

Day Nine

Early Sunday May 10th, 1998: I lost 8 miles to the current last night, pushing us Southeast.

I finish my breakfast and open the companionway doors. I clip on to a safety line in the cockpit, before stepping out and closing the doors behind me. I switch off the mizzenmast anchor light. It's foggy, the wind is picking up, it's rapidly becoming a strong wind. The waves were picking up fast. We are getting knocked around a bit.

I want to take advantage of this wind and make some tracks, boogie time.

With great difficulty. I barely managed to get a small jib up, one step above the storm jib. A sail designed to take winds up to 40 knot's. With even greater difficulty, I succeeded in double reefing the main. We took off like a bat out of hell. Wind speed is increasing steadily, the waves are building in size and thickness, they have white caps on them already. Gonna take advantage of this wind. Make tracks

The wind kept blowing harder, it came from the North East. It looks like a storm is coming up fast. We are headed right smack dab into the middle of it. We kept on sailing, beating into the wind. North toward Halifax and a foreboding sky, a rapidly approaching storm. Wind speed increased intensely, so did our speed. Theanna took off, crashing over the tops of the waves.

The wind continued to pick up. So did we.

Theanna starts to plane, wow, we are surfing now!

Jim and Nynke told me about Theanna's sailing capabilities, she is designed for heavy weather off shore racing, on the southern ocean. 49 feet in over all length, a 10 ½ foot beam at its widest point. She has a 45-foot water line, a normal top displacement speed of 9 ½ to 10 knots per hour, any faster and she is (one of the first) designed to come out of the water like a surf board, bouncing over the tops of waves. Theanna is a sled, a bullet. She can really go, they told me.

The only problem with that, Theanna has to be in really heavy weather, to see these capabilities in action. Looks like I'm getting a first hand demonstration, she's hauling ass. keeps me busy at the wheel she's like a sports car. Just like Jim and Nynke said. Holy cow! I see what you mean guy's.

Yabba dabba doo !!!!

I glance over at the knot meter for an instant while planing down a big wave and up and over another it said 16 knots. I never had a chance to look again, I'm too busy steering her. There are moments when it felt like we are going a lot faster. I'm just too busy steering, negotiating the huge narly waves, Too busy to look and see.

My poor fingers are getting numb on the wheel it's so cold. I'm getting soaking wet from heavy spray. The storm is here. It's getting really nasty. I don't think I can stand it much longer. By 12 noon I'm already exhausted, and freezing. I have to fully concentrate on steering. The waves are really starting to get whipped up to steep breaking heights. Some of them come crashing down on us, at times covering the entire deck and filling up part of the cockpit. I manage to avoid most of them, Theanna is moving so damn fast. These wild waves are sneaky bastards. To see them all, I'd have to have eyes in the back of my head.

What a concentration exercise! I'm afraid! It's dangerous! I'm cold and wet. Even so, its incredibly exciting, a real rush.

I love roller coasters, these huge breaking rollers, are rolling wave coasters. I like it, it's fun at first. But after five hours, I'm so exhausted and in freezing pain. It went from fun to very hard work to sheer survival and torture, really quick. I hang on by the skin of my teeth.

Sea conditions are worsening By the minute, wind speed intensifying, this is bad, I'm in deep shit now.

I have to make a move soon, while I still could. Had to stop and heave to while I got strength left. More important, the fucking weather and sea conditions continue to get worse by the minute. If I'm to survive, I have to act fast.

Then it happened, I can't believe my eye's. The wind's blowing so damn hard. The jib pulls so hard on the head stay, it began to stretch like a rubber band. The Jib pulls this ¼ stainless steel heavy-duty head stay, out like the string on a bow an arrow, it looks like it's made of rubber.

I release the jib sheet before the head stay snaps in two. Immediately it starts flapping around like something straight out of hell. Crackling, slapping hysterically, it looks and sounds like a thunder twister, it is.

I feel like I'm in a Moby Dick movie, except it's for real, the sea is alive frothing, foaming at the mouth, I've never seen anything so wild and terrifying. It's got me completely surrounded, as far as I can see.

I turn Theanna hard into the wind, tighten up the main sheet. The mainsail instantly starts to flap like crazy. With the bow, head into the wind. I wrap all the ties for the mainsail around my neck, I have no time to be afraid. I must act fast.

I clipped on to the jack line, tightened up my butt cheeks and stepped out of the cockpit. Making my way carefully along the starboard side, clip and grip, up to the main mast.

Theanna is a bucking bronco, I get soaked, sopped by spray, from waves slapping Theanna all around.

I release the main halyard, I pulled the mainsail down with one free hand and held on for dear life with the other. I got it down and quickly tie it to the boom using all the ties I had. I hope the fact, the sail was still double reefed when tied it to the boom. The taught jiffy reefing system lines would help hold the mainsail on its boom. I don't want to loose it. There's no way in hell I can get it off in time and down below in this howling wind and savage sea. Like balancing on the back of a 49ft long, wild bucking, Brahma Bull.

