

Tales from the Crypt



An equatorial crossing haunted by superstition

by Heather Francis

We woke up to a double rainbow arching across a clear sky and disappearing behind Isla Cocos.

The sea was calm but for a steady ripple of breeze that skipped across the surface. The horizon was a smooth flat line of blue. It looked like a perfect day to start our 500-mile passage to the Galapagos Islands.

After breakfast we started to prepare for the day ahead, stowing the cabin and doing the pre-departure checks on our problematic engine. I dug out the ship's log, turned to a clean white page and started to make notations. I reached across the nav table for the calendar and counted four days since our arrival. My finger landed on the word "Friday."

"Should I tell Steve?" I thought to myself. "We own a green boat, are we really THAT superstitious?"

My head was heavy with possibilities. I knew that most sailors who believed in nothing else probably still

believed it was bad luck to leave port on a Friday.

But this can't technically be considered port, I assured myself, when we didn't really check back into Costa Rica.

No, we had just sailed 700 miles from Panama in the "wrong direction" to get to Isla Cocos, which is governed by Costa Rica, and got a pretty stamp in our passports when we arrived.

Technicalities, I decided. If I could pretend that I didn't notice we were about to leave port on a Friday than maybe the sailing gods could too.

I swallowed my decision down like a spoonful of bitter medicine and crossed my fingers for a smooth passage.

WRITINGS ON THE WALL

We cleared the anchorage and soon found a nice breeze to fill the sails. Steve ducked below for a nap while I picked out my lucky lure and rigged up the fishing rod, happy to pass the afternoon in the sun. Not even an hour passed before the ratchet on the reel announced we'd hooked up.

I yelled "FISH ON!" and started

furling away the headsail to slow the boat. Steve, who had just drifted off to sleep, grumpily came up on deck, grabbed the rod and strained to get a couple turns on the reel. He and the fish battled it out, neither willing to concede and after two hours he was fatigued, his hands knurled like an old crone's and started to blister. No longer able to grip the rod tightly the fish dove, jerking it over the lifelines. A lanyard attached to the rod let us quickly recover our best piece of fishing gear, but when it happened again we agreed it was time to cut the line. Fish and lucky lure be damned.

A light drizzle had started and a row of dark clouds now filled the horizon. By late afternoon we had steady rain and increasing winds. After dinner we reefed the mainsail and then I headed below, leaving Steve in the wet and uncomfortable cockpit. Before I even peeled off my gear I heard him pull in some headsail, the wind and sea continuing to increase.

My favorite berth underway in the main cabin was impossible; with every wave I slid off onto the floor. I ventured forward to crawl into the

V-berth only to discover that the forward hatch above our bunk had sprung a leak. The bed was wet and the sheets were clammy. There would be no sleeping in the V-berth until we were safely in port and the laundry was done. I clawed my way back into the main cabin.

The only dry place left to lie down on was the 18-inch wide bench wedged in behind the dining table, a place that was not considered a berth at all up until then. I only had two positions to choose from, lying on my side with the corner of the table within inches of my face and the boat heaving in a confused sea, or lying prone on my back with my arms folded across my chest like a vampire. After what seemed like hours of shifting around uncomfortably, and only a few minutes actually sleeping, the alarm went off.

My watch was a torturous, cold four hours in the dark watching the horizon for ships and keeping the boat on course. I was soaking wet within the first half hour and spent the rest of the time hopping from bare foot to bare foot trying to create some body heat. When Steve came back up on deck he looked haggard, "Get any sleep?" I asked.

"What, in the coffin? Barely a wink," He smiled weakly. Now was definitely not the time to mention we left on a Friday.

GOOD THINGS IN OUR PAST

We had two straight days of rain and 25 knot winds. The sails stayed reefed, the boat stayed closed and we remained damp, tired and cranky. Life was reduced to a cycle of four hours on watch and four hours on our backs in the coffin. Lather, Rinse, Repeat. Although we

managed two hot meals a day, neither of us logged more than two consecutive hours of sleep. On the morning of day three we both felt like zombies. Conversation had degenerated into grunting at each other.

During my watch the wind picked up to a steady 35 knots and started to clock around. The seas became more confused as the wind waves tripped over the large ocean swells. I furlled away more headsail, leaving up just a scrap of jib, but the boat was still a little sloppy. We really needed to tuck the second reef into the main.

I know the golden rule about reefing; do it when you first consider it, otherwise it will be too late. But Steve had a long night and when I poked my head down below he looked like he was sleeping, so I waited. I waited until I heard him rustling downstairs before I mentioned anything. It had only been 45 minutes but by the time Steve took the wheel I already knew that I'd made a mistake trying to be nice.

We don't lead our halyards into the cockpit so I clipped my harness onto the jackline and, hand over hand, moved forward to the mast. The boat was pitching in the messy sea and I couldn't crank the winch on the swaying boom and hold on at the same time so I sat on the cabin top and cranked the winch above my head half a turn at a time, taking up the slack in the

reef line with my other hand. Two turns on the winch and I got an override. Impatiently, I gave the winch a few more cranks hoping to work the tangle through. I quickly realized I had made my second mistake of the morning; my impatience and inexperience had locked the reef line on the winch. I looked up hoping that Steve hadn't noticed my mistake and knew instantly by the disappointment in his eyes that he had.

My heart sank. "SHIT! What should I do now?" I wondered aloud.

