I got any blisters? Oh yes, Bradley, yes indeed! It was good to know both boys were okay as he passed the phone to Elaine. We chatted for twenty minutes about day-to-day events, her work, how the lads were coping, how *she* was coping – all the usual domestic chitchat of a married couple. I underplayed the strength of the wind and storms, as I didn't want her to go through any unnecessary worrying – the weather was my problem and I would deal with it in my own way. Elaine knew conditions had been bad as she'd been in touch with Anna, Anthony's girlfriend, and had also been reading the blogs from the other two boats. I played it down and said things weren't that bad, the other lads weren't used to Atlantic moods as much as I was. 'Wait till we have a real blow,' I joked. Joel, my younger son, came on the phone and said, 'Hello Daddy, I miss you, goodnight.' So few words carrying huge emotions. I felt a lump in my throat and fought it back as Elaine came back to the phone to say goodnight. I switched the phone off and sat there in the silence. It felt strange to do all that talking from a tiny boat, adrift it seemed, in time and space. I played back the conversations in my mind, having so long waited for the chance to natter, then over so soon: all those feelings, then nothing. An emptiness engulfed me and I sat for a few minutes thinking of my family. Tears welled up but I fought the urge to cry. I didn't want to feel sad or sorry for myself, I wanted to feel happy. Speaking with my family had been a happy time. I snapped out of the immediate sadness and rummaged around the locker for my dinner of dehydrated meals. Same packets, same old flavours. I'd brought only five different

types, shepherd's pie, chicken and noodles, spaghetti Bolognese, chilli con carne and lamb pilaff, and already they were starting to become a bit repetitive. That night I had two ready meals of shepherd's pie, fast becoming a firm favourite. I'd other meals and concoctions aside from the dehydrated ones but figured I ought to get better acquainted with my environment before I started cooking on a jet boil. Conditions also had to be a bit calmer as I didn't want burns or scalds to contend with, cooking with a jet boil between bare legs was not for the faint hearted. I also thought it would give me something to look forward to, a sort of mini-rewards-and-celebrations approach. The easier stuff to eat was going down well, though I'd slightly underestimated my need for calorific intake in the evenings. I was finding it perfectly normal to eat a 200-gram bar of chocolate then follow it with a Mars bar or two, and that was after a huge meal.

Week three continued with me drifting in and out of meditative mood, the weather still testing and changeable. Lots of squalls and lumpy seas, but I was making progress, albeit more slowly than I'd have preferred, but at least it was towards my destination. I figured the wind would eventually turn more to the north and I could then make some southing. The conditions were still difficult though and little did I realise I was building up a bank of internal frustrations that would eventually have to blow. Even rowing hard most days it was tough to make progress and at one point I strained my back a little and had to give myself a good talking to for being stupid. I had a long way to go and injury would be a disastrous end to the journey. I still needed reminders not to fight the weather.

The end of the third week coincided with the first day of February: a new month and perhaps a better weather pattern to come. The weather was becoming all-consuming, and I could now feel the build-up of tension and resentment as the days continued to frustrate. Oddly, I wasn't unhappy, just very frustrated. I'd encountered some horrible days rowing and going backwards or sideward, having to earn every mile, only to lose it at night. Some days after rowing it would feel like I'd been run over, so painkillers and anti-inflammatory tablets were now mandatory. By the end of each day I'd stink like a camel with stale sweat, my clothes constantly damp and mildewed by the salt. I

had another mishap with timing my exit from the cabin and was just getting out as a wave washed. Fortunately, I took the brunt of it but sufficient found its way in. There was no damage but I cursed the sea endlessly as once things got wet with saltwater they never seemed to dry out fully, the salt seemingly holding the moisture.

I cursed the rowing too. My frustrations reached daily pinnacles, the oars jousting and jostling with each other and the sea, with me the abused referee trying to make sense of the game. Seas became akin to an uncontrollable twin-tub washer, wild and confused, wind from the southwest making any headway virtually impossible. This morning's result after a brutal and relentless four-hour stint was half a mile backwards from the day's start point. I could have wept royally, could have sat there thinking things couldn't get any worse. Then an unseen wave would slap the boat and douse me yet again. I let an odd tear of frustration go along with the dripping saltwater and just dug deeper for more resolve. I lost count of the times I had to stow the oars and put out the para anchor to help save losing further ground back to the Canaries. The only positive act possible was to fire up the jet boil for a brew. Many were the times when rowing became pointless, forward motion impossible. I sensed the conditions were gradually beating me, wearing me down, fatiguing and frustrating me. A new routine emerged. I'd finish my brew, then check the lines on the anchor straining under the pressure of the seas, wondering, ever wondering whether progress was being made.

A petrel darted around *Solo*, seemingly appearing from nowhere. A black-and-white elegance on wings, with full acrobatic skills on display, as it danced and swooped over the waves. I feel an affinity to ocean birds and love it when they visit, another freestyle wanderer in this vastness of blue and grey. This one came when I was in dire need of a moral pick-me-up, and it made me feel not so alone. It brought the promise of fleeting companionship, another being having to tackle the harsh environment and grizzly conditions. I exchanged my cursing and took comfort from nature, a smile etched across my face. Remarkable that a solitary bird could make my spirits soar. I laughed at myself and the adversity of the situation I found myself in. Here by choice and now no choice.

The petrel twirled and dazzled briefly before heading off on its lonely journey. I watched it disappear to a tiny speck, then, strangely happy and wistful, I retired to the sanctuary of my cabin.