I got the main sail under control. Next I made my way up to the fore deck and brought down the jib. I want to bring it down and stow it below. I pull it down onto the bobbing fore deck, while being clobbered by the wild whipping jib sheets. The blows from them felt like a LAPD billy club to the head. I tried unsuccessfully to untie the jib sheets from the jib. The wind had pulled the bolin knots so tight, they are impossible to open. I thought that was impossible. The sheet knots felt petrified hardened like steal.

Unreal man, this is blowing my mind.

Unbelievably true. The bolin knot is designed to withstand tremendous pressure, it's very strong. Yet it's still very easy to open. Supposed to be, so you can change sails quickly. This freak fuck wind, is stronger than the knots, pulling them tight as hell. This is bizarre, not normal. I'm forced to leave the jib sail on deck. I bunch it up in a ball, jam it into the nose of the bow. Using the locked on solid, jib sheets, to tie it down. Wrapping the lines around and around the sail, then securing it to the large cleat on the for deck. Then tying the remaining slack to the anchor windlass and the jib is still hanked onto the head stay. The huge storm is gearing up, continuously, I quickly made it as secure as possible.

I hang on tight, it's a wild ride. The cloudy sky above has turned jet black. It looked evil. Foreboding.

All through this, I keep getting drenched by breaking waves. Continually, slamming hard into us. Rolling across the bow and me. I'm terrified, cold, wet, seasick, freezing. The wind chill factor stings my body. The wind blew the spray so hard, it feels like needles when it hits me in the face, it hurts.

My next task get the storm boards on soon as possible, never mind the colossal challenge before me. I'm clipped on deck in a full-blown storm, getting worse all the time. I brought the storm boards up one at a time. I'm afraid to leave a storm board unattended in the cockpit, they would just blow away like a piece of tissue paper in this wind.

I'm almost blown off deck, knocked off, washed off several times. I hang on tight. My safety harness is my insurance policy, I clipped my way around the boat. I barely manage to get the storm boards on. Using every last bit of strength I had left, hanging on to a storm board and the boat at the same time. We were hit by breaking waves crashing onto the boat. I had no choice but to continue. These boards had to be put on or we were doomed to a watery grave. I got them on just in time, waves crashed into them almost immediately. The wild seas are confused raging from all directions, big waves are rising, crashing hard into those storm boards.

I'm so glad I put them on. I'm so glad.

I tie the wheel and lash down the auxiliary tiller on the stern. I left the reefed mizzen up, I make sure its sheets are pulled tight and tied off. I look around at the ghastly surroundings and gasped with fear. I went below to ride out this terribly nasty storm. I shut the doors behind me and locked them tight. The pandemonium awaiting me, in the darkened main cabin, is indescribably insane.

I have second thoughts about everything, I feel totally lost, completely exhausted, sea sick, numb with fear. It's intense, total pandemonium down below, inside the boat. With nothing but the worst nightmare imaginable, just getting started outside. Shit a brick, this is fucked up.

I got out of my wet clothes, into some dry ones (dry as can be out here, everything gets so damp) I climb into the pilots' berth, with pillows and a sleeping bag. I shivered with cold and trembled with fear at the same time. I try my best to warm myself up. I slide into the bag and brace the pillows around me. Theanna rocked and bounced around like hell, jumping all over the place. Horrid sounds.

The tremendous pounding of the waves against Theanna, sounded like explosions. They are so loud and getting louder. I prayed for peace and protection. I get a grip. I got faith in Theanna, we had rode out a storm together before. Nothing like this one though, this shit's already way scarier than anything I have ever imagined. And it's just getting started! Lord have mercy on us. I prayed with all my heart.

I have a horrible feeling it's going to get a lot worse before this night is over. I feel a bulging knot growing in my stomach. I'm extremely tense, it looks, sounds and feels dreadful, so absolutely awful. Things flying all over the cabin, unbearable, the noise this racket alone made. The sound of the wind screaming through the rigging, exploding waves, hitting us so hard. Theanna shook from the shock waves while I tremble with fear. I'm unnerved, maddened, I do my best to hold my nut, keep my cool.

I could do nothing to calm the stormy sea outside, I thought maybe I could try to calm the sea of fear within me. I pray out loud, it seems to help. I try my best to stay calm, the wild storm increases relentlessly. It rages on, and on. Shit I realize I forgot to put the mizzen anchor light on. I must to do it. Before it gets dark. Oh shit! I got to do it.

I'm not looking forward to it. By now waves are crashing regularly into the cockpit filling it all up. Experiencing near knock downs. Heeling almost all the way over with our masts almost in the water. The mizzen anchor light switch, a pull switch that lives in a locker inside the cockpit. I'll have to take the pad lock off and open the hatch cover on the locker. Exposing Theanna to danger, while I pulled the light switch on, close the hatch cover, put the pad lock back on the hasp. Lock it.

