



April 2004 - Short Story Competition Winner



Stick to the Plans

By Thomas Hembroff

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With her full complement of working sails trimmed, our Polynesian catamaran *Piggy* was gracefully bounding southward. It was mid-November, and Fijians were already hauling their boats out in preparation for cyclone season. In Fiji, my brother Don and I had exhausted our limited monetary funds and, as such, had decided to attempt passage to Russell, New Zealand, prior to the onset of the nastier weather patterns typically borne in the South Pacific at this time of year. We hoped to regenerate our pocket books in New Zealand to provide enough money to continue the world cruise we had hastily begun four months ago in Vancouver, Canada. I was twenty-four, and my brother Don, two years younger. Also onboard was a struggling young artist we had picked up in Hawaii. Brian had an eager yearn for adventure on the high seas, and in exchange for a share of the passage expenses, the gangly, landlocked American had persuaded us to have him on for the passage to New Zealand. Although he had never been on a boat before, he felt the experience would benefit his expression of art. As it would happen, he was not to be disappointed.

We were five days out of Suva, close reaching due-south on brisk, easterly force four winds that kept our sails full and sent *Piggy* skipping effortlessly across the open swell. I took a routine evening sight and calculated us to be roughly 300 nautical miles north of New Zealand.

“Landfall in two days,” I exclaimed confidently to Don and Brian at the port chart table. “Let’s hit the sack for the night guys,” I mustered before crawling into my starboard bunk, to be lulled asleep by the gentle acceleration-deceleration pattern I had grown so used to.

Just before dawn and the beginning of my watch, I startled awake to a sickeningly repetitive thud and shudder, followed by wrenching, high-pitched squeaks. Something had broken! I pulled myself out of my bunk and peered out the tiny cabin window looking forward into the stale light of a drizzly gray morning. To my utter horror, I could see the forward crossbeam lifting slightly from the deck as we reached the bottom of a swell.

“Oh my God, Don! I think one of the beam fittings has broken!” I croaked in disbelief to my groggy brother, who was half-asleep in the aft bunk. Struggling into my raingear, I gave Don an incredulous look of surprise. He pulled the blanket up tightly to his head as he rolled over on his side.

“Take it easy man, it’s probably nothing. If you need a hand, I’ll get dressed,” he grunted back calmly. His nonchalance did little to temper my anxiety. Dodging some

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spray whipped up by the 15-knot breeze, I clambered out from the cabin and made my way forward. Sure enough, one of the four fittings holding the forward crossbeam to the starboard hull had cracked apart! My mind raced to provide a rational explanation. Each fitting is $\frac{1}{4}$ inch steel bar, four inches wide and lag bolted to the beam. At the bottom of the fitting, a flange of angle iron should have been welded on, through which it is bolted to the deck. A creeping nausea overcame me as I realized our mistake. In our haste to build the boat, we had neglected to weld that large angle-iron reinforcement to the fitting and instead, had made each fitting from a longer piece of bar and merely *bent* the bottom to 90 degrees. In the boathouse on the banks of False Creek, the idea had seemed economical and efficient, but now I began to ponder the ramifications of our thriftiness. The total load on the beam is taken right at this bend and can amount to several tons as the boat wrenches in a seaway. Without designer consultation, we had drastically weakened the fitting at its most critical point!

I had been kneeling by the broken fitting totally mesmerized for perhaps 20 minutes when I realized that Don was standing beside me.

“Bad karma, man,” he managed as we pondered together while the beam creaked and moaned in its newfound freedom against the deck.

“No kidding!” I retorted, “There’s no use putting blame on anything here. Shouldn’t we be doing something?” It had been at least half an hour since it had broken, and in that time we had traveled over four miles. As we discussed the problem and scrutinized the remaining fittings, we grew aware that the situation wasn’t worth panicking over.

“Must be just some flaw in the steel,” Don offered.

