

TEMPEST ON BOARD

THE SUGARCANE

Mike Connole

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Dedication

I dedicate this book to my family and friends for their
encouragement and inspiration

Chapter I

The deck of the forty-six foot sloop was damp, a typical tropical rain shower having rinsed everything down just before dawn. At 6:30 A.M., the sun was illuminating Fort Charlotte, which guarded the entrance to English Harbour in Antigua. Early June in the Caribbean is the beginning of the “little period of the big rains” (as opposed to the “big period of the little rains”).

As usual, Mitch was the first one on deck, checking the moorings before heading back into the spacious cabin to start the coffee. The aroma of locally-brewed Caribbean beans served as a wake-up call to the other five on board.

“Honey, what’s for breakfast this morning?” called out Mitch to his French wife, Anne Sophie. She had vaguely felt him leave their forward cabin on the starboard side, but had nodded back off.

“Keep it down out there,” came the voice of Hal from the aft cabin. “This is vacation! Can’t a body get some sleep?”

From the forward port cabin, John replied, “Everybody up. It’s almost seven in the morning, and we’ve got a long day if we’re going to make the Saintes by nightfall.”

The three men met on deck, silently admiring the puffy white clouds as they gradually crossed the pale blue sky from east to west.

“Another beautiful morning,” observed Mitch. “Let’s just hope the weatherman is wrong about that tropical depression, and that it will head up north before making it to the Lesser Antilles.”

“Listen, you two,” admonished Hal. “We’ve been sailing together since we were ten years old, and a little squally weather isn’t going to scare us off. Remember that chubasco off

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Point Loma when we were in high school? We made it back with only a ripped mainsail and my dad's Victory sailboat without a scratch."

"I'm not worried about us," added John. "It's the women that worry me. I only wish that they could get along like the three of us do, but there always seems to be something wrong. I don't know what's going on with Tammy and Laura, but dinner at Admiral's Inn last night was rather uncomfortable, to say the least. And Anne Sophie kind of stays off by herself. I was hoping that this three week cruise in close quarters might bring the three of them closer together, but so far it seems the opposite is taking place."

"Whatever you're doing up there, get down here if you want your bacon and eggs warm," commanded the voice of Laura.

"And another day begins," muttered John under his breath.

In the galley, things seemed okay, the three women pitching in to get breakfast on the table. The tension of the night before had dissipated. The three men gave each other a look of relief.

"How long will we be sailing today, mon amour?" questioned Anne Sophie. "I hope the sea will be more tranquil than when we sailed down from Nevis and St. Kitts."

Mitch, eager to dispel any fear, replied, "We'll have a few hours of open sea until we reach the north coast of Basse Terre, in Guadeloupe. There, we should be protected by the mountains. The ocean will probably be very calm there, and we might even have to use the motor for a few hours before spotting the lighthouse at Vieux Fort. From there, we should be able to see the Saintes, and tonight we'll be mooring in what is considered to be the second or third most beautiful bay in the world, after Rio de Janeiro, and maybe after Hong Kong."

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“And it’s French!” exclaimed Anne Sophie. “Surely we’ll find some good restaurants, and, at last, eat decently, after a week of English cuisine,” she added somewhat pedantically. The other two women stiffened almost imperceptibly, but their attitude was not lost on the three men.

After a hearty, truly American breakfast, everyone went about the preparations for a day at sea, battening down anything that might be sent flying across the cabin if the seas roughened, or the heel increased abruptly, due to a sudden squall. They would probably only snack at noon, as the women didn’t like being thrown about in the cabin while trying to prepare lunch.

It was about nine, and they were just about ready to set sail. The women volunteered to go to the Custom’s Office with their six passports and the registration papers of the rented sloop, *Tempête*, to notify the local authorities of their departure.

Although Antigua achieved full independence from Great Britain in 1981, the British influence was obvious everywhere, even to driving on the left-hand side of the road. The Customs’ official, very black, had a spotless white uniform and a friendly attitude. He thanked the women in his British accent tainted by the tropics, and wished them a pleasant trip to their next island, after having collected the \$60 customs’ fee.

English Harbour had been an excellent haven for a three-day breather, before heading back to sea. The harbor was founded in 1725, but had been used as a hurricane shelter as far back as 1671, and served as Admiral Horatio Nelson’s base in 1784 to launch his attacks on neighboring islands. This little island, very poor and arid at first view, has been devastated several times over the years by severe earthquakes and also hurricanes – Hurricane Marilyn as recently as 1996, and Hurricane Hugo in 1989.

