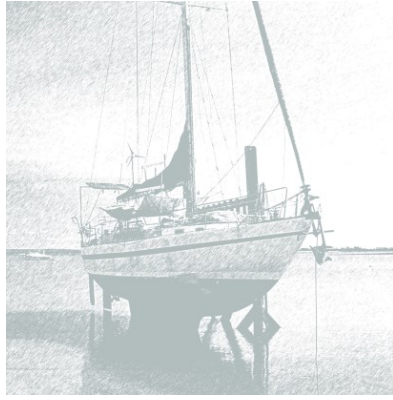


# CAPTAIN JACK



By Grant Da Costa





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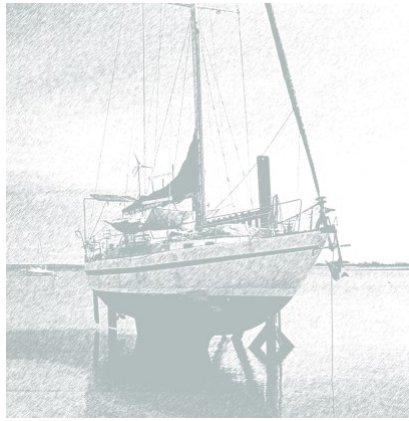
# DISCLAIMER

Before departing Cairns, the author asked Jack and the others on board the yacht for permission to write a book about our coming adventure, and it was freely given. However, due to some of the story proving to be controversial, the names of the people involved have been changed to protect their privacy.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I thank my wife Leanne, without whom this story would not exist.

Several people played key roles in shaping the manuscript. Their suggestions greatly improved the quality and focus of the story—to my sister Hilary, Marg & Mike Duke, Selwyn Abrahams, Jane West, Laurel Cohn, and Jim & Lorna Downey—thanks guys.



## CHAPTER ONE: APRIL FOOL'S DAY

The diesel engine burst into life. It was five a.m. I could just make out Jack in the gloom. He shinnied up the companionway and went forward to raise the anchor. This was his signal for me to take the helm.

I got up from the narrow berth in the saloon, dropped my sweat-soaked boxers and pulled on some clothes, hoping none of the women or the baby would catch me naked. Tyler, on the other berth, turned over and buried his head under a pillow.

After nearly three weeks I still wasn't used to such brutal awakenings. What was wrong with having breakfast and a cup of coffee first? Or a chance to use the toilet in calm water, before all hell broke loose?

Dawn light revealed the splendour of our anchorage. The dark blue rollers of the Pacific Ocean crashed and foamed against the outer reef a few hundred metres in front of *Endurance*. We lay in the lee of Ribbon Reef Number Seven, thirty nautical miles offshore from Cooktown, in Far North Queensland.

The water was electric blue, like it was lit from inside. It was so clear I could see the ripples in the sand nine metres down. Vertical coral walls rose from the seabed all around the yacht, turning the area into a tropical lagoon of riveting beauty.

As I looked over the side I could still imagine Tyler's sunglasses clearly visible on the bottom. He had gone into another of his dark rages after baby Lily had thrown them overboard. I guess it was my need to prove my worth that made me dive for them. There was no time to equalise the pressure in my ears on the way down – it was right on the limit of how long I could hold my breath. A splitting headache for two hours was a small price to pay for the satisfaction of achieving what others had failed to do.

Tyler was a walking disaster area. He had a talent for losing stuff overboard. After each item disappeared he would accuse us with his dark and violent eyes of deliberately throwing his things into the sea. First it was his towel, then his best sunglasses, followed by an expensive running shoe. Perhaps he was afraid we might become lost – we could follow his trail of breadcrumbs home across the sea floor.

I pushed the tiller over as the anchor came free. The fifteen-tonne yacht slowly swung to the north and gathered momentum. Once clear of the coral we unfurled the headsail and Jack turned off the engine. We were headed for Lark Pass, a small gap in the coral through which we would leave the relatively sheltered waters inside the reef for the rolling blue mountains of the Pacific Ocean.

Jack did this kind of navigation by eye, and he was good. He wouldn't even look at the GPS. He told me time and time again not to rely on electronic devices in situations like this, and he was right.

We sailed up the inside of the reef, keeping a good distance off, looking for the telltale break in the surf that identified the pass. I was still on the tiller. Jack was up the mast for a better view. But all I could think of was my need for an extended session in the loo.

The others trickled up one by one from below. First Natasha carrying a sleepy Lily, who waved when she saw her father high overhead. Then Pat and his Thai wife Kea. Tyler, as usual, was last out. They all wanted to experience the excitement of sailing the pass first hand.