“Yeah, I guess we’ll have to locate a welding shop as soon as we get in. Looks like the other fittings are able to carry the extra load for now,” I added. The other fittings outwardly looked fine and we agreed there seemed little that we could do about it anyway. We were 250 miles north of New Zealand, and if we could continue at this rate, we would make landfall late tomorrow evening.

By this time Brian was on deck, roused from a comfortable sleep by the combination of our clomping around on the decks, and the new squeaking noises.

“Holy Crap! Your friggin’ boat is falling apart!” he shrieked in horror, obviously not sharing our confidence. “Don’t you guys have a spare fitting? What are you going to

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do? Dammit, do something!” he exclaimed in a somewhat shrill voice. “Slow down Brian,” I said, “There are 24 fittings holding the boat together. Losing one isn’t going to be the end of the world.” However, we decided that by reducing sail we could ease the tension on the beams and, simultaneously, our frightened companion. With reefed main and staysail, *Piggy* held a steady course under self-steering, allowing us to retire to the galley for coffee and an early breakfast of toast and eggs.

I consequently found it impossible to relax in my bunk with the dreadful noise, akin to a dentist’s drill, so close to my ears. My conscience had, by now, begun to bother me. The loss of one fitting *would* put that much more strain on all the others, and I felt it would only be a matter of time before another broke and another and so on. I envisioned the entire beam springing loose and our boat crumbling at the hands of the greedy seas. Brian’s safety weighed heavily on me. Much later I was deep in thought devising a method of lashing the beam back to the deck bolt when I heard a tremendous “thud”, and I groaned inwardly. The sister fitting on the opposite side of the beam had split apart leaving only two suspect fittings holding our beam to the starboard hull deck! Now, each time the boat rose in the waves, the beam lifted several inches from the deck and then slammed back down with such force as to create sickening reverberations throughout the hull.

“Don! Grab some line!” I screamed down the starboard hatch, as I watched Brian vault from the port hull like a startled rabbit from his hole. We hastily lashed the beam back to its deck fittings with terylene line, but with the bucking motion, it proved impossible to get very tight. However, the wild unchecked movement was temporarily abated, and I overheard Brian grumbling several curses.

“Guys, I think the wind is picking up!” he exclaimed in earnest.

I nodded ominously as I too had noticed the wind was freshening to a strong breeze. Later, with the onset of dusk and the seas heaping up, we tucked a second reef in the main yet continued screaming along at nine or ten knots. As the wind had swung more to the southeast, we had to harden in the sheets tight and soon were bashing into a very heavy sea. We knew now it would only be a matter of time before another would go.

We spent an uneasy night alternating between huddling in our bunks like caged animals and checking the fittings on the hour until “BANG!” At three a.m., a port hull fitting was wrenched clear of the hull on the second crossbeam! Brian appeared, wild-eyed, from the hatch of the port hull, just as I was coming out of the starboard hull, flashlight in hand.

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“Man, I told you! You guys don’t even have a radio! I should have never...” but an angry gust of wind buried his complaints.

With the flashlight we examined the latest breakage. The second and third beams, being bolted directly through the cabin bulkheads have only two fittings on the outboard side on each hull, making them impossible to lash.

“If only the wind would ease, or at least veer so that we could fall off a little,” I pleaded under my breath.

The wind had been steadily increasing for the last while, and the stays began their telltale hum in protest. I talked Brian into looking over the pilot chart with me to convince him that the weather had to change for the better soon. Easterly gales are indeed unusual for these parts in November. Another fitting from the second beam tore apart just before dawn, and once again we could not lash it. By noon, two more were ripped free by the torsion of *Piggy’s* hulls. All of our spare line had by now been used up in emergency lashings, yet with no let up in the wind, we were compelled to change our strategy. Dead reckoning put us just 40 miles directly north of North Cape in a full-on easterly gale. The seas hissed and sweaty froth splattered across the decks as we pounded on like a discombobulated, three-legged dog loping across a busy highway. One quarter of our major connections were broken! I marveled at how our boat was increasingly becoming a true Polynesian craft held together with rope lashings.

