

CHAPTER ONE

A SAILOR IS BORN

(Well, 'Born' Is a Strong Word)

My plan was elegant in its simplicity: I would sail from Cape Town to Rio de Janeiro on someone else's yacht, thereby getting my first 6,000 kilometres of travel completely free.

There was just 'one small problem'.

I had never sailed before.

I had never even been out to sea. Not once. Not even on a ferry. The sum total of my maritime experience consisted of two weekends paddling a sailing dinghy around Durban Harbour, which, as I would soon discover, was about as relevant to ocean sailing as playing with bath toys is to submarine warfare.

Undeterred by this minor detail, I placed an advertisement in the yacht clubs around Durban:

'EXPERIENCED CREW AND DECKHAND seeking berth on Cape to Rio yacht race.'

The interviews did not go well.

"So, tell me about your sailing experience." the first skipper asked, squinting at me with the suspicious eyes of a man who had seen too many idiots try to kill themselves at sea.

"I've done some dinghy sailing in the harbour." I said, with what I hoped was a confident smile.

"The harbour."

"Yes."

"The one with no waves."

"That's the one."

He showed me the door.

After being rejected by every legitimate skipper in Durban, I did what any sensible person would do: I upgraded my resume. I attended a basic navigation course one Sunday afternoon—which essentially taught me how to read a map—and rewrote my advertisement:

'EXPERIENCED CREW, DECKHAND, AND NAVIGATOR seeking berth on Cape to Rio yacht race.'

Most people still saw through me immediately. But finally, miraculously, one person was desperate enough—or perhaps just crazy enough—to take me on.

His words: " I just need someone on board to navigate in case I fall overboard." *His name was Dick, and he looked at my resume with the weary expression of a man who had run out of options.*

My response - "I can do that."

Dick: "You understand that if I fall overboard, you'll need to turn the boat around and come get me?"

I nodded enthusiastically, having absolutely no idea how one might accomplish this.

Finally those magic words - "Welcome aboard."

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Before the race from Cape Town to Rio, we first had to sail the yacht down from Durban to Cape Town. This, I reasoned, would be excellent practice. A chance to get my sea legs. To learn the ropes, as it were.

What I did not anticipate was the seasickness.

Let me paint you a picture: Imagine the worst hangover of your life. Now imagine that hangover is happening while you're trapped in a washing machine. Now imagine the washing machine is on fire and also somehow simultaneously drowning. That's seasickness.

I had told the crew I'd never been seasick before. This was technically true—I had never been to sea either, so the opportunity had never presented itself. Now the opportunity was presenting itself with enthusiasm, and I spent the first two days of the journey hanging over the side of the boat, contributing my breakfast, lunch, and dinner to the marine ecosystem.

"You alright there, mate?" one of the crew asked, as I retched over the railing for the fourteenth time that morning.

"Never better." I replied, which was technically accurate.

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Once I recovered enough to actually contribute to the sailing, I learned something interesting about the route around the South African coast: it is one of the busiest sea-lanes in the world. Giant tankers that can't fit through the Suez Canal take this route from the Middle East to Europe and America.

We spent most of the journey dodging ships that made our 42-foot yacht look like a bathtub toy.



One night, I was on steering duty. It was dark and misty, visibility nearly zero. I saw two ship's lights in the distance—one to my left, one to my right. They didn't seem to be moving that fast.

"Perfect. I'll just slip between them." *I thought.*

As we got closer, fortunately, the clouds parted briefly, and I realised with a cold stab of horror that the two 'lights' were actually two houses on land. I had been navigating directly toward the shore.



I yanked the wheel hard, the yacht groaning in protest, and somehow managed to turn us back out to sea before we became a very expensive piece of beachfront debris.

Everyone else was asleep below deck. I never told them.



Here I am, the highly skilled "sailor". Those were the days!



My ticket to Rio

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The actual Cape Town to Rio race began on January 10th. One hundred and thirty-two yachts at the starting line. I stood on deck, trying to look like I knew what I was doing, which was difficult because I very much did not know what I was doing.

"Just follow the other boats." my skipper Dick said, pointing at the horizon filled with sails.



By the next morning, we couldn't see any other boats.

We wouldn't see another yacht until we reached Rio, thirty-five days later.

This is when Dick turned to me and said the words that still haunt my dreams:

"So. Navigation. You said you could navigate?"

I looked at him.

He looked at me.

In that moment, we both realised we had been exaggerating our skill set to each other.

"I've never actually navigated anything." *I admitted.*

"I've never actually skippered a yacht across an ocean." *he said.*

We stared at each other for a long moment.

"I bought a book in Cape Town. 'The ABC of Navigation.'"

"You haven't read it yet?"

"I was going to read it on the trip."

And so began a very educational thirty-five days, during which I attempted to teach myself celestial navigation while simultaneously being responsible for not sailing us into Africa, Antarctica, or the middle of the Atlantic.

My only reference point was a small island called Trinidad, about 1,000 kilometres off the coast of Brazil. I calculated—using my newly acquired and extremely questionable navigation skills—that we would pass it at 2 AM on a particular night.

At 2 AM on that particular night, the island appeared exactly where I said it would be.

I have never been more relieved in my life.

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We arrived in Rio thirty-five days after leaving Cape Town. Most yachts completed the journey in seventeen to twenty days, which means we were either incredibly slow or incredibly lost. I prefer to think we took the scenic route.

Upon arrival, the yacht's owner—whom we had apparently disappointed in some unspecified way—kicked the entire crew off the boat immediately. So much for sailing on to the Caribbean.

But as one door closed, another opened. We arrived just in time for the prize ceremony at the Rio Yacht Club, where all the successful sailors were celebrating with Brazilian beauties on their arms.

Being a late arrival, I, of course, ended up at a table full of elderly ladies.

But here's the thing about elderly ladies at yacht club parties: they have daughters. Beautiful daughters who were, apparently, dying to meet 'experienced sailors.'

"So you sailed all the way from South Africa?" *one of them asked, batting her eyelashes.*

"Thirty-five days." *I replied.*

I did not mention that most of those days were spent lost. Some things are better left unsaid.