And it was exciting. Over the space of a few nautical miles the bottom dropped from fifty metres to two kilometres down. Fangs of coral and crashing waves menaced as we turned eastwards through the pass. The waves began to build in height and power and the yacht took on a new feeling under our feet.

Once through I swung *Endurance* back to the north and set the wind steering for the sail to Ribbon Reef Number Ten. The waves and swell caused the yacht to roll heavily, but I had an engagement with the toilet that was now long overdue.

At eighteen months old, and having spent her whole life on the yacht, Lily could run the full length below at top speed with no hands, leaning into the tilting floor like a motorcycle rider on a racetrack. This was my first ocean voyage and I bowed to superior ability. I carefully descended the companionway then worked my way forward like a four-legged spider, bracing my feet against the saloon furniture and hanging on to whatever came to hand. This was going to be a challenge. I cursed Jack under my breath.

Arriving outside the toilet door, I planned my approach. *Endurance* was heeled over to starboard, and the toilet is to port, which meant there was a steep uphill slope to climb. I lifted the flimsy catch on the outside of the door. Gravity flung it open and I got a good clout on the forehead.

Grasping the doorframe with both hands, I pulled myself part way into the cubicle, then let go and grabbed the handrails. When I first came in here I thought there must be a disabled person living on board. Now I realised what the rails were for.

Inside there was barely room to swing a mouse, let alone a cat.

The next challenge was to get the door closed, as it was still dangling and thrashing dangerously in the passageway. I grabbed the tattered bungy strap screwed to the back of the door and pulled it shut, hooking the other end of the bungy around one of the handrails to keep it there.

Now that the door was closed I could drop my shorts, except that there wasn't enough room to bend down between the toilet bowl and the door. So I turned sideways, waited for the floor to reach the limit of the next roll, let go with one hand, dropped the shorts and fell onto the toilet seat.

Attached to the back of the door was a colourful fish poster which we used for identifying the species we caught. Sun coming in the open hatch had faded the colours over the top half, so there was a good chance we'd get it wrong – hopefully not with fatal consequences. Normally it was very relaxing boning up on fish species while sitting on the loo. But not today.

The contents of the cubicle bore no resemblance to a domestic toilet. The bowl sat on a raised step. There was no flushing tank. Instead, to the right when sitting, was a manual bilge pump bolted to the wall. An inlet pipe brought in seawater when you operated this pump, squirting it into the toilet bowl. To the left was another bilge pump connected to the base of the toilet and through more plumbing to an outlet through the hull. After the bowl was pumped full of seawater using the right arm, the left was used to extract the contents and send it flying overboard. The process had to be repeated several times, depending on what you ate the day before.

Directly behind and above the toilet bowl was the hand basin. You needed long arms and an even longer neck to use it. The basin was fitted with a single hand pump, connected to one of the freshwater tanks. The outlet drained through a pipe into the back of the toilet bowl.

The setup was an accident waiting to happen and Tyler was the source of the fun. His reaction when his only toothbrush slipped out of his hand and fell straight into the toilet bowl was priceless.

Such idle thoughts were rudely interrupted when I discovered the true purpose of your backside when sitting on the loo in rough seas – to keep the contents in the bowl, like a big rubber stopper. The shock of cold water spurred me to quit dreaming and get on with it.

After completing my business I let go of the handrails and reached for the toilet paper. *Endurance* gave a violent lurch. I flew off the loo and into the back of the door. The bungy broke under the force of the impact, the door flew open, and I was ejected into the passageway. I hit the wooden lockers head first on the far side and slid down to the floor, with my shorts still around my ankles and a bit of a mess further up.

It was difficult getting onto the loo the first time, but with a broken bungy, my shorts still around my ankles and a large egg growing on my forehead, it was much harder the second time. But I succeeded.

It proved just as hard to get my shorts up as it had to get them down. But once up it was time to give the pumps a workout. To do this I had to wriggle around to face the bowl and grab one pump handle in each hand. This put me in a face down position with a bird's eye view of the bowl contents, flying around madly as the yacht rolled and pitched.

One calmer day while idly standing urinating, my eyes wandered up to the ceiling where I noticed a series of brown stains high up on the wall. Probably rust, I thought. It's a steel yacht after all, and the stains were way too high to be anything else.

But back to the matter in hand. The urgency of expelling the toilet bowl contents before they ended up in my shoe made me apply too much energy on the inlet pump. In a curious twist of fate the yacht rolled onto its other side, so for an instant the contents of the bowl travelled part way up the hand basin outlet. My fear-crazed pumping did the rest, ejecting the contents out of the hand basin plughole and onto the wall near the ceiling.

At least I wasn't the only one to suffer at the hands of the loo. Poor Kea wasn't coping too well with the low-fibre rations we had to eat. By the end of the first week she'd blocked the outlet pump three times. On each occasion Pat had to dismantle it and clear the blockage with a screwdriver.

