

The Backward Ark

By Carl Gedye

Preamble

My father, Rodney Gedye, died on the tropical island of Trinidad in April 2003, succumbing to cancer. He left behind two old cats, a small internet café and a once beautiful yacht called *Kra*.

Having cruised up and down the Caribbean for many years, multicultural Trinidad, with its often strikingly beautiful mix of African, Asian and European ancestry, had become his hurricane season bolthole, somewhere the long-lost sailor had finally called home. I had the chance to visit him shortly before he died and flew out again from England a month or so later for his cremation.

Sitting in the land-bound yacht's decaying cockpit after the ceremony, alone save for the occasional cockroach rash enough to venture out before dark, perhaps seeking relief from the relentless heat and humidity before meeting me and wishing it hadn't, I realised something would have to be done with the boat.

Kra was in a depressing state. A collision with a ship in Puerto Rico four years previously had seriously damaged her starboard side (right hand, looking forward). She'd been out of the water since then, resting on props in a forgotten corner of a busy boatyard, a sad and dilapidated dwelling slowly succumbing to the ravages of the tropics.

Despite knowing little about boats, I'd always appreciated *Kra*. She's what I've heard sailors call a proper yacht, designed with one eye to aesthetics and the other to the wide blue yonder. Built for strength as well as looks, she is sturdy but graceful. Her cutaway clipper bow, teak deck, full keel and functional pilothouse are all based on long tradition. Once a proud and elegant vessel, she was now in desperate need of love and care. Was I the man to rescue her? The answer was obvious; I didn't have a clue.

I don't doubt that my desire to prevent *Kra* dying was partly driven by a wish to cling to something of my father's that I didn't want to lose, but even without his inseparable association, I felt that saving *Kra* just for her own sake was a mission worth attempting.

Having said all that, I must confess to a reluctance to say farewell to Trinidad, with its wild equatorial beauty and warm and friendly people. During my short stays on the island I'd liked what I'd discovered. It would be nice to have an excuse to revisit with my own family and a chance to stay a while longer.

A few days later, as the airliner gathered height at the start of the long haul back to England, I gazed down at the seascape passing below, at the jungle covered islands with their endless sandy beaches, at the shallow coral outcrops clearly visible under a pale crystal sea and, just occasionally, at the white flash of a cruising yacht's sails and the tell-tale line of wake running at her stern.

What must it be like, living on a yacht sailing endlessly around paradise? It's a lifestyle I'd long imagined. Maybe, I thought then, if I played my cards right and got lucky, I might get the opportunity to experience the reality. I knew I wouldn't get another chance. As the aircraft gained altitude and the Caribbean finally faded beneath cloud, I fell asleep already dreaming.

Several obstacles required overcoming before I would be in the position to return to Trinidad with something akin to a plan, to get *Kra* back into the water for either sailing or selling or, ultimately perhaps, to get her back to England.

Before anything else, I had to talk Debbie, my wife, into joining the adventure, along with our two sons, Blake and Craig, aged twelve and four respectively. I baited the hook of my probable mid-life crisis with the idea of living the Tropical Cruising Dream.

‘We’ve got nothing to lose, our lives are in a rut,’ I almost pleaded. ‘It’s time for a change, a brave move. It’ll be great for the boys. Just imagine it, a year in the tropics...’

I was prepared to beg if necessary, but Debbie surprised me by agreeing after just a moment’s hesitation, understanding my desperate need to prove to myself that I was capable of doing more than just working as a part-time seaside bartender, my job for the five years since turning a disillusioned back on seventeen years as a struggling commercial photographer.

‘Hon, if that’s what you want to do, you know I’ll back you,’ Debs replied, stating what was to her the obvious.

With Debbie onboard, I next needed the consent of my three sisters, each a quarter owner of our father’s scanty estate. The boatyard was charging two hundred US dollars a month for *Kra*’s bit of land and we couldn’t have given her away. Lyndy, Maggie and Isla all readily agreed to allow me free rein. If I could do something with *Kra* that would stop her costing us money, like getting her out of the boatyard and back afloat and at anchor, then that was fine with them.

Green lights shining all around, Debbie and I put our lives in storage and set about decorating and selling our small two-bedroom flat in Weston super Mare, the proceeds from which constituted our entire funds. By the time we were ready to go, all bridges burnt to a smouldering char, a year had passed.

A month before our departure, my sister Isla, executor of the will and responsible for everything relating to our father, called from her home in Scotland to tell me she had received bad news from the boatyard.

Thieves, she explained, had broken into *Kra* and stolen a fair amount of equipment, gaining access via a ladder left in place to allow staff at the internet café access to feed the cats still living aboard. I would have to assess the damage once we arrived. Isla had the ladder removed and the cats went into boarding.

The final obstacle to my plans for getting *Kra* back into prime condition, my own weighty ignorance of all things nautical, would have to wait. I hadn’t crewed on a boat since my mid-teens and didn’t know the first thing about yachts. At forty-two feet in length, with the two masts of the ketch rig and weighing in at over eighteen tons displacement, *Kra* is not the sort of boat you attempt to renovate and skipper unless you know what you’re doing. I had no idea back then how hard, and at times how frightening, learning could be.