We both answered at the same time "Ease the halyard!"

Without tension on the mainsheet or main halyard the boom was dead weight held off the deck by only the rigid boom vang. It swung from side to side, clanking and crunching with each small movement of the boat. I was about to untangle the override when the boat suddenly rolled steeply to port.

I hugged the mast and heard the boom violently swing sideways, the rig shuddered as it settled momentarily and the end of the boom vang cocked at an unnatural angle. Then the boat was picked up by another wave and the boom rolled to starboard. The force of the swinging boom snapped the end of the vang and the boom crashed onto the deck, the end lying over the lifelines and dragging in the water.





Crossing the Equator, above; the yacht *Kate* in the Galapagos, below

There was too much drag for me to pull the 13-foot boom and sail back on board, although I tried desperately. We quickly switched places and Steve calmly heaved the boom from the water, let down the rest of the sail and tied everything down safely.

If the boat had rolled a few seconds later, if I had been standing in front of the boom, if I had been sitting on the coach house... “Go below and get some sleep.” Steve’s command interrupted

my list of morbid scenarios.

I knew there was nothing to say. Sorry couldn’t erase the stupidity of my mistake. I went below, stripped down and lay in the coffin. “God Damn Fridays!” I muttered as the hot tears trickled down my cheeks.

When I woke up a few hours later I laid with my eyes shut hoping it was all just a sleep deprived bad dream, but I could still hear the angry ocean

through the hull. My mother always said that bad things come in threes, so I figured we’d had our run: we’d lost the fish, had a salt-soaked bunk and broke the boom. I pulled myself out of the bunk and slapped a smile on. Things could only get better!

After my midday watch I had a sink bath. I reached all the stinky and important bits but still

felt clammy. A mouth full of water confirmed my suspicion, our tanks had been compromised and our fresh water supply contaminated with seawater. The only possibility was that the tank vent on deck had failed and every time we buried the rail salt water was backing into the valve and into the tank.

I was too defeated to bother to mention anything to Steve and figured that I would be getting wet and salty on watch anyway. We had two jerry jugs for drinking water so we were not in any danger of dehydration but this new development threatened the already fragile morale on board.

KEEP ME GOIN’ STRONG

Five long days after departing Isla Cocos we approached the equator. Living up to its reputation as the doldrums the wind dropped off so that we were lucky to be averaging three knots. That afternoon the wind all but died and our progress all but stopped. At 0100 I woke Steve for the festivities. We snapped a picture of the GPS and ourselves and had a shot of rum



in the cockpit as we inched over the invisible line in the sea. Steve crawled back into the bunk, leaving me with my thoughts and a glass of rum in the darkness. The night was clear and the sea glassy, it was hard to believe that the problems of the last few days had occurred.

The first time I sailed over the equator there was no ceremony, no ritual and certainly no drink involved. I wonder if perhaps Neptune and I got off on the wrong foot. I reached out over the railing and tipped the rest of my glass into the sea as a peace offering. I figured it couldn't hurt.

By daylight the winds had filled in again, only this time they were blowing directly from San Cristobal, our destination. We made slow progress to windward, tacking back and forth across the rhumb line and a contrary current. The possibilities of a calm anchorage and a good sleep that night slipped further away with each change of course.

Our anchorage was only 25 miles away, but there was no way we'd make it there before dark. As the light faded from the afternoon sky so did my good mood and by dinnertime I was sulking like a child. Over a hot meal Steve pulled me out of my grumpy haze, after all, what's one more night at sea?

It turned out to be another night sent to test us. Our fresh head wind

died shortly after dark and we were left adrift, the lights of San Cristobal teasing us in the distance. When the current started to push us backwards we decided that if we wanted to check in before the weekend we had no choice but to spark up our temperamental engine.

Just before dawn I woke to a strange noise and vibration emanating from the engine bay. One look and I discovered we'd cracked an engine mount. And, for some unknown reason, the alternator was no longer charging the batteries.

When I told Steve, he let out a maniacal, exhausted cackle and told me to try and get a little more sleep. We had another two hours to the harbor entrance and there was nothing left to do.

SUPERSTITION AIN'T THE WAY

After finding a spot in the busy anchorage we sat on the bow and enjoyed a hot cup of tea together, sharing the excitement of finally arriving in the fabled Galapagos Islands. We knew it would be a busy day checking in with the agent and getting the boat cleaned and reorganized, so we enjoyed a few minutes of calm while we could.

"One hell of a trip, eh?" I asked.

"Don't even talk about it. Besides, right now, we are in the GALAPA-

GOS!" Steve beamed as a seal darted under the boat.

"Well, we can do anything we want today, anything that doesn't involve moving the boat." I declared.

"Oh yeah, why's that?"

"Today's Friday, you know its bad luck to leave port on a Friday." I elbowed Steve gently and smiled.

"Silly superstitions, who believes in that stuff?"

I smiled and decided that one day over a beer somewhere I'd tell him the whole story, and we'd laugh. But that morning I wanted to enjoy the stillness of being at anchor and savored the thought that on Friday I would be standing on solid ground on an island in the Galapagos. **BWS**

Heather Francis is originally from Nova Scotia, Canada and has been sailing with her partner, Steven Hertik, on board their Newport 41 Kate since 2008. They have spent the last three years in the South Pacific. To follow their adventures log onto www.yachtkate.com.

Lying at anchor in the Galapagos, welcome sign with the welcoming committee