\* \* \*

That evening as I lay in the sticky heat trying to sleep, my mind drifted back over how I came to be on *Endurance*.

It started when Leanne, my wife, was made redundant by the American Fortune-500 company in which she was a top executive. The move was part of a cynical cost-cutting exercise designed to make the Australian division look more profitable prior to its sale. At the time I was working in Greenhouse Gas research with CSIRO and had a good deal of flexibility in my employment, whereas she did not, so I was sad for her but happy for us.

As a thank-you for my emotional support during this difficult time, Leanne offered to send me on a weekend racing-car training course. I said I'd rather do a sailing course, so she came too and we loved it. Shortly afterwards we bought our own yacht, a seven-metre trailer sailer. Over the next five years we sailed it 1,500 nautical miles, mainly on bays near Melbourne and on the Gippsland Lakes.

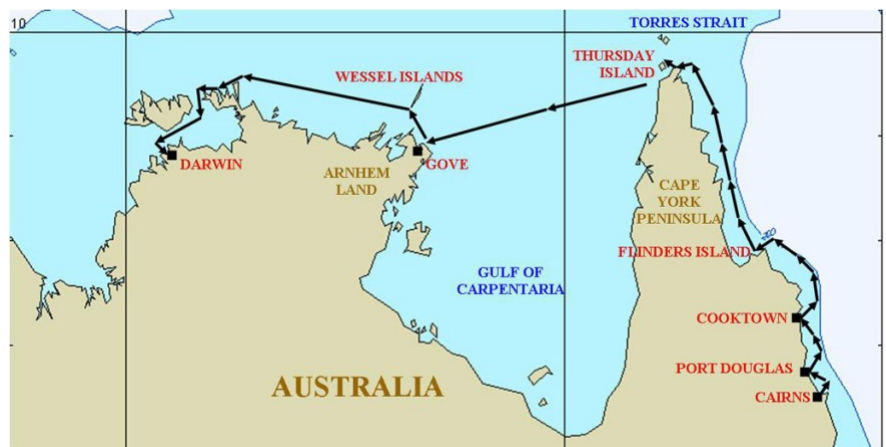
Leanne had unleashed a monster. I soon developed plans for bigger things. I looked at yachts for sale on the Internet and dreamed of cruising the coast of Australia and the World, while Leanne became progressively more stressed over my obsession.

We took three months off work in a bid to cure my itchy feet, spending it travelling in our four-wheel-drive to Central Australia, then on to Western Australia across the Gibson Desert. We climbed Mt Augustus, descended the great gorges of the Pilbara and snorkelled the Ningaloo Reef.

It was a wonderful trip but only made me worse. Within three months of our return I was looking for a new adventure, something that would push me to the limit. And it had to be on a big yacht. But how?

Then one day, there it was – The Answer – an insignificant few lines in a sailing magazine asking for crew.

I logged on to the website. The yacht was called *Endurance*. It was the home of Jack, Natasha and baby Lily. The vessel was on its way to Cairns where four crew were invited to join for the leg from Cairns to Darwin and the Kimberley, around some of the most remote coastline of any inhabited continent on Earth. After returning to Darwin, *Endurance* would be leaving Australia on the start of a world circumnavigation.



A sense of excitement and romantic expectation engulfed me. So what if I didn't know the owners? So what if I didn't know who the other crew were? So what if it was through tidal rips and coral-strewn seas, infested with sharks and crocodiles? So what if the waters were so remote that once on board there was limited opportunity to get off if things went bad? So what if I had to spend three months on a thirteen-metre yacht with an eighteen-month-old baby? So what if I had to give up control of my day-to-day life to a complete stranger, and me a control freak? So what if Leanne didn't want to come?

\* \* \*

The preparations for the voyage took their toll on Leanne. I was rocked by feelings and emotions which I couldn't explain. It is a cliché but I was the victim of a severe mid-life crisis. The experience can shatter all normal frameworks and leave both parties in the relationship bewildered and insecure.

Such was the state of my mind that I renewed my passport without telling her. Maybe I wouldn't disembark in Darwin. I felt I needed the freedom to stay on *Endurance* and disappear off around the world, maybe never come back, even though I can see now that this would have ruined my life. We never openly discussed such a possibility but I knew she could sense it.

Leanne's family didn't help the situation. 'Clear the house out and leave him while he's away,' they advised.

Our friends had mixed reactions. Many were against it, some not, but suddenly everyone had a view on the state of our marriage. Learned opinion was that we only had a 25% chance of surviving when, or if, I returned.

The consistent theme from everyone was disbelief that I would allow myself to be locked up in a yacht with a baby for three months, given my disinclination to breed. I should have heeded this advice.

