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Foreword

RANDALL REEVES

I met Sharon by phone in the fall of 2003 at the end of a long, hot day of boat work. The sun had just set and I was washing up, musing over my aching back and the next day's tasks, when the phone rang. "Hello. This is Sharon Adams," said a perky and entirely unexpected voice. "My coauthor said you wished to speak with me."

I'm an avid boatman who has been dreaming or reading of blue-water cruising much of his life. In fact, this boat on which I'd worked for months, a thirty-one-foot Far East Mariner Ketch, was purchased precisely for that purpose. But I'd had no idea until the previous week of her historical links, that she was the same make, model, and vintage as *Sea Sharp II*, the boat Sharon sailed in her single-handed crossing of the Pacific.

This discovery was the result of a casual Internet search for anything unusual about my old boat. But after the initial find and its resulting elation, I began to realize that beyond mentions of Sharon and her accomplishments—she was the first woman to sail solo from California to Hawaii in 1965 and then, in 1969, the first woman to cross the entire Pacific Ocean alone from Yokohama to San Diego—no other information was available. No detailed history or voyage accounts of Sharon existed, and only one site discussed the potential of a biography in the works. Then just days after sending a note of introduction to Sharon's coauthor, here she was on the phone.

It is one thing to wish for a meeting and another thing altogether to get it. Standing in the middle of the boatyard and at the ragged end of a tiring day, I had no idea what to say, but Sharon didn't mind. We discussed my boat and her adventures. She asked

with genuine interest what cruising I intended to do (extended, somewhere, someday) and assured me I'd got a good boat. She inquired about my self-steering device and, finding I had none, quickly offered to (and later did) send plans for the bulletproof, home-built wind vane she had used. She recommended the installation of a cabin-top bubble made of Plexiglas like the one she had on *Sea Sharp II* so that while on passage, I could safely see all around without going on deck. She praised the Mariner's easy handling and comfort below. "But what was she like in rough weather?" I asked. "Oh, just fine," came the confident voice on the phone, "I got knocked down once in fifty knots, but it was my own fault."

By the time of this conversation, Sharon's oceanic adventures were well in the past, but I found her stories to be fresh and relevant and told with a passion that suggested she had just come ashore. In setting her two records, she had single-handed well beyond eight thousand miles of open ocean, yet she was freely offering her advice to a man she'd never met and whose boat, at the time, didn't even float. We talked into the evening, and after a fatiguing day in the yard, the conversation did much to boost my flagging morale.

The remarkable nature of Sharon's achievements can be easy to miss these days. For one thing, the age of air travel has shrunk the world to such a degree that the idea of crossing an ocean now seems unspectacular—it can be accomplished in a day's flight. So, a few facts to set the stage. First, sailing a small boat is slow work in any weather. *Sea Sharp II's* top speed was around six knots, but due to the vagaries of wind, her average speed for the seventy-four days it took to cross the Pacific was just four knots, or about as fast as a fit person can jog. And a relaxing vacation it was not! Sharon was solely responsible for the care of her little craft—shortening sail in foul weather, piling it on in fair, and repairing whatever might break—twenty-four hours a day, day after day.

Second, Sharon chose to cross what is by far the world's largest ocean. At a staggering sixty-four million square miles, the Pacific is twice the size of the Atlantic, covers a full third of the planet, and is so vast that the area of the United States, including Alaska and Hawaii, could fit into it sixteen times with room to spare. Sharon's route between Yokohama and San Diego traces a rhumb line course of almost six thousand miles, or the equivalent of heading east out of Los Angeles and traveling as far as Casablanca in West Africa, eight time zones away. And unlike the tropical island-paradise typically depicted in television and movies, this part of the Pacific is entirely open, uninterrupted, and often stormy water.

Another differentiating factor is technology. While crossing an ocean may never be easy, the abundance of electronic devices now available have taken much of the difficulty and some of the risk out of making the passage. Global positioning systems, radar, satellite telephones, and laptop computers that receive graphical weather reports and send e-mail over ham radio signals are considered standard equipment by many small-boat captains today. And with them, the contemporary voyager can know his position to within a few feet by the push of a button; he can quickly know the state of the weather anywhere in the world, and can stay in daily contact with those ashore.

