



## Chapter 2

# Water, water everywhere

They say that water covers two thirds of the earth's surface. It certainly looks like that when you're out there, and it feels like it too. Sea water, rain water – all of it is wet. I spent most of the time soaked to the skin. I wore all the right gear – the skipper always made sure of that – but somehow the wet still got through.

Down below too, everything was damp, even the sleeping-bags. Only when the sun shone and the sea had stopped its heaving, could we begin to dry out. We would haul everything out on deck, and soon the *Peggy Sue* would be dressed overall, one great washing-line from bow to stern. To be dry again was a real luxury, but we always knew it could not last for long.

You may think there was not a lot for three people to do on board, day after day, week after week. You'd be quite wrong. In daylight there was never a dull moment. I was always kept busy:

taking in sail, winching in, letting out, taking my turn at the wheel – which I loved – or helping my father with his endless mending and fixing. He often needed another pair of hands to hold and steady as he drilled or hammered or screwed or sawed. I'd forever be mopping up, brewing up, washing up, drying up. I'd be lying if I said I loved it all. I didn't. But there was never a dull moment.

Only one of the crew was allowed to be idle – Stella Artois – and she was always idle. With nothing much to bark at out on the open ocean, she spent the rougher days curled up on my bed

down in the cabin. When it was fine and calm, though, she'd usually be found on watch up at the bow, alert for something, anything that wasn't just sea. You could be sure that if there was anything out there she'd spot it soon enough – an escort of porpoises perhaps, diving in and out of the waves, a family of dolphins swimming alongside, so close you could reach out and touch them. Whales, sharks, even turtles – we saw them all. My mother would be taking photographs, video and still, while my father and I fought over the binoculars. But Stella Artois was in her

element, a proper sheepdog again, barking her commands at the creatures of the sea, herding them up from the deep.

Annoying though she could be – she would bring her smelly wetness with her everywhere – we never once regretted bringing her along with us. She was our greatest comfort. When the sea tossed and churned us, and my mother felt like death from seasickness, she'd sit down below, white to the gills, with Stella on her lap, cuddling and being cuddled. And when I was terrified by the mountainous seas and the screaming wind,

I would curl up with Stella on my bunk, bury my head in her neck and hold her tight. At times like that – and I don't suppose they were that frequent, it's just that I remember them so vividly – I always kept Eddie's football close beside me as well.

The football had become a sort of talisman for me, a lucky charm, and it really seemed to work, too. After all, every storm did blow itself out in the end and, afterwards, we were always still there, still alive and still afloat.

I had hoped my mother and father might forget all about the planned school work. And to begin with it seemed as if they had. But once we had weathered a few storms, once we were settled and well into our voyage, they sat me down and told me the unwelcome news. Like it or not, I was going to have to keep up with my school-work. My mother was adamant about it.

I could see that any appeals to my father would be pointless. He just shrugged and said, 'Mum's the skipper.' And that was an end of the matter. At least at home she had been my mother and I could argue with her, but not on the *Peggy Sue*,

not any more.

It was a conspiracy. Between them, they had devised an entire programme of work. There were maths course books to get through – my father would help me with that if I got stuck, he said. For geography and history I was to find out and record all I could about every country we visited as we went round the world. For environmental studies and art I was to note down and draw all the birds we saw, all the creatures and plants we came across.

My mother made a particular point of teaching me navigation, too. ‘Barnacle Bill taught me,’ she said, ‘I ’m teaching you. I know it’s not on the curriculum, but so what? It could come in handy, you never know.’ She taught me how to use the sextant, take compass bearings, plot a course on the chart. I had to fill in the longitude and latitude in the ship’s log, every morning, every evening, without fail.

I don’t think I had ever really noticed stars before. Now, whenever I was on watch in the cockpit at night, with the *Peggy Sue* on her wind-vane self-steering, the others asleep below, the stars

would be my only company. Gazing up at them I felt sometimes that we were the last people alive on the whole planet. There was just us, and the dark sea about us and the millions of stars above.

It was on watch at night that I would often do my 'English'. This was my own version of the ship's log. I didn't have to show it to them, but I was encouraged to write in it every few weeks. It would be, they said, my own personal, private record of our voyage.

At school I had never been much good at writing. I could never think of what to write or

how to begin. But on the *Peggy Sue* I found I could open up my log and just write. There was always so much I wanted to say. And that's the thing. I found I didn't really write it down at all. Rather, I said it. I spoke it from my head, down my arm, through my fingers and my pencil, and on to the page. And that's how it reads to me now, all these years later, like me talking.



I'm looking at my log now. The paper is a bit crinkled and the pages are yellowed with age. My scribbly writing is a little faded, but it's mostly

quite legible. What follows are just a few chosen extracts from this log. The entries are quite short, but they tell the tale. This is how I recorded our great journey. This is how it was for an eleven-year-old boy as we rode the wide oceans of the world on board the *Peggy Sue*.