“Well Skipper,” moaned Brian, more in agony than in contempt, “What the hell are you going to do now?”

“We’ll heave-to and wait for a shift in the wind,” I replied, mustering more nonchalance than I truly felt.

Disconnecting the self-steering, we brought the bows into the wind and waves. The jib sheet was led around the forestay and hauled in without actually going through the full tack. With the triple reefed main driving the boat forward, the jib a-back, and the tillers lashed, *Piggy* remained relatively stationary for the first time in days. It was the first time we had hove-to in this classic defensive posture, and we were impressed with how effectively it worked. We kept the log streamed, so as to keep an accurate account of our drift – drift that would be driving us closer to New Zealand, from where we were now picking up a clear signal from the radio beacon at Cape Reinga. The motion was quiet compared to the previous exhaustive pounding we had been suffering. Occasionally, a comber would break over the bows sending an immense, mountainous

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wall of water crashing over the foredecks. Fortunately, we had built numerous large scuppers into the bulwarks, and the water dispersed rapidly. Even so, *Piggy* shuddered under each assault with her crew flinching in harmony.

We had been hove-to for six hours when another fitting broke as evidenced by a new grating sound above the background din. Obviously there was still a considerable strain on the boat. We took down our spare jib halyard and cut it into lengths sufficient to lash down the newly broken fitting on the port hull's forward beam. Having secured it, Don and I retired to the confines of our cabin, more to psychologically remove ourselves from the madness prevailing on deck than to stay dry.

"How's Brian doing, Don?" I asked.

"I think he's crying man – we'd better check on him."

We found Brian sobbing and huddled like a frightened puppy in the corner of his bunk. Strewn all over the port hull were his most recent sketches, which we gathered and returned to their shelf.

"Don't worry buddy!" I said softly, attempting to instill faith in him, "We'll be outta this before you know. There's an end to every storm."

Again, there was to be little rest this night, as we had to keep an eye on our position. Off the tip of a large protruding landmass where two great bodies of water meet, there is bound to be novel, unpredictable currents. In addition, as it had been two days since our last accurate fix, there was the possibility that our navigation was off. We passed our time playing cards and listening to broadcasts from a local New Zealand radio station. The fact that we seemed so relaxed aggravated Brian to no end. The reality of this adventure was proving too much for him and our efforts to calm him proved fruitless. He became more in-drawn, less talkative, and developed a psychotically blank stare that reminded Don and I of the forlorn gaze of a heroin addict. By morning, fitting number eight had severed, and the remainder of our spare halyard was used to lash that part of the beam to the deck. One of the first lashings applied two days previously was now chafing through after rubbing against the jagged edges of the severed steel. Our log indicated that we had drifted 12 miles in the last 24 hours. Apparently, staying hove-to would not stop the remaining fittings from breaking, so we decided to risk sailing the 30 miles to land where our chart indicated some protection in the lee of Cape Reinga.

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With reduced sail, we set off, reaching for the cape, homing in on the powerful radio beacon there. Our decision to give up our hard-gained, windward position, once made, was a relief. By early afternoon, the prominent headlands rose out of the dreary gray masses of sea and cumulous cloud. The top of New Zealand's North Island is a blunt 20-mile long headland. From North Cape, the eastern-most extremity, the coast sweeps west for 16 miles. From this point, Cape Reinga juts out a few thousand feet forming a massive open bay on its western side, which terminates at Cape Maria van Dieman four miles away. As the gale was easterly, we were hoping to find shelter in the lee of Cape Reinga. From a few miles off, we could make out what appeared to be Cape Reinga. Between giant rocky buttresses, we saw a tiny white beach. However, as we sped closer, we realized something was terribly wrong. The bay was much smaller than the four miles shown on the chart. In actual fact, it was only a few thousand feet wide! Still spanking in and less than a mile away from the gnashing, seething promontory, we began to appreciate the size of the seas we were in. The 25-foot seas were smashing onto the cape with such force that a concussion of solid water cannoned upwards of 80 feet and spray much beyond that! A deafening roar resonated from the jagged shoreline with each tremendous collision between epic combatants of ocean and land.