Chapter 1

We flew into Trinidad late on a mid-May evening. Elizabeth, the Company Secretary now running Ankh Internet Café, my father’s last business venture, met us at the airport in her little red company car.

Rather than taking us straight to the boat, Elizabeth insisted we spend our first night in Trinidad as guests of herself and boyfriend Nigel. We dined on fried chicken while the boys watched cartoons on TV before sleeping one last night in a real bed.

Elizabeth, an attractive and confident Afro-Caribbean lady in her late twenties, was now the sole remaining member of staff at the internet café. Two further employees from the original team of three had been sacked in the year between my father’s death and our arrival, victims of a power struggle that had left Elizabeth ruling the rapidly diminishing roost. The small enterprise had not yet returned a single dollar of profit and was feasting on what little cash remained. Other than dealing with *Kra*, I had volunteered to try and do something with the dying business. It wasn’t top of my list of priorities, but the company car would prove very useful.

As Elizabeth drove toward Trinidad’s north-western peninsula the following morning, and the busy boatyards that crowd the large bay to the south of Chaguaramas National Park, I again warned Debbie that the yacht wasn’t in the condition it had been when we had last visited my father together seven years earlier. *Kra* had been out of the water at that time too, just for routine hull maintenance. I knew that seeing the once beautiful boat would come as a shock, despite my repeated cautions, but Debs was in high spirits. After months of frantic preparation she wanted to enjoy the moment and

gazed out dreamily as we weaved our way through the busy streets of Port of Spain, Trinidad's bustling capital.

The early morning air was already thick with the scent of stalls offering breakfasts of spicy roti and doubles, while others overflowed with colourful arrangements of exotic fruit and vegetables: yams, breadfruit, plantain, christophenes and other fragrant tropical delights. Parked haphazardly by the roadside, occasional trucks loaded down with ready-to-drink coconuts were already doing brisk business.

The road widened as it headed out of town and we gradually gathered speed. With a warm morning breeze playfully tussling her blonde hair through the open window, Debbie smiled to herself as she soaked up the atmosphere in all its mysterious flavours.

The boys started getting excited too as they glimpsed the sea lying calm to our left between gaudy billboards advertising *Stag Lager*, '*A Real Man's Beer*', and improbably named *Rough Rider* condoms. Modern hotel developments, blocks of luxury apartments and the sprawling West Mall shopping centre, still under construction but already open for business, lined the route until eventually giving way to the dilapidated shanty villages more typical of Trinidad's numerous poor. Liquor stores with iron-barred windows and colourful open-fronted rum shops tried to outnumber the ramshackle roadside dwellings they served.

The scenery changed again abruptly as we entered Chaguaramas National Park, a US naval base until 1961, the year before Trinidad gained its independence from rapidly retreating British colonial rule. The road almost met the sea as we passed a group of large hangers, warehouses and other ugly concrete military constructions interspersed with fast food franchises, glitzy nightclubs and sporadic scrubby beaches.

Entering PowerBoats Marina, one of several large boatyards nestled shoulder to shoulder along the water's edge, we wove our way through a forest of aluminium masts and multicoloured hulls towards the forgotten corner in which *Kra* sat under a large canopy of white plastic sheeting, erected by my father to fend off the daily deluges of the six-month rainy season. Elizabeth dropped us off before departing to Ankh Internet, handily located within easy walking distance a couple of boatyards back down the road.

Stepping under the large, wooden-framed plastic tent, standing in line and all holding hands, the family looked up in silent awe at our new home. Resting on large wooden blocks, the grand old lady towered above us.

Kra's draft—the distance from her waterline to the bottom of her keel—is over seven feet. Adding her freeboard, the three or so feet of hull above her waterline, made a total of nearly twelve feet from ground to top outside edge, called the toe rail. I looked about for the ladder, no point in standing around dumbstruck all day.

Up on deck everything was much as I'd last seen it while sitting in the cockpit hatching crazy schemes a year earlier. Everything was covered in mildewed rubbish and sawdust; erratic repairs having ended when the man paying the bills had died. The safety rail along *Kra's* starboard side was missing and Debbie instantly had visions of young Craig falling over the edge.

Gingerly navigating my way along the deck while ducking the timber crossbeams supporting the plastic canopy, I kicked at the junk hindering my progress. Bits of rotting wood, decaying mattresses and crumpled bedding from the master cabin and forward double berth lay scattered about. I turned to Debbie, following close behind. She retuned my half smile, sighed deeply and shrugged her shoulders. Debbie didn't need to confirm it; things were indeed worse than she had imagined.

After a few minutes below deck I wrote a brief mental itinerary. No mattresses on the bunks. No fresh water onboard until the tanks had been cleaned. I didn't trust the bottled gas cooker until professionally serviced, so no cooking. Thick grime, cockroach excreta and cat hairs covered everything, turning the rich handcrafted woodwork and upholstery a sticky dull grey.

The nearest toilet and showers were a two hundred metre dash away, once you'd climbed back down the ladder to ground level with your legs crossed. We had electricity though, provided via a disreputable looking cable that ran to an outlet beside the boat, so that's where I started.

After much sorting of wires and trusting an old rusty transformer, I succeeded in getting a single bulb hanging from an extension to work. At least we had light. I also found an enormous fan in the

bows and got that running. With all the hatches open this created a through draft that did something toward making life more tenable, but it was loud.