What made the prospect of my departure more difficult was that over our seven years together Leanne and I had become extremely close. It turned out that we were soul mates beyond our wildest expectations, something that was not obvious initially given my left-wing research background and Leanne's right-wing business background.

After her redundancy Leanne shed her executive skin and allowed the tomboy inside her to emerge. Together we drove and bushwalked through some of the remotest places Australia has to offer. Her transformation from a background of five-star hotels was brought about by a three-day test run in the Little Desert in Victoria, then seven weeks in the four-wheel-drive to the tip of Cape York and back.

On one occasion on the Cape I had to wade into a wide river at dusk, to try and find a way across for the vehicle. It was my own stupid fault. I should have turned back hours ago. I took a quick look over my shoulder and there was Leanne, standing on the bank, totally terrified, holding a huge rock over her head, ready to protect me from the crocodiles. How on earth could I be contemplating leaving such a person? It must be some form of madness.

Leanne did not try to stop me from going on *Endurance* despite fears that I wouldn't come back and that maybe I didn't love her any more, once again demonstrating her courage. Instinctively she knew what path to tread to hold us together.

In the end, Leanne and I rationalised what I was doing into a framework we could both understand, so achieving an uneasy peace. I was going to gather material for my fifth book, on what should be a pretty interesting adventure. I would take my camera too. Although Leanne wouldn't come with me, she didn't rule out making the transition from bay sailing to coastal sailing some time in the future. We both agreed it would be a great opportunity for me to find out whether I really did want to sail into the wide blue yonder. There was no way that Leanne would place herself in the situation I was about to embark on, but if I came back full of new knowledge and experience then that would make her feel more comfortable if one day we should have our own blue water yacht.

But first, I had to get a berth on board *Endurance*. I flashed off an e-mail to Jack then sat back and waited with bated breath for him to arrive in port and pick it up.

In the e-mail I told him how I could sail, navigate and cook. I told him I was used to roughing it in remote places and that I had already been to Cape York twice and Arnhem Land once by four-wheel-drive. And of course that I was an all round entertaining bloke and terrific company.

I also expressed a personal motivation for wanting to come that wasn't part of the rationalisation that Leanne and I had worked out. I told Jack that 'I have a lot of experience in the bush. But I realise that my sailing is very Mickey-Mouse stuff. I sit and read cruising magazines every month and wonder if I've got what it takes to do more. I realise that if I continue on the way I'm going, I'll never find out. I need to make a quantum leap. This is it, I hope. At the end I will either know I'll never make a blue water sailor, or I'll have the confidence to turn my dream into reality.'

\* \* \*

I'm still not sure whether it was my glowing self-praise or the fact that I was happy to pay the US\$37 per day that Jack wanted, which secured me the berth.

The deal was that it was a private vessel, I was an invited guest, and that the money was my contribution to our expenses for the trip. Payment had to be in cash. The money would cover everything except grog. I could pay half up front. The rest could wait until Darwin.

Jack told me that *Endurance* was registered with the authorities in Queensland. But the registration turned out to have expired.

He said that the vessel fully complied with all rules, regulations and safety requirements of both the Queensland and Australian Governments. But once on board he told me there were no lifejackets, and he sometimes told stories about smuggling.

He said there was no insurance on the boat, nor on the property or people on board, and that no liability would be accepted for anything. I believed him.

He said that the yacht was set up for single-handed sailing and that he had sailed thousands of miles alone, but now he preferred to have 'crewmates'. This was true. He said he had never lost crew overboard. At first I believed him but now I'm not so sure.

Jack was very specific on crew keeping their traps shut in the presence of authorities, who might occasionally board the yacht.

'Your instructions are not to answer any questions. All information will be supplied by the Captain. Don't even give them your name.'

With good reason. Jack gave the impression that his greatest pleasure in life was breaking rules. Was Jack a free spirit or a rogue? Was he fiercely independent or just a social misfit? I still don't know.

As Jack was telling me the rules my mind wandered back to the old days when the Captain had the power of life and death over the crew. Was it still the case today? What were my rights while on the high seas? I should have known, but I didn't. What had I gotten myself into?

I spent the last few weeks of preparation researching all the places we were planning to visit. The Internet is an amazing thing, but sometimes it throws up stuff you wish it hadn't. But there it was, an article in a Western Australian newspaper about a yacht skipper who had picked up a forty-year-old woman and her fourteen-year-old daughter as crew, then proceeded to sail around the Kimberley coastline to Darwin. The two women never made it. The skipper was charged with one count of manslaughter and one count of interfering with a dead body, even though no bodies were ever recovered. Later the charges were upgraded to two counts of murder. I didn't tell Leanne.

\* \* \*

I left home for Cairns on April fool's day.