In contrast, Sharon found her position on the ocean the old-fashioned way. She used a sextant (technology already in use in the 1700s) to measure the sun's angles and then reduced those angles to coordinates by doing famously difficult math. At best, on any given day, Sharon knew her position to within a mile or so. She only knew what weather was approaching by looking at the sky. And though she did have a radio for the Yokohama to San Diego run, it failed to operate. For much of her two and a half months at sea, Sharon was utterly isolated from the rest of the world, beyond reach or rescue, and entirely dependent on her own skills and the soundness of her boat.

Put simply, ocean crossing is a most committing endeavor; and

when Sharon did it, there were those who weren't sure a woman could or should. This highlights another remarkable aspect of Sharon's accomplishments—she was one of the first *female* single-handers.

That women participate alongside men in many sports, including sailing, is now largely taken for granted. For example, the fact that the second-place finisher in the 2000–2001 Vendée Globe—a grueling, solo, nonstop, around-the-world sailing race—was a twenty-four-year-old Englishwoman named Ellen MacArthur is unlikely to spark anything but admiration among her contemporaries. But such was not the case in 1965 when Sharon was roundly snubbed by the local yacht club just after becoming the first woman to sail from California to Hawaii in a twenty-five-foot Folkboat. And days after her arrival in Honolulu, she was accosted on the docks by a local yachtsman who berated her for such an unwomanly exploit as crossing an ocean.

By the time Sharon began her career as a voyager, the world's oceans had been single-handed many times by men. The first authenticated solo crossing of the Pacific occurred in 1882 and is credited to Bernard Gilboy, who made it from San Francisco to Australia (almost) in his small, double-ended yacht, the *Pacific*. Six years earlier the first west-to-east solo crossing of the Atlantic was completed by a fisherman named Alfred Johnson in an open, twenty-foot dory. These were the first two of many early single-handed passages that include now-forgotten but then-famous names like R. T. McMullen, John MacGregor, Albert Andrews, and Howard Blackburn. The crowning achievement in early cruising came in 1898 when Joshua Slocum proved what had been widely held impossible—he circumnavigated the globe in a small boat named *Spray*.

Women have entered this scene only lately. For example, Sharon's unprecedented 1969 crossing of the Pacific in *Sea Sharp II* came a full eighty-seven years after Gilboy's. In 1952 Ann Davidson,

in her twenty-three-foot *Felicity Ann*, was the first woman to cross the Atlantic, seventy-six years after Alfred Johnson's passage, and she wasn't seconded until 1969 by Ingeborg von Heister. Seventy-eight years after Slocum crossed his own wake, Krystyna Chojnowska-Liskiewicz became the first woman to circumnavigate the globe. Like many of their male counterparts, these women and their accomplishments have been reduced simply to names on lists of early sailing records.

Some months after our first phone call, Sharon and I met in person at a Mariner Owners Association gathering in Los Angeles. The event organizers, Bill Kranidis and Tony West, Mariner owners and passionate advocates for the preservation of these now-vintage yachts, were excited to have Sharon attend and deliver a lecture she'd been sharing for years with other interested groups. I had the honor of having invited Sharon, who immediately agreed, showing her enthusiasm and the single-hander's knack by making the long trip down from her Oregon home by car and by herself.

Sharon stood next to her small display table, spry and alert, wearing a hot-pink blouse and clearly enjoying the attention of other sailboat owners. During earlier correspondence, I had learned that pink was Sharon's trademark color. To the consternation of many in 1969, she had asked that the decks of *Sea Sharp II* be painted pastel pink, that a pink stripe be added to the hull, and that hot pink be integrated into some of the sails. And on the voyage, Sharon sewed a hot-pink dress that she intended to wear on arrival day.

At the end of her talk and slide show, one of the sailors in the audience asked, "Why did you want to cross an entire ocean alone?" Her answer: "I didn't see what there was about it that I couldn't do."