Having changed into an old t-shirt, cut down jeans and a bandana covering her now bundled hair, Debbie soon set to work with a scrubbing brush, disinfectant and buckets of water filled from a nearby standpipe. By making herself busy she avoided contemplating the size of the task ahead, a ploy I soon learnt to emulate. Sensing the despondent mood, Blake and Craig set off to explore the boatyard, leaving the now grumpy parents to get on with it. After just three of hours working in the heat and filth, Debbie and I were swamped in sweat and completely exhausted. It was time to find a bar, we'd be eating out for lunch. Lime-drenched fish sandwiches and salad washed down with iced beer—it wouldn't be all hell.

A nice bar-cum-restaurant called Sails sits close to the water's edge within our boatyard, with an interesting view across the bay. Sitting on one of the wooden benches under the shade of spread coconut fronds, the first thing that grabs your attention is the anchorage. Yachts of all shape and size gently sway with their bows facing the breeze.

Beyond the yachts and over to the right is the small island of Gaspar Grande, known locally as Fantasy Island after a permanently half-finished resort at its eastern end. The island is mostly dense jungle but around its edges many brightly painted houses have been erected, the weekend getaways of Trinidad's elite. Each has its own landing stage and accompanying speedboat.

To the left of the view, sticking out to sea like a thin pointing finger, is the fuel dock belonging to our yard. The launching dock, where yachts are raised and lowered from the water by a huge four-legged crane, lies just beyond the fuel dock. I would soon find myself watching keenly whenever a boat was *pulled* or *splashed*, imagining the day that *Kra* would make her return journey to the sea.

To the far left of the bay everything is big and commercial. Large ships arrive around the clock, offloading supplies to feed Trinidad's booming oil industry. Nothing about that view is pretty.

The best view from Sails bar was often skyward over the water, from where pelicans dive almost vertically for fish, crashing into the briny with seemingly neck-breaking force. Frigate birds, with their long and distinctive forked tails, put on a fabulous show of graceful gliding, catching thermals that give them height without the least expenditure of effort.

At water's edge, not a stone's throw from where we sit, shoals of mullet swim close to the surface. At night, attracted by the bright lights, occasional leopard ray might appear, gliding through the water as gracefully as the birds above. Also after dark one snatches brief glimpses of fish bats flying in and out of the shadows, scooping fry that have strayed too close to the surface, lighting themselves in the beam of the bat's stealth sonar. The sunsets, viewed from Sails with a chilled glass of '*A Real Man's Beer*', are always superb.

The service, though friendly, is never fast. The waitresses go out of their way to ensure you're never disturbed. That's a typical Trinidad thing, as is the ubiquitous answer, '*Just now*' to any question that utilises the word '*when?*' Such as, '*when* will you serve me?' or '*when* will my baked grouper with mango salad be ready—I ordered it two hours ago?' How long the interval '*Just now*' will take to expire remains unknown until its final passing. Minutes may likely become hours. The problem, you must understand, is that everybody is running on Trini' Time and it is *you* who must adjust—or risk becoming bitter, frustrated and nobody's friend. It's far easier to get a beer from the bar yourself, sit back comfortably and spend your surplus moments idly scanning the menu and enjoying the view. You will get served, sooner or later.

Our first night on *Kra* was very uncomfortable. Craig was the only one to have a good sleep. His bed, called the quarter berth, was a narrow single bunk in the saloon designed for off-watch crew to grab a little shuteye during passage making. Close to the companionway steps, it gives fast access to the cockpit. It was the only bunk with a usable mattress.

Blake slept on the couch in the saloon. His cabin would eventually be the small starboard double berth that Debbie and I had occupied during our last visit together. It was currently filled with junk. Debbie and I slept in the portside master cabin on bare boards. We had no sheets or blankets, but in the thick heat that hardly seemed to matter. Soon after dusk, squadrons of hungry mosquitoes declared noisy and relentless war.

While visiting Ankh Internet the following morning, currently our only source of hot, freshly brewed coffee, I discovered that a neighbouring company specialised in yacht soft furnishings. I paid them a visit. The good news was that they could supply our mattress needs, but sadly not for at least a week. We would be sleeping on bare boards until then.

Back aboard *Kra* again, Debbie bravely returned to scrubbing below deck while I prudently kept out of her way, amusing myself clearing the rubbish on deck and exploring the large lockers in the cockpit, discovering all manner of interesting stuff stowed away in their damp depths. Things that were obviously broken or decayed I threw over the side, including two pairs of rotten rubber flippers, face masks and snorkels, a pair of unserviceable diver's knives and a heavily corroded wind turbine.

The pile of discarded junk on the ground beneath the boat soon developed into a small mountain. Over went the old mattresses, a threadbare canvas spray deck, a curtain that had once hung across the door to the master cabin and was now falling to bits. Old pots of half-used paint, badly rusted tools, bedding that wouldn't survive cleaning, lengths of rope that had seen better days, all went over the side. The cockpit looked far tidier by the time I'd finished but in later months, once I'd started learning what things actually did, I often found myself looking for something I knew I'd chucked overboard in those early, impetuous days.