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The Customs and Immigration formalities took about 45 minutes. During this time, the men were charging the batteries with the big diesel motor, and readying the sails.

“Is Tammy all right, Hal?” asked Mitch. “Sorry for asking, but I can’t help my medical training. She seems pale and anxious.” He didn’t add that he noticed her checking her watch much too often for someone on vacation, and that she took many pills throughout the day. However discreet she tried to be, as a doctor he noticed these things

“Yeah, she’s fine. Just a little uptight and tired. I don’t think she really enjoys sailing all that much,” Hal explained unconvincingly.

Chapter II

The three guys were so much at ease in each other's company. They'd done everything together since grade school and Boy Scouts. They all attended middle school and high school together in an exclusive La Jolla school. John had been Student Body President in his senior year, while Mitch was Year Book Editor. Hal was first-string quarterback during his junior and senior years. All three maintained a 3.5 plus grade point average, but Mitch was clearly the intellectual of the trio. He read more, was interested in philosophy, and in observing man and nature. John was the organizer, a born leader, and was destined to become a lawyer, as had his father and his grandfather before him.

Hal was going to San Diego State University on a football scholarship, and was unsure beyond the four years at State what he would do with his life. The only certainty seemed his marrying Tammy, his girlfriend since their sophomore year. He was tall – 6foot 2 with broad shoulders and an easy stride. Blond with blue eyes, his good looks and baby face often drew stares. Of the three, he was the most fashion-conscious, but still favored the casual Southern California surfer garb. But he and Tammy melded together so well, why bother shopping around, as had done Mitch and John throughout high school. The three teenagers confided everything to one another, from their first innocent kisses to heavier French kissing and petting, and what it would be like to go “all the way”. They did all their boyhood exploring together – looking at their first Playboy magazine, smoking their first cigarette, and comparing the size of their early-puberty hard-ons.

Mitch appeared the most mature of the three. Just under 6 feet with a firm body, he had jet-black hair and hazel eyes. His

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ever-present five o'clock shadow gave him a swarthy look, but his ready smile and sparkling eyes assuaged this impression, and he was easily likable.

John had roughly the same build as Mitch, but with a little more baby fat. His two friends often teased him about this, but he couldn't resist sweets. His dark brown hair and light blue eyes, almost transparent, always caused second looks. He was the planner of their weekends and vacations together, but never imposed his ideas.

All were from upper middle class to upper class families, but none seemed spoiled by the outward signs of wealth. They all lived in the same La Jolla neighborhood, just north of Bird Rock, with ocean-front yards and fantastic views of the waves. All were practically raised in the water - sailing, swimming, surfing and diving from an early age. When the waves were up, or a good north swell materialized, they'd grab their boards and paddle out for a few hours after school. Sometimes, on weekends, they'd take Hal's dad's Victory sloop from Shelter Island Yacht Club, and sail it around to Mission Bay, spending the night on board before returning home Sunday night, relaxed and tanned.

Growing up in Southern California in the 1960's inside a silk cocoon did take its toll in social consciousness. Once in a while, lying on the beach with Hal and John, Mitch would bring up some current events problem. They were all shaken by the assassinations of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, and postulated on the reasons for these insane acts. The Civil Rights Bill of 1964 sparked little interest. The only blacks they ever saw were their maids and the trash collectors who passed once a week. There were no blacks in their school, no black neighbors, and no black surfers. Only in sporting events was there an occasional contact with black players.

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Vietnam, however, was a recurrent topic of conversation. Young Americans were being killed every day in Southeast Asia, and the draft had been instated. As all three were approaching their eighteenth birthdays, there was some concern. Back and forth, they argued the Domino Theory, U.S. financial interests in Southeast Asia, the economic boon of a war, and the just-dawning anti-war movements. Should they blindly support their government's policies, or rise up against their conservative don't-rock-the-boat Establishment parental influence.

They rarely discussed religion. All three believed, or at least hoped, that there was a God out there somewhere, maintaining a certain order in the Universe. Mitch was a C and E person, going to mass with his parents on Christmas and Easter. It was not unpleasant, but he didn't see the necessity of making it a weekly affair. All three had a deep sense of what was morally right or wrong, and their basic code of living included respecting and being honest with others, but also with themselves.