These few sentences can only hint at the complexities involved in being a woman adventurer of forty-odd years ago, and it is a mark of Sharon's essential courage that while undertaking physi-

cal and social challenges never before attempted by someone of her gender, she did not abandon her own view of womanhood. Women in sports today owe a debt of gratitude to the likes of Sharon Adams. I invite you to enjoy this book, so long in coming, about a solo sailing pioneer.

Preface

KAREN J. COATES

In October 1964 Sharon Sites learned to sail. On June 12, less than eight months later, the thirty-five-year-old widow set out from California on a twenty-five-foot Danish Folkboat named *Sea Sharp* headed for Honolulu. Thirty-nine days after that she made world history, docking in Waikiki, becoming the first woman to single-hand from the mainland United States to Hawaii. Sharon gained instant fame; she was praised for bravery and chastised for foolishness. What right had she to sail the seas? What hope she gave to all women! The public's views diverged.

But Sharon wasn't done.

On May 12, 1969, she cast off from a wharf in Yokohama, Japan, in a Mariner 31 named *Sea Sharp II*, beginning a six-thousand-mile journey to San Diego. Alone again. Seventy-five days later she succeeded, becoming the first woman to single-hand the Pacific.

In all, Sharon set five world records: first woman to single-hand the waters between the U.S. mainland and Hawaii, first woman to single-hand the Pacific, first woman to set two such records, longest distance sailed by a woman, and most days a woman had ever spent at sea alone. Sharon did all that in an era without GPS, cell phones, e-mail, or Internet. She sailed in what was still a technological dark age for sailors. Sharon Sites Adams is no feminist. She did not sail the Pacific to prove anything about women. Sharon Sites Adams sailed the seas because she could.

INTRODUCTION

Alone

There is no loneliness wider than the single-handed sailor's. She is cast for days, for months, beneath an endless breadth of sky atop a plain of eternal blue. So blue. As far as the eye can see—blue. Tinted gray or green, light or dark, but forever blue.

Her life becomes confined to a small plot, just a couple dozen feet long and a fraction thereof wide. Her mind dances with insanity, depression, hallucination, self-defeat. Some of these or all of these—life alone on water drags the sailor down. Whether she plunges beneath the surface or whether she returns to the world on land are questions that color every day at sea. Every single day.

I was not prepared for that, in either of my record-setting voyages. Experience does not deaden the sting of loneliness at sea.

I had hardly sailed before embarking on my first journey from California to Hawaii in the spring of 1965. I didn't know how scared I should have been. I was too naive to know that loneliness would be my greatest fear, my nemesis, the gremlin that would get

me. And so it was again four years later, when I set sail for the second time, departing from Japan for San Diego.

Today it's different. Sailors have winds of another kind. Technology leads them through the doldrums and keeps their spirits intact; it connects them to the world in ways that old-time sailors never were. Technology has the power to eradicate aloneness. Today's solitary sailors have satellite phones, global positioning systems, e-mail and Internet, solar panels and ICOM equipment; so many gadgets to keep their bearings on the ocean, in the world, and with themselves. I'm just now learning to use the Internet. But sailors today, they know where they are and the world knows where they are. Forty years ago we single-handers sailed unknown. We navigated with the sun. We had to believe that mathematical formulas would get us to our destination, though we never knew for sure until land appeared. Our friends didn't know, couldn't know, when we would return or whether we would survive, and we—I—on the boat didn't know. Neither could I share the events of my day.

I had a World War II air force sextant. I had kerosene running lights and inside the boat a gimballed light, two compasses, and a Timex watch that could be set to the second. With my Zenith transoceanic shortwave radio, I could check the atomic clock at the National Institute of Standards and Technology in Boulder, Colorado, for the official government time. I could listen to the radio as I bobbed along, but I could not talk back. I heard baseball games and news of the world, but no one heard from me.

Sometimes I heard gossip about me, though. It came one morning on the *Breakfast Club*, a broadcast from Chicago hosted by Don McNeil. I can almost hear that voice now: "Have you all heard about the young housewife who is sailing alone in her boat to Hawaii?" McNeil told his audience it would be a dangerous, dubious idea for a strong man. "But for a woman without experience, can you imagine?"

I remember the chuckle, coming from his sidekick.