I discovered the bottled propane gas locker supplying the cooker situated on the starboard side of the cockpit. A small hole in the bottom of the locker, passing through the hull above the waterline, allows any dangerous escaping gas to drain harmlessly overboard. The hole had become blocked and rainwater, somehow getting into the locker, had accumulated to a depth of several inches. Thus nourished, an opportunist poison ivy had taken root in the rotting woodwork. I destroyed the plant and drained the water, but the damage was done. Badly decayed, much of the wood fell to bits in my hands like so much wet paper.

Another urgent job was *Kra's* holding tank. Effluent is stored in the holding tank when the boat is in harbour, for later disposal overboard when out at sea. *Kra's* holding tank was full, backing stagnant sewage up into the galley's (boat's kitchen) twin sinks.

Unpleasant expanding gases in the bowels of the boat slowly built pressure during the heat of the day until alarming gurgling noises rumbled up through the pipes, spurting thick black liquid through the sink plugholes and several inches into the air. It was like living with a small, foul Mount Etna.

As one might imagine, you're not supposed to pump the waste overboard when the boat is on land, but a holding tank that has been full for over five years in the tropics doesn't make for healthy living. I decided to pump out anyway, waiting until night when everyone in the yard was hopefully asleep before preparing a hose to wash away the sewage while Debbie operated the manual pump below deck. Blake stood watch against the arrival of nightshift security, calling 'stop' and 'go' as necessary.

Black waste shot from a hole in *Kra's* hull, flying several metres through the air before splattering to the ground close to my feet. The stench was impressive. I was about to call a halt when the flow suddenly dropped to a coughing trickle. I could still hear Debbie pumping the handle aboard *Kra*.

Surely we couldn't have emptied the tank yet. I reckoned we'd shifted maybe four gallons before the flow stopped. Although I had no idea, I imagined *Kra's* holding tank capacity at somewhere closer to a hundred gallons. There was a problem somewhere in the system.

We thought it through. If we were pumping stuff out of a sealed tank, there must be a vent allowing air to enter to prevent a vacuum. Maybe oil and fat from dishes had blocked the vent at some point in the past. It sounded reasonable. Perhaps pouring boiling water down the sink would soften the fat enough to clear the obstruction. The answer seemed simple enough, if only we could boil some water. At least for now Mount Etna was quiet and the sinks drained. It was a small, temporary triumph.

I next turned my attention to making an inventory of the equipment stolen before our arrival, a task made easier by my father's efforts. Having kept manuals for every bit of kit aboard *Kra* in a series of plastic binders, it was only a matter of finding manuals for things now missing. The thieves had disconnected the radar monitor, leaving it in a plastic bag under the chart table for later collection.

The VHF marine radio was gone, the wires and aerial simply cut through. The SSB radio was also gone (single-sideband). This expensive bit of kit enables a boat to stay in contact just about anywhere in the world, whereas VHF only works line-of-sight over a distance of around twenty-five miles.

The Weatherfax, which downloads and prints weather information while at sea, was absent. There was also once an inverter. This device, its manual explained, takes the 24 volt DC supply from the batteries and turns it into a 110 volt AC supply, allowing for the use of desirable domestic appliances such as the microwave oven and portable television, both nicked along with the inverter. I would have to replace the VHF radio if I ever seriously intended going cruising, but the rest could wait.

Debbie made a new friend the following morning. She discovered the soon-to-be-named Lizzie the Lizard living in the timbers supporting *Kra's* plastic canopy. About five inches long and lightly built, the lizard was coloured dull green with an adder-like diamond pattern running down her spine. Blake and Craig were delighted, lizards make really cool pets in their opinion.

'Is a house lizard,' Elisabeth explained knowingly after hearing Debbie's description later that day. 'Is a good thing to have a house lizard bless ya home,' she continued, 'They eat de mosquitoes an' roaches.'

After several more days of hard and dirty work, Debbie and I decided to indulge in some gentle playtime. Having been forced to provide their own entertainment thus far, the boys were getting dangerously restless. I borrowed the car from Elizabeth, and we headed off to find Maracas Bay.

North-western Trinidad doesn't have many beaches, but those few that exist are pleasant enough, though often crowded. Crossing verdant mountains, our ears popped before a rapid descent to the northern coast an hour's drive from Chaguaramas along jungle bordered roads.

We stopped to admire the view from a high, sign-posted vantage point while enjoying a refreshing slurp of cool coconut water, drunk straight from a nut expertly decapitated with three fast blows of the smiling Rastafarian vendor's machete. He split the nuts open for us when we thought we'd finished and, with another deft chop, fabricated a simple spoon to scoop out the soft, gelatinous centre.

Maracas is possibly northern Trinidad's most famous strip of sand and although not the immaculate and deserted sort of place found gracing the covers of slick holiday brochures, it does boast a few designer palms growing at jaunty angles. I couldn't resist posing against one, Robinson Crusoe scans the horizon, until a colony of enormous red ants asked me to leave.

The sea was warm yet refreshing as we played in the rolling surf. This is what I'd promised through the long winter nights in England. As far as the boys were concerned, we'd finally arrived. They spent a couple of happy hours playing with inflatable boogie boards we'd carried all the way from England.

Heading to one of several garishly coloured grass-roofed shacks doing good business around the large car park, we treated ourselves to Bake 'n' Shark, a popular and delicious burger-like dish made from shark steaks sandwiched between deep fried bread and served with a selection of salsas, salad mixes and pepper sauces. They taste a lot better than you might imagine and there's a certain primeval satisfaction in biting into shark flesh.