John's dad had a successful law practice in La Jolla, and was an associate of his own father, who was now semi-retired but came in daily, more or less to avoid boredom. John's mother was involved in several charitable organizations and bridge clubs, and was rarely home.

Doctor Christiansen, Hal's dad, was a clinical pathologist, and a full professor at the U.C.S.D. Medical School. When he wasn't teaching at the medical school, he was travelling to various medical conferences around the world. He published often, and had become a worldwide reference in clinical pathology. His wife was an avid tennis player, but always managed to be free to accompany her husband in his travels.

Mitch's parents were the only ones often at home. Hal and John appreciated the homey atmosphere at the Donaldson home, and spent a lot of their free time there. Mitch's dad didn't

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actually work, but drove to his stockbroker's for an hour or so every morning and late afternoon. Both of his parents came from old New England money, and the stock market was their distraction. They both loved flowers, and spent several hours daily pruning the tropical flowers and six or seven varieties of orchids. When the Dendrobiums weren't flowering, they were likely to have some Phalaenopsis, Oncidium or Cattleyas in bloom. The always-blooming Vandas assured year-round color in the side yard. Beyond the swimming pool, in the back yard, were the citrus fruit trees, always generous with their yields in the mild Southern California climate. Mitch had one little sister, six years old, who was forever in love with Hal or John, depending on the week.

Chapter III

As a graduation present, their parents sent Hal, Mitch and John to Europe. Of course, each had already been to the old continent several times, but this would be their first foreign experience without chaperones. They had purchased in advance a VW van equipped for camping. The boys were to pick it up in London, and then cruise around Europe for a few months. Their first view of England was from the air, and they were stricken by the so very green rolling hills and countryside. They noticed things they hadn't really paid attention to before, when their parents were by their sides, tending to everything. The England from their History and Geography class was one of the Industrial Revolution, and the grimy, sooty England from the Dickens' novels of their English classes. The bucolic scenery below them was anything but industrialized.

The British accent was difficult to cope with, and they found themselves asking the various airport officials to please repeat what they were saying. After a long (and very expensive) taxi ride into the city – driving on the wrong side of the road – they arrived at the dealership and found everything in order.

The van had a miniature kitchen and a big bed in the back – tight, but possible for two of them, with the third one sleeping on the padded bench behind the little table. Fortunately, they were young and would make do. They were travelling lightly, so there wasn't much to stow.

The first week was full of English and Scottish scenery, and lots of laughing and joking with the narrow roads and left-side driving. They found the food greasy, and barely digestible – greasy fish and chips wrapped in old newspapers, or tasteless, overcooked roast beef, but they decided to make the most of this trip, and not compare everything to “back home”.

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Ferrying over to Calais, they immediately encountered another type of language problem. Mitch's two years of French was just too basic, but he did catch a word now and then. It seemed that the French authorities were chauvinistic, and expected all foreigners to speak and understand their language. The baguettes, red wine and berets were not at all caricatural, and were visible everywhere. In Paris, they found a cheap hotel in the Quartier Latin, with a hot, running shower – down the hall, of course! They got a kick out of the hot and cold water urinal in their room, which they also used to wash their feet. An Australian in the room next door later explained what a bidet was. The weather was gorgeous, and they discovered Paris on foot. Driving the van around this bustling metropolis just proved too stressful, and they were freer to move about without their wheels. After a tour of the magnificent Gothic cathedral with its flying buttresses [Notre Dame], they leisurely strolled along the quays of the Seine, past the Louvre, reserved for the next day, to the Place Concorde with its obelisk – a gift to the French people from Egypt. From there, they passed in front of the U.S. Embassy, then the Elysee Palace (home of the French President), and up the world-famous Champs Elysee, with its chic boutiques. The boulevard ends with the Arc de Triomphe. Of course, their goal was the Eiffel tower, clearly visible from almost anywhere in Paris, and only a short distance from Trocadero, which afforded a splendid view of the fountains, the Seine, the Eiffel Tower, the Champs de Mars, and the Hotel Invalide in the background (under the gilded dome reposes the remains of Napoleon). They courageously attacked the Eiffel Tower by the steps for the first two levels. A brief elevator ride took them to the top, and they weren't disappointed with the view. The next day was more cultural, and devoted entirely to the Louvre and its fantastic collection of artists, sculptors and works of many and varied civilizations.