“What’s so funny?” McNeil asked him.

“I was thinking about buying my wife a boat like hers.”

I’ll betcha they never guessed I could hear them, way out there in my housewife’s boat. I heard them, loud and clear, but they couldn’t hear me. No one could.

And yet I chose that solitude. I chose to endure it twice on the world’s largest ocean. I wanted to cross those waters so badly—why? Just to say I had? Truth be told, I’m not entirely sure, even after all these years. I just felt the need to do it once I’d dreamed up the idea.

I am not the greatest sailor, I admit that. And loneliness is not everyone’s adversary, as it is mine. Yet not every sailor could do it, could stand being alone so long. Some sailors simply couldn’t endure their own minds. What does it take? I have no idea whether it’s simple determination or something much more. But if I am determined to do something, God willing, I will. I only ask myself whether I am able. If I am, I’ll do it.

I have always been that way. I remember myself at five or six years old, how determined I was. I grew up in the outdoors of rural Oregon. The neighborhood boys cut the limbs off the trees to keep me out of their tree house, but I defied them. I shimmied up a rope as they did. I wanted to be up there, and why not? I could do anything the boys could. That was my attitude all through school. I was the first woman in my high school who didn’t take home economics; why should I? I had been doing the family cooking since I was twelve, so I took mechanical drawing instead.

Critics have accused me of being too independent, and I’m sure that’s true. Reporters lambasted me when I sailed to Hawaii. One asked, “Why?” when it would have been cheaper to fly. They called me a foolish housewife. They psychoanalyzed me. Some asked who gave me the right to sail the ocean alone. But I didn’t need permission; that much I knew. Others even said I hadn’t really

done it, I hadn't really sailed. What? Did they think I'd camped on an island all those nights? Or hopped on a cruise ship? Or flew across the ocean incognito, then rustled up a little harbor boat to create the illusion of my arrival?

Yes, my headstrong nature has cost me a few friendships. But it's also defined my life.

And I've thought about those things, out there alone on the Pacific. Not much else fills the mind when the wind doesn't blow, when the sails luff. Life becomes a purgatory in still waters.

At other times, life is a tempest, riled and mighty. I endured several gale-force winds that rolled the ocean and hurled me against the cockpit coaming, bruising my rib cage. My body turned blue, blue like the sea. Every breath drew pain. Pain and discomfort are more fearsome when faced alone.

It was so damp, too. Always damp. A damp so thick it penetrated my clothing and gnawed at my skin. So damp I could not sharpen pencils and my paper grew too soft for me to write. I packed my clothes inside a sleeping bag, hoping body heat would dry them. But the air hung so thick that I could almost wring it out.

And the gray. Oh, the gray, at times lasting a week or more, it painted my mood. A dreadful gray. Should I scream? Or cry? Or run outside my little hatch and keep on running? I thought about it. I could not get warm some days. I tried to surround myself in vibrant colors, in self-made cheer that would outdo the sky and sea. You know, I love the color pink, hot pink, anything painted in that electrifying hue. So I could not bear a life of gray, nor of fog. Sometimes the fog swirled around me, wrapping me deep inside its blanket. It seemed to come on cat paws, just as Carl Sandburg had written.

I devised little ways of enduring; every sailor has her own. At times, I talked to myself, babbling to my tape recorder and writing in my diary. It's true, I survived through communication—even

though I was speaker and audience all the same. I talked to that recorder like a pal. I called it “you” and bestowed it with the quality of human companionship. Now those conversations remain as record; they’re testimony to my travels. When I look back on those entries, I learn things about myself and I am transported back to my days at sea.

Any single-hander will suffer mercurial moods. Lows so low, the heart plummets to ocean’s bottom, anchored in darkness and cold. And highs so high, they stretch wide wings of hope over our little journeys on water. I can hear those highs in my recorder: “Top o’ the mornin’ to you all! I’ve had a wonderful night’s sleep. The wind is from the northwest at eighteen miles per hour. There’s not a cloud in the sky. Perfect!”

But moods shifted as quickly as the breeze; and at another time with no wind and a wicked headache, I was a different Sharon: “I have kicked, screamed, beat with my fists, slammed pans together and—oh, I just can’t tell you. This is the kind of frustration that could drive me overboard. I could take a hammer and swing and swing—strike out at everything, beat this boat to death.”

There were days of stagnant grayness, weighting my veins with lifeless blood. My pulse stirred with each flicker of wind, but for so long I huddled beneath a wall of fog. This happens to every sailor, I’m sure, and it happened to me more than once:

A few more swells and an occasional ripple across the water from the southeast. I trimmed sails. Twenty minutes later the ripples approached from the north. I trimmed again. After expending all that energy, I looked up at the bits of nylon yarn tied to the shrouds to show wind direction. They were lifting slightly—and pointing directly at each other! My hopes of moving again were shattered. Now we are sitting as before. There is not a breath of air. “Thy will be done.” But

the Lord and I are not in agreement at the moment.

My fate idled on still water beneath still sky that day. A few altocumulus clouds drifted slowly overhead, a whisper of wind way up there, but nothing for me and the boat. I did what I always did when stuck in such a rut: I busied myself with housekeeping. I repaired all things broken, greased and oiled all parts I could reach, scrubbed salt from the deck, polished the chrome. There was nothing more I could do for the boat; there was little more I could do for me.

Always, the worst was not knowing. Will the stagnant air continue two hours? Two days? Two weeks? No sailor knows when she's in the middle of the sea. At least a storm gives winds to whip, rain to beat, something alive to fight. The calm lends nothing. Like shadowboxing, the heft of my punch would disappear in static air.

This is why loneliness festers in the doldrums. The battle is in the mind, and the mind is never beaten. You read a book, and it exhausts you. You write a letter; eventually it ends. You sew, and one day the dress is done. I once made a dress, a pink sundress, and there in the doldrums I had nearly finished it. It made me sad. I had one more arm facing, a hem, and a ruffle, and then it would be ready. But for what? No one else was there to see it, to see me in that dress. I almost ripped it apart just to start again, to give me something to do.

One day I simply told my recorder, "It hasn't been a very good day." On that day, I had sailed just five miles, but I had eaten more than that in food. When you're out on the water for weeks on end, you must count your food in days. I figured I was stocked for ninety. When we traveled swiftly—I mean the boat and I—I had no problem with what I ate. Oh, but the mind wrestles with the stomach when the boat slows. If I didn't move, didn't log the miles for a particular day, I didn't deserve to eat. That's what my

brain would decide. I always checked my log to see when and what I had eaten last.

Once, I drifted two miles backward—far, far worse than standing still. To a sailor, each mile backward doubles the distance of failure. Twelve miles back really means twenty-four behind the goal of moving ahead. How could I eat? My mind played good cop and bad cop, one half thinking I deserved no food, the other knowing I needed sustenance. Still, in my heart I knew the truth: I wouldn't get anywhere without food.

So much thought of eating made me hungry all the time. I had no more cookies, no more candy, and I kept lusting for a cheese sandwich. Couldn't someone please bring me a cheese sandwich? A glass of cold milk? I desperately craved the things I couldn't have.

Life at sea was forever a psychological game, with the enormity of the ocean holding dominion over my mind. The Pacific is so vast that it can't fit onto one chart alone. Just east of the dateline, in midocean, the time comes when a sailor changes charts. Before that time, I always felt I was sailing uphill to no particular destination. My first chart ended in the middle of the ocean and dropped off to nowhere. I knew how Columbus's crew felt when they thought he might sail off the edge of the earth. Can you imagine? When I changed charts, I could see home, I could see land, I could see it in my head, I could see it printed on paper.

And still, there was so much more to do, so much farther to go under such leaden skies. One day the sun would shine again—it would have to. I knew that. I lit the oven and dried my socks and gloves and waited for a change in weather. I hung pants, shirts, foul-weather gear. I hung my sleeping bag one section at a time from the open oven door. And I tried to soothe my soul any way I could.

Sometimes the sea converses with lonely sailors. It talks. Really. Single-handers know this well. The ocean's rolls and swells become the voices of imagined companions. Some sailors begin to