Having found a nice spot under the shade of a large mango tree, we played carefree holidaymakers for the rest of the day, eating ripe, sun warmed windfalls as they obligingly dropped into the soft golden sand beside us. Debbie and I made the best of it while we could, it would be back to work tomorrow.

Chapter 2

Being only ten degrees north of the Equator, Trinidad sees no perceptible difference in daylight hours from month to month. It gets light at about six in the morning and dark around six at night. By midday, with the sun overhead, it's too hot to work. So it's early to bed and early to rise, do the hard stuff before it gets impossible to continue and then relax somewhere shady.

In the beginning I also had ideas about finding the time to get fit. Having shown a marked dislike for physical exercise at school, Blake was included in my plans. I thought he was in danger of becoming a couch potato. It would be a great idea, I said with ridiculous optimism, for both of us to

get up extra early, before dawn, to go running. We could take a football and have a kick-about before starting the day's labours. Blake would then have to spend several hours studying while I got on with my work.

Naturally, Blake wasn't impressed. I soon tired of waiting for him to get out of bed. By the time he was awake I had to get busy. The early morning runs soon forgotten, I looked forward instead to getting the boat in the water. Then we could all go swimming whenever the fancy took us.

I hired the services of a professional contractor to test the bottled gas system. All he did was open the valve on the gas bottle while pouring soapy water over all the joints and looking for bubbles. It was exactly what I would have done if a professional hadn't been available. Then he announced that he'd discovered a problem with the cooker itself. Insulating material was, he assured me, missing from the oven's sides. Being no expert myself, I agreed to let him take the thing away. We settled the price and off he went. It wasn't cheap.

Returned the following afternoon as promised, I couldn't see how my man had replaced the cooker's missing insulation. There was no sign that the metal sides, which were riveted on, had ever been removed. Having spent some time cleaning the burners before the cooker was taken away, Debbie realised that one was now jammed on at an awkward angle. The cooker worked but didn't burn cleanly. Pots and pans would henceforth wear coats of soot after every use. Not a very good result, I thought.

We had a similar experience a couple of days later with the contractor I employed to pressure clean our water tanks. Although nothing got broken, he charged the earth. I was beginning to realise that if I continued using professionals I was going to go bust while *Kra* continued dying. I had two more contractors to see regarding servicing the engine and replacing the woodwork on the starboard side after which, I decided, I would somehow do everything myself.

As it turned out, the mechanic didn't show at all. The woodworker, a Canadian chap, made at least that much effort, arriving only a couple of hours later than arranged. Having moodily paced the deck several times inspecting the damage, he shook his head and informed me, rather gruffly, that it was an impossible job. Firstly, he was too busy working on an ongoing project and couldn't spare the time. Secondly, someone had apparently bought up all the available teak on the island. It would be months before the wood could be purchased and even longer before his skills would be available. In the meantime, if teak stocks improved, he might send around one of his boys to have a look. Not a very good result, I thought again. A while later I learnt the true cause of the problem, an intriguing story involving my father and the carpenter's now ex-wife. I'm not surprised the man held a grudge.

Meanwhile, Debbie and I got slowly organised. We now had clean drinking water, as much electricity as needed, bottled gas for cooking and the new mattresses would be arriving any day. Debbie started arranging the galley to her liking and I ran out of things to rashly discard. Wanting a small digital camera to record my progress, our first week ended with a trip to West Mall, the large and modern shopping centre we had passed on our way to the boatyards of Chaguaramas.

Later that afternoon, enjoying a cold beer in the cockpit while playing with my new toy, I was distracted by the sound of someone walking about under the boat. I leant over the side, looking down just as the stranger below looked up.

'Hello,' I called down, smiling.

'I understand this is a ferro-cement boat,' he replied curtly.

'Yes,' I said, 'that's right.'

'The yard manager suggested you might need a little advice sorting her out.'

I got to my feet and made my way down the ladder. The chap introduced himself as Alan. Standing over six feet tall despite a pronounced stoop, with shoulder-length grey hair held back in a ponytail and a beard not recently trimmed, there was something vaguely piratical about his appearance. The accent was English but with a strange twang I couldn't place. Alan explained that his yacht was also a Peter Ibold designed concrete *Endurance*, but Alan's boat was an earlier model and five feet shorter.

We talked for a while about the pros and cons of this unusual boat building material as he walked slowly and with a slight limp around *Kra*, carefully inspecting her damaged hull—which included a long, nasty looking crack close to the bottom of the keel.

There was nothing, he finally announced, broken beyond repair. But he warned me up front that if he was going to get involved, he wasn't cheap. I said I was interested. Alan explained that he was currently working on another cement boat project on the far side of the yard and couldn't help right away, but he might be available in a week or so. I suggested he come to dinner a few days later, when we could discuss things further. Having already realised that whichever way I turned, the hard earned profit from the sale of our home was going to rapidly diminish, I was prepared to listen to anyone who felt qualified to help. Right from the start Alan had spoken sense and, unlike most I had dealt with so far, he had warned me that it would cost. I felt we might do business.