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Leaving Paris, they headed south to Biarritz to try some French surfing. What a disappointment! Three days of camping in the beach parking lot, and the waves never came. They crossed the nearby border into Spain, and took the coastal route from San Sebastian to Bilbao. Still no waves, and they headed inland to Madrid. Although there were museums and churches everywhere, they knew they couldn't take them all in at once, but did agree to visit the Prado in Madrid, and Picasso's home/museum in Barcelona.

Hal and John had each taken two years of Spanish in high school, and did manage to communicate when necessary. They were agreeably surprised by the prices in Spain, including meals and gas. They did have a generous budget from their concerned parents, but decided not to squander money unnecessarily. In France, filling up the van was very expensive. Someone explained to them that over 80% of the cost was government taxes [gas being roughly four times more expensive than in the States]. They wondered how the French people could tolerate such high prices, and welcomed the cheaper Spanish gas. It seemed that everywhere they went, there were other English-speaking teenagers, all discovering these numerous, vastly different countries within such a small area.

The weather was holding up wonderfully – lots of sunshine and light breezes across the south of France, from Perpignan, through Marseilles, Cassis, Nice, to Monaco. The beaches all along the Cote d'Azur were small and crowded, and the people actually sunbathed stretched out on rocks – no sand to be seen! Hal, John and Mitch were surprised when the doorman at the Monte Carlo Casino requested that they put on ties if they wished to enter. Of course, for a small fee, there were rental ties. Compared to Las Vegas (naturally, they did compare some things), it seemed like a mausoleum inside, practically no noise,

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expressionless gamblers, making it impossible to tell who was winning and who was losing.

The van was running great after over 4,000 kms. They crossed into Italy at Ventimiglia. This was definitely the country of the car horn and good brakes, if one expected to survive. They were to meet some friends from San Diego in Sicily in just five days, so headed directly to Rome. All three had to agree that Vatican City, the Sistine Chapel with its magnificent Michelangelo ceilings, and St. Peter's Basilica, was the most impressive sight they had seen on this trip. The huge plaza in front of the basilica, the Pieta, the tombs of all the popes, and the fantastic view after climbing 520 steps to the top of the cupola – they were definitely impressed. An eerie walk through the catacombs with candles to light their way ended their stay in Rome. From there, they motored down to the tip of the Italian boot, and took a car ferry across to Messina in Sicily. They were rewarded with a splendid view of incandescent lava flowing down the side of Mount Etna as they drove toward Catania that evening.

Unfortunately, they were two days late, their friends having already headed back to the States. They drove on to Palermo, and left the van at the VW agency, as had been previously decided before leaving San Diego. They were glad to be back on foot for a few days of sight-seeing in this pleasant Sicilian seaport. They all found Sicily a bit like Southern California – blue, sunny skies, and palm trees swaying in the warm breeze.

After two months on their own, they were greeted by their parents at L.A. International Airport. They had matured in that short period of time, had fended for themselves, absorbed some European culture, and were now ready to tackle college.

Chapter IV

With Mitch at the helm, Hal and John cast off, and they slowly motored out of English Harbour, and continued their voyage to the south. The heading was roughly 190 degrees, which they would try to maintain, thus bringing them close to the northwest coast of the Basse Terre part of Guadeloupe. Guadeloupe is composed of two large islands – Grande Terre to the northeast (flatter, with white-sand beaches), and Basse Terre, which is mountainous with black, lava beaches. The island's volcano is active, and the last eruption of the Souffriere was in 1976. The two islands are separated by a salt-water river, and are connected by two bridges.

Once out in open water, Mitch cut back the motor.

“Let's do it, guys,” said Mitch, heading the boat into the wind. Hal and John hoisted the mainsail, then the jib. Mitch fell off and the sails filled immediately. He took the heading of 190 degrees, and they trimmed the sails.

“Who's ready for a good cold beer?” asked Hal, once everything was under control, and they were gliding along smoothly at about six knots. They had discovered Carib beer in St. Kitts, a light, mild beer, and the three men appreciated their first gulp. The only sound was the fluttering of the sails and the small waves slapping against the hull.

Laura broke the silence. “What about that depression they mentioned. What if it hits us between here and Guadeloupe?”

“Don't worry, Laura, reassured John. “It's too early in the year. Hurricane season starts officially on June 1, but most hit in August and September. There is a tropical depression off to the east, but that only means disorganized winds and lots of rain.

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