Going back out there is the last thing on earth I want to do. I have to do it, it could save our lives. I need a navigation light on at night, it's vital to our survival. I'll do it, but not until just before dark, to save battery power.

I waited in the pilot's berth, submerged in the sleeping bag. I felt warmer. We keep bouncing around frantically. I soon get seasick. I kept a bucket next to me. I can't hold down anything, not even water. I worried I might get dehydrated.

Just before dark I climb out of the bag and the pilots berth. I managed to pull on my safety harness and foul weather gear without injury. It's complete chaos unleashed down below. It sounds so insane. I can't imagine what it might look like out there. I hang on tight, look at the cockpit, through the windows on companionway doors. I wait for a wave to come crashing into the cockpit.

It came crashing in, filling up the cockpit with a swirling white foamy head. I time how long it is until the next wave. Not long. I wait, we get hit by another incoming storm wave. Soon as it drains out of the cockpit, I quickly open up the companionway doors, clip on and jump out into the cockpit. Slamming the doors shut behind me. I Locked them as fast as possible before another wave could crash into the cockpit and flood the main cabin.

Sinking us.

Doors shut I look around amazed, the oceans completely out of control, a totally confused raging sea. This is flipped out. The wind has whipped the huge waves into a totally wild, white foamy frenzy. It looks so horrendously wicked. I made my way to the locker with the light switch, next to the wheel. I look around at the crazy waves, see none about to break in the cockpit. I get the key out of my pocket, insert the key into the pad lock.

I'm on my hands and knees keeping my head down from the insane thrashing wind. Before I can turn the key, a big wave crashes in the cockpit from behind me, I didn't see it coming. I heard it and felt it. I grab hold of the wheel with one hand and hung on tight. Instantly I'm floating around the cockpit filled with water, on my back, keeping my head above water. As it knocked me around the cockpit. Like in washing tub.

I laugh to keep from crying.

The cockpit emptied quickly, through the 4 large drains, two on each side of the cockpit, underneath the cockpit benches and through the drains in the bathtub floor and the floor under the wheel pedestal. It drains out fast, I'm soaking wet, extremely nervous. I looked around again for another killer wave. None about to hit the cockpit at that moment. Then moving a lot faster than you could ever read this, I open and close the locker hatch cover. Pull on the mizzen anchor light switch, before the hatch cover slammed shut.

I lock it and look around for another freak wave attack. Its okay, go for it. I open the companionway doors, quickly step just inside them. Reaching back outside, once my body is safe inside. Unclip myself from the safety line stretched across the cockpit. Unclipped and unhooked, I close the doors behind me fast as possible. I duck, avoid projectiles catapulting around below. I pull off my soaking wet clothes. Wow, close call. Have to be more careful, not too many sets of damp clothes left in my cabin closet.

I'm so cold my teeth are chattering. I climb back into the sleeping bag, in the pilot's berth and braced myself. I got my chart, hand held GPS and flashlight with me inside the pilots berth. I calculate we only made 14 nautical miles north. Before heaving to, around 12:30 p.m, on this unforgettably hellacious afternoon.

I thought it would be more, Theanna moving so damn fast. Seemed like we were really flying to me. I reasoned another slower sailing vessel would have made no progress at all. Theanna the champion ocean racer, that set a record, racing in a hurricane. She made 14 miles north. Over the tops of waves and a strong current, right into the heart of the storm, the jaws of death. Waiting to chew us up and hopefully spit us out.

We were beating hard, close hauled into the wind, surfing over the waves and the strong current. The seas current is moving so fast against us, we were only making 4 or 5 knots an hour, in actual distance gained. Even though the knot metered said, we were being propelled like a rocket.

The storm is pushing us west, back toward America at about 2 knots an hour. I'm dreadfully seasick from the boats frantic gyrating motion, it never stops, just gets worse.

The storm rages on, building stronger and stronger through out the night.

I couldn't sleep, if I wanted to. I'm so scared, we could die any minute. I don't want to sleep anyway. The force of the giant waves, is so tremendously powerful. Crashing and pounding the hell out of us. I don't know how Theanna can take such a beating, or for how long. It's getting worse. If the boat opened up and we went to the bottom, I don't want to miss anything.

Sleep is out of the question.

I'm wide-awake, eye's as wide open as they could get and popping out frequently. Fingers crossed, toes crossed, and my eyes crossed. Praying and hoping. I held my nut the best I could. That means I didn't die of a heart attack yet. It's so terrifying. That uncertainty, are we going to die any second, you don't know, you just hang on. There is nothing else to do but hope and pray.

I believe anybody in my shoes, even an atheist would be praying, just in case they made a mistake.

Nobody really knows what it's like to be in a storm like this, in a sailboat, unless you have been there. Believe me when I tell you. It is truly unimaginable. I read a lot of books about storms and survival.

I never had an inkling of what it's really like until now.

Unimaginable ain't the word, more like being in a blender. I keep praying it will end soon, burn its self out.

Please God. Have mercy.