The following morning turned out to be one for the diary. We'd been in Trinidad just eight days. I was sitting in the saloon drinking coffee when Craig got out of bed naked. As soon as he stood, I realised something was seriously wrong. The poor boy's manhood was completely off centre to the left, while a large swelling protruded below his stomach on the right. Craig wasn't in any pain and didn't understand what all the fuss was about, but things definitely weren't as they should be. I decided to take him to hospital immediately.

Getting the car from Elizabeth, we set off for downtown Port of Spain. Having driven my father into town for radiotherapy daily for a fortnight, I knew my way to the hospital only too well.

Seen soon after arrival, a brief examination confirmed my own layman's diagnosis—Craig had a hernia. The doctor gave us the telephone number of Dr Landreth-Smith, the only paediatric surgeon in northern Trinidad, and one of only two on the entire island.

Craig had a nasty cough before leaving England, as children often do. The cough was almost gone but the doctor advised us that our son was recovering from a mild chest infection that needed clearing before surgery. Writing a prescription for a course of antibiotics, he pointed the way to the cash desk.

We called Dr Landreth-Smith from Ankh Internet as soon as we got back. His receptionist explained that the doctor was in theatre and would call as soon as possible. Debbie and I spent a couple of hours pacing the floor, our anxiety levels heading toward fever pitch. It would have been bad enough if our son had suffered a hernia in England but here, in what we suddenly perceived as the back of beyond, it couldn't have been worse. Eventually Dr Landreth-Smith returned our call, agreeing to see us the following morning.

We spent that evening quietly on the boat, our lives suddenly on hold. Should we return to England, and to what and where? Maybe Debbie should return with Craig. They could stay with my mother in Cornwall. Debbie's own mother had died thirteen years earlier and she'd never known her father. I hated the thought of us splitting up. The idea of trying to get on with restoring *Kra* while Debbie sat outside surgery five thousand miles away with no one to hold her hand was too much. We lay awake all night with stomachs slowly turning turtle.

My first impression of the tall, well-built and handsome Asian-Trini' doctor who shook my hand the following morning, with his easy smile and relaxed manner, was that he was too young to be any good. The doctor read my thoughts. Before even so much as looking at Craig he assured me that he had attended medical school in Glasgow and had since been in practice for several successful years. I smiled my best smile, disbelieving every word. Impressive framed diplomas hung from the walls of his compact consultancy, just as you'd expect they would in a private medical practice situated at the heart of a nation's capital. Thank heavens we hadn't skimped on medical insurance.

Craig was getting nervous with all the attention, convinced that sooner or later something was going to hurt. The doctor prodded and probed, talking gently to Craig all the while. Yes, he said, it was a hernia. And yes, it was right that Craig should be on a course of antibiotics. He explained that surgery would be necessary, but that he couldn't operate for six weeks. Craig would have to complete his medication first, by which time the surgeon would be off island for a fortnight, attending various seminars and clinics. After that his diary was full until early July. He would need to re-examine Craig to ensure that he was fit to go under anaesthesia and would then book the operating theatre for a day or so later.

And then the good doctor scared the pants off me. There was a chance, he warned, that the hernia could strangulate while we were waiting for the operation, that things that shouldn't protrude through the tear in the muscle wall might well do so. If that happened there was a chance that a constriction could lead to a cut-off in circulation. This would be extremely painful and potentially life threatening.

He showed me what to look for and what to do should the emergency arise, which amounted to pushing the bits gently back through the muscle wall and calling an ambulance. Meanwhile, Craig was to take things easy: no running, climbing, jumping, lifting or any of the other things a young child wants to do.

There was nothing for it except to keep an eye on Craig and wait. We drove to another beach close to Maracas the next day to let the boys have some fun. Debbie and I weren't in the mood for boats. As long as I stayed with Craig there was nothing wrong with him paddling and building sandcastles. We had Bake 'n' Shark again and tried to have a lazy day. It didn't work. Watching people playing cricket on the sand, throwing themselves into the crashing surf to catch a well hit ball, we realised that these were games for the future, not now. As our poor invalid sat playing in the shade, I found myself continually checking the size of the bulge below his stomach. Every night for six weeks I would have to go through the ritual of laying him supine on his bunk and carefully rolling my fingers over the swelling as I'd been shown. Craig continued to feel no pain.

Two days following the discovery of the hernia was Craig's fifth birthday and the day that Alan was due to come for dinner. As children always do on mornings that promise presents, Craig woke extra early. We'd bought him a miniature steelpan drum, the traditional instrument of Trinidad, and lots of other silly toys. Craig had a great day making loads of noise. I'd known when we bought it that the pan was a mistake.

Alan arrived in the early evening with his girlfriend Suzie, a thin Asian-Trinidadian lady with long black hair that had started turning silver. Suzie had a loud, slightly annoying laugh that she used whenever possible, especially after consuming a fair quantity of an illegal bush rum called babash that she'd brought along, thinking we might like to try a taste. Having sipped the smallest sample and observed Suzie's demonstration of how the illicit liquid burnt with a pure blue flame capable of launching rockets, we sensibly settled on warm beer instead, which after the babash had no taste whatsoever—nothing would for the rest of the evening.