"Don, we're on the wrong side of the cape!" I screamed as panic threatened to consume my every fiber.

Approaching from the northeast, we had confused Cape Reinga for Maria van Dieman! We were now being sucked up towards the foot of the cliffs where undoubtedly *Piggy* and her crew would be lambasted and churned to fragments destined for a violent, watery grave. There was a road zigzagging down the cliff face to the beach, and on it, we spotted a couple of land rovers racing down at great speed with their lights flashing in earnest repetition. The people at the lighthouse must have thought we were mad to be approaching this place in a raging gale. We wasted no time in turning *Piggy* around back into the fury of King Neptune.

"Fittings don't fail us now," I prayed silently.

Sure of our position now, we skirted around the outside of Colombia Reef, which projects north and west, roughly three miles from Cape Reinga. Defining the hazard was no problem for the seas were breaking so heavily upon it that the water was churned into a boiling milky white mass. Once around its end, we backtracked into relatively smooth water. As we headed into the somewhat sheltered bay, the majestic beauty of it gripped the three of us (Brian had ventured on deck at the noticeable

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decrease in boat motion). Bold rocky headlands, swathed in green, framed a beautiful broad white sand beach. Our momentary enchantment was distracting enough that we didn't notice the breaking roller bearing down on our beam from the narrow gap between the cape and the reef. We lurched over at an impossible angle when the comber struck. At the tiller, I was lucky to have my feet braced against the bulwark, upon which I wound up standing! As several tons of water steam-rolled over the decks, Brian was thrown against the cabin, and Don sprawled clinging to the forestay. *Piggy* snapped upright, and Brian looked at me accusingly, as if I had conjured this prank on purpose. Before the next wave approached, we raced past the gap into the placid shallow waters under the lee of Cape Reinga where we anchored in 40 feet of water well away from shore. Although there were no waves to speak of, the swell was generating tremendous surf on the beach. The wind also took little notice of the Cape and whistled down on us with all its screaming fury. Our anchorage was totally exposed to the north and west, but for the time, we were safe from the seas of the easterly gale. On the tall cliffs above us, we would occasionally see land rovers and buses, and from listening to the AM radio, we knew of the tours that visited the Cape. According to the ancient Maori legend, there is a special tree on the cliff. The venerated Pohutukawa is the Reinga, the "Place of Leaping," where the spirits of the dead leap off the headland and climb down the roots of the 800 year-old tree, to descend into the underworld and return to their traditional homeland of Hawaiiki. I hoped we weren't interrupting sacred grounds.

The gale raged on all that night and through the next couple of days. A pair of large dolphins kept us company throughout our stay and helped to ease our anxiety. I had the feeling that we were guests in their home. They would sound near the boat and come back up streaming long strands of kelp from their dorsal fins. The chart had the word "Foul," printed across this bay. We now realized that it meant the condition of the anchorage and not the name of the bay, as we had originally thought. Fortunately, our anchor had found its way through the forest of kelp and into the sandy bottom. We took advantage of the situation by sewing up tears in the sails and retying our hastily made, emergency lashings. Our food supply was getting down to a critical stage. We had some soup, a small bag of rice, and a half case of evaporated milk. It would sustain us for a few days but little more.

Impatience to get to a comfortable port combined with a lull in the weather helped us decide to leave the morning of the third day. The wind had eased considerably and shifted to north-of-east. If it continued, it would be worth beating the 20 miles to North Cape from where we could ease the sheets for the 75-mile reach south to Opuia in the Bay of Islands, the nearest port of entry. Eight hours and ten tacks later in fluky winds

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and bright sunshine, found us slogging through heavy seas by North Cape. A freighter chugged close by heading in the direction of Auckland, and Brian, convinced of our peril, thought we should send up a flare. A tow definitely would have been nice, but in these seas it would have been a hazardous undertaking. Besides, there was just one more short tack out to sea, and we would have sufficient offing to turn south with the wind finally aft of the beam.

By five o'clock, we were at last heading south, but to our consternation, the wind headed us as we turned the corner! It had become a steady 15 knots from the southeast. Optimistically, we continued beating down the coast hoping again that the wind shift was only temporary. Eight miles later we were off the large inland lagoon called Parengarenga Harbour. The sea was breaking so heavily across the entrance bar that we dared not attempt crossing without the aid of a detailed chart showing the hidden channel. From there, the coast runs southeast and for 15 miles is one continuous expanse of beach aptly named Great Exhibition Bay. Considering the perilous condition of our boat, we didn't want to risk tacking out to sea and away from the seeming safety we could see so close at hand. With darkness closing in, we found ourselves physically drained, and with broken spirits, we made a fateful decision to anchor off the lee shore about a mile from the entrance to Parengarenga.

"The soft beach behind us'll give a gentle resting spot should anything go wrong," I assured my shipmates.

We estimated our distance to be 500 feet from the breakers where we dropped the hook in roughly 40 feet of water. Almost at once the anchor rope snapped tight on its full 300-foot scope. We took a bearing on the light at Parengarenga, and settled back to wait out the night, tossing about in the heavy rollers. It was a grueling night spent constantly tormented in fitful sleep by the lurching and wrenching action of our moorage. When dawn finally broke, it had been our intention to continue beating southward with the safety of daylight. To my utter dismay, the gale was returning to full intensity and blowing directly onshore!

"We have to get out of here right now," I yelled to the others with growing urgency, "The wind's up and there's no time to lose!"

"Let's get the damn anchor in then," replied Brian in utter malice as he struggled forward to help Don who was already heaving on the heavy line.

The cable was singing tight, and the three of us pulling together couldn't budge it. Not

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wishing to cut and abandon our primary anchor gear, we reverted once again to our wait-and-see attitude. In all likelihood the storm had to blow over or at least change direction, right?

Before noon, the first wave broke over the bows. *Piggy* groaned and shuddered under the weight of the mighty blow.

“Oh my God! We’re in for it now!” shrieked Brian, as he poked his head from the port hatch, his face grimacing in agony.

Checks on the bearings of prominent shore features showed we were not dragging, while the sea was steadily building to mammoth proportions. By the end of daylight, the rollers were beginning their cresting a thousand feet *to sea* from our precarious position. They slammed into *Piggy* like freight trains through a snowdrift. She boldly attempted the climb over the top of a wave that must have measured 30 feet in height while the strain of the anchor pulled her bows under the curling lip sending a mass of water cascading over the foredecks. The forward netting beam, a reinforced two-by-six, was snapped in half as if a matchstick while the net lay dangling, limp, and shredded like a weathered flag. Rest was now totally out of the question as each new set of breaking surf threatened to pound us into oblivion. Cutting our anchor line and attempting to sail away from shore would now mean beating through 25-foot breakers, surely an unbearable load on our crippled beam fittings. Valiantly, *Piggy* clung to her precarious hold like a resilient piece of kelp held fast to a rocky bottom. Inside her snug hulls, we clung onto *Piggy* with feelings not unlike the drowned rats we must have resembled. I found myself holding my breath, as the far off hiss of a newly forming breaker grew louder. As it approached, the hiss turned to a growling rumble while the anchor line, stretching to its maximum, protested in a succession of higher pitched screeches that made my skin crawl. My muscles tensed involuntarily forcing my teeth to clench tightly shut while my hands locked in fists. With the bows angled skyward, *Piggy* reeled like a rodeo bronco under the impact of another tremendous blow. It was as if the Pacific Ocean was focusing her enormous power with the clear intention of totally annihilating us.

“Don, this is insane!” I croaked towards my brother’s aft bunk.

“I don’t think we’re going to make it,” he gloomily forecasted back.

Poor Brian was alone in the other hull and must have been near lunacy. If we survived the predicament, we had given him his money’s worth of terror on the high seas!

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Around midnight, the boat suddenly lurched over sideways sending me flying onto the side of the hull. Sideways! There could be only one explanation. The anchor line had finally snapped free, and we were lying broadside in the surf. I was out of my bunk like a shot. Just as I opened the hatch, we were struck again. A deluge of warm seawater cascaded into the galley before I could shut the hatch. Timing the next one, I raced back into the blackness to untie the lashed tillers.

“Don, watch for the next one,” I commanded my little brother to enable me to focus on untying the wet ropes that had helped secure us only moments before but now gripped the tillers with stubborn resiliency and maintained our susceptibility of broaching.

“Look out Tom! Here comes another one,” shouted Don above the roaring cacophony. “Hang on!”

Glancing over my shoulder into the blackness at the cresting giant that was mounting in size and intensity, I raced forward to the boom and draped myself against it as the wave struck and unloaded thousands of miles of pent-up energy onto our wooden craft. Don slammed the hatch shut as the wave heaved *Piggy* up to an awkward angle while I was pinned to the beam by the force of solid water washing over the entire boat. The white boiling aftermath of foamy bioluminescence lit the decks, and I sprang back to untying our tillers with methodic intensity. Three more waves hit before the tillers were released from their manacles. There was only one way to turn.

“Donny, we’re taking ‘er in!” I yelled at my petrified relation.

Under bare poles, *Piggy* sailed towards land and when the next monstrosity reared its seething head, it was to our stern.

“Yee-hah!! Oi’ Neppy can’t have us yet!” I screamed to nobody in particular.

The chaotic noise, tension, and violent motion transformed into a serenely smooth ride as we easily accelerated and surfed that enormous wave like some gigantic surfboard. A full moon gleaned through the scudding clouds giving the scene a somewhat magical effect. We rode that one wave right up to the beach to land on the soft, white sand with a gentle thud. I felt myself grinning as I looked down and realized I was in my underpants - drenched but feeling an overwhelming sense of relief. Brian sprang from the port hull and exclaimed:

“You guys are out of your minds!” and promptly jumped onto terra firma.

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We quickly ran our spare anchor line up the beach in an attempt to keep *Piggy* square to the huge wash coming in from the sea. Indescribable relief flooded our souls like a tranquilizer - solid ground never felt finer. Thank goodness we had anchored here and not in front of some rocky socket. The soft sand would not hurt *Piggy's* bottom. In a few hours the tide receded and left her high and dry. Our feet were stinging from walking barefoot across the beach and squishing the numerous blue bottles - a tiny jellyfish that had been freshly stranded by the storm. We were sopping wet, physically and mentally exhausted, but so overwhelmed by the harrowing ordeal that each of us bore a toothy grin.

“So what now guys,” Don pondered in the eerie morning twilight, which was unfolding a desolate backdrop of dazzling white sand dunes and stunted scrub brush.

Brian was already packing. He was leaving - vowing never to return.

“You guys are going to have to find someone else to help you out of here,” he muttered as he stuffed the remainder of his clothing in a large army duffle bag.

With the wind still strong from offshore, it was obvious we would be stuck here for a few days; we decided to hike out with him to make our presence known to the authorities. It was only then that I noticed Brian's sketchbook open on the chart table. In his haste to distance himself from the ocean and our magic carpet, he had left his sketchbook. I opened it as I had never looked at his art and was shocked to find that most latter pages contained hideous sketches of an emaciated prisoner, manacled and dying. It was only then that I truly began to understand his plight, and the reality of our brush with death began to creep in.

Notes:

- *Piggy*: Classic Ariki launched in 1973
- This episode occurred during our shake down cruise in 1974; the first major leg of an eight-year engineless circumnavigation completed in 1982 by way of Cape of Good Hope and Panama.
- She's still holding her own with new stronger fittings, and laying low while the family matures in Canada's west- coast Gulf Island waters.
- My sincere apologies go to James Wharram for compromising the integrity of his plans. T.H.

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