Alan and I talked and played splat the mosquito while sitting in our canopy-covered cockpit. I was happy to discover that he knew about more than just cement boats. He was also well versed in the workings of diesel engines, was good with wood and could even tackle the repairs to *Kra's* starboard side. It all sounded good. We agreed a day rate for his help and, as he'd warned me, he wasn't cheap. I explained the hernia situation and said that Debbie and I had decided that if things took a turn for the worse, we might return to England without warning. Alan understood but said that we should get started anyway. He planned to begin with getting the engine running. It would be the first time it had done so in nearly five years.

Chapter 3

We had arrived in Trinidad at the start of the six month rainy season. Now it really began settling in. Trinidad hardly ever sees drizzle, when it rains it wants everyone to notice. There is a commonly held but erroneous belief that tiny tree frogs, seldom seen but often heard, call to each other with a loud shrill chirp just before a deluge. Another myth reckons that it always rains after three in the afternoon. My experience was that the tree frogs sang whenever I was trying to sleep and that the rain falls whenever it fancies. While out for one of our rare early morning runs, Blake and I found a puddle thick with tree frogs. I was amazed at their tiny size, no bigger than my smallest fingernail. How they managed to make such a racket is beyond me. It rained hard as we jogged back to the boatyard.

Preceded by a strong wind springing from nowhere, blowing away the clamminess hanging in the air under a quickly darkening sky, the water falls hard and fast. Then, just as suddenly as it starts, it stops again, leaving steam rising thickly from the ground and for a while the air feeling cleaner, fresher and easier to breathe.

Standing in a slight depression meant that *Kra* became an island surrounded by her own little lake every time the heavens opened. Craig loved splashing about and getting filthy, but for the rest of us getting to and from the ladder meant crossing the water by means of stepping on whatever bits of wood and rubbish lay about, manoeuvring around the metal props that kept *Kra* upright on her keel. It

wouldn't take long for the waters to subside once the rain stopped, but then the next deluge would soon come along and fill our little lake up again.

One upside to the rain was that it helped wash away the products of our holding tank problem. Dishwater filled the tank every couple of days, until the sinks wouldn't drain again. Then it was time to wait until dark, place Blake on watch and get to the pumping. Debbie and I took it in turns to pump or hose down. If we emptied during heavy rainfall, there wasn't any need to use additional water to hide our covert operation.

It was obvious that we weren't emptying the tank completely, no holding tank should fill with only a couple of days' worth of dishwater. What we were pumping out also told a tale. It wasn't dishwater, it was rank effluent. The dishwater didn't even appear to be diluting the horrid liquid.

As soon as we had gas working, we tried pouring boiling water down the sink, kettle after kettle. It had no effect other than creating a little steam and giving the foul muck a slightly cooked odour. Then we tried detergent. That made the black liquid bubble vigorously but didn't increase the volume we managed to shift. We bought expensive chemical drain un-blocker but that just made Mount Etna return with more fury. I realised that if I was going to deal with the problem properly, I was going to have to get at the holding tank directly. I decided to look at the problem later, maybe a couple of weeks later, once I'd worked up the courage.

Lizzie the Lizard started bringing friends and family to live in the wooden framework of our canopy, doubtless attracted to the mosquitoes that were in turn attracted to us. Three cute reptiles even took to living aboard *Kra*. There was one little chap hiding in the folds of our mainsail, another baby occupied the bottled gas locker and the third lived up in the bows. We often spotted small lizards scuttling about, looking for titbits to which they were most welcome.

One morning, having made our way on deck to investigate a strident burst of curious chirping, we found a new member of the growing lizard clan, larger and brighter than all the others. I had little doubt that this was a male. While drinking coffee in the cockpit soon after, Debbie called me to witness a scene straight from David Attenborough's *Living Planet*.

'See,' said Debbie, 'I told you Lizzie was a girl.'

Walking the quarter mile between our boatyard and Tardieu Marine, the home of Ankh Internet Café, with impenetrable jungle across the road to our left and boatyards to the right, we found an area close to the water's edge which had escaped development.

Here, between occasional trees and palms, a large tribe of iguana spent their days warming in the sun between downpours. We always had a head count whenever we passed and, on several occasions, spotted as many as seventeen of the noble prehistoric beasts. Sadly, these wonderful creatures are considered something of a delicacy by a few of the locals who often hunt them. They are said, though we never tried any, to taste like chicken.

The morning finally came for Alan to start work. I handed him a recent survey that Isla had commissioned before our arrival. It stated that the big Perkins diesel engine required a complete rebuild. My greatest worry was how we were going to get the monster out, there was no way we could work on it in situ. Lifting the saloon floor, we peered down into the darkness at the large and complicated mess below. Things looked bad to me. There was a lot of matted cat hair, a lot of rust and dirty oil and an awful lot of machine.

'We should see if we can get it running before you think about rebuilding the whole thing,' Alan advised. That seemed like a logical idea. 'But first there are a few jobs that we need to do before cranking the starter,' he added.

It took a couple of days before we got anywhere near the ignition key. Alan had me doing most of the hard work under his supervision, explaining that I wouldn't learn if he did it all himself. Being nearly twenty years younger, I was also more agile. The original builders must have been dwarf contortionists. To work on *Kra*'s engine you've got to be prepared to get down, get dirty and *squeezed-in-tight*.

The first job was basic cleaning and rust removal, a few hours at that and things started looking better. We emptied the old engine oil, replaced the filter and refilled with new. The fuel line leaked so we replaced it all. Diesel engines, I discovered, have at least two fuel filters, the function of the first

being water removal. The filter was so clogged with sludge that it surprised me that the engine had run the last time it was used. Or maybe it hadn't, for all I knew.

Alan was concerned about the condition of the diesel remaining in the fuel tanks, so rigged up a temporary supply using a five-gallon container. Then followed the laborious task of hand-pumping fuel through the injectors, locking each nut in turn as first bubbles and then fuel spat from the pipes as we bled the system. I learnt as we worked.

Finally the moment of truth arrived. Alan made sure the gears were disengaged and hit the switch. The starter motor spun into life without hesitation, the engine turned but wouldn't fire. Alan cupped his hand over the air intake before pulling it away again rapidly. The machine coughed and sputtered like a drowned man slowly reviving and then, suddenly, the monster awoke.

Alan eased the throttle, allowing the engine to warm slowly. Cooling water, supplied through a long hose running through the galley hatch from the standpoint beside *Kra*, could be seen escaping through a pump down in the bilge. I pointed it out, but Alan wasn't concerned, explaining that it wasn't a problem, just something to look at tomorrow. He seemed more intent on listening to the deep throbbing of the motor.

'How does she sound?' I asked, worried by the serious look on Alan's face as he tapped the temperature and oil pressure gauges with a knowledgeable index finger. He smiled,

'Like a Perkins,' he said with obvious approval. I was delighted. This, at last, was progress.

All the boats on the hard in our marina were arranged in neat rows forming little streets navigable to cars and cranes. A couple of boats down from *Kra* on our particular street, resting on high props, was a catamaran called *Momo*. We had seen her owners, a middle-aged couple, almost every day. Nodding greetings in passing, we hadn't yet spoken. When Alan and I climbed down *Kra*'s ladder shortly after our engine success, the man was waiting to meet us. He spoke English well, with a strong German Accent.

'Hello, hello,' he said with a smile, 'you have the engine running. I could hear it from my boat.'

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I hope it wasn't too loud.'

'Not at all,' the smile beamed, 'I am delighted to hear such noise. The last owner was a good friend of mine. To hear the boat coming back to life is really nice.'

'I am Rodney's son,' I explained, 'My name is Carl.'

'Ya,' he said, 'is that so, and my name is Wolfgang, and my wife is called Magit. Welcome to Trinidad, if there is anything I can do to help, please just ask.'

I thanked him and we shook hands warmly. As he turned to leave, a thought appeared to occur, 'Magit and I are having a little barbeque under our boat tomorrow night, just by ourselves. Why don't you come over and join us?'

'That would be lovely,' I said. 'We'll be there.'

Debbie and I enjoyed more than a couple of beers at Sails bar that night. I had been desperate for something to go right and it had been a good day. Alan had just saved me the need and expense of removing and rebuilding the entire engine and it seemed we'd made new friends.

The next morning heralded the arrival our foam mattresses. I can't claim the foam made the greatest bed I've ever slept on, but it was far more comfortable than bare boards and kept morale high.

Blake had also begun making his cabin home. His was the only one with a door and it must have felt like living in a den, just what he wanted. A talented artist in the making, Blake pinned recent drawings to his wall and arranged his lockers to his liking.

Craig shared his little quarter berth in the saloon with all his toys. Much smaller than Blake's cabin, it was still his personal space and not to be invaded without good reason.

When formulating my big plans back in England, I had decided that we wouldn't work at weekends. That was to be family time. I had been ignoring the internet café but still used the car whenever necessary, especially to escape from the boatyard. This weekend however was one of multi-denominational Trinidad's frequent bank holidays—no religious holiday knowingly excluded—and Elizabeth and Nigel had decided to head off to the south of the island, leaving us with no wheels. Instead of playing I spent my time going through the large collection of books crowding the shelves in the master cabin.

There were lots to choose from and I had much to learn. Subjects covered important stuff like meteorology, navigation, boat maintenance and electrical system guides, rope work, first aid, heavy weather sailing and blue water cruising. Other books seemed less important: guides to fish, coral and other aquatic life, seabird guides, world cruising routes and suchlike. I dipped into each, just looking at the photos, charts and diagrams, letting my imagination fly before rearranging the shelves and organising my reading into some sort of order.

Alan decided against attending Wolfgang and Magit's little party. He had other things to do. Debbie, the boys and I joined them before it got dark. Wolfgang proudly showed me his homemade barbeque. It consisted of a car wheel, minus the tire, welded onto a stout bit of scaffolding pole joined with a flat metal base. Already burning well, it worked with typical German efficiency. Debbie helped Magit prepare a table to lay out the salads, sauces and plates. She'd prepared salsa and potato salad while I provided the wet stuff.

We had a pleasant evening protected from the threat of rain beneath *Momo*. An unexpected bonus of owning a twin-hulled catamaran is the sheltered space provided between the hulls if the boat is chocked high enough on wooden blocks when it's on the hard. Wolfgang and Magit had an entire workshop under their boat, and with tarpaulin hung at either end they could continue working even under the heaviest downpour.

Catamarans are very popular in the Caribbean. Requiring little water depth they can navigate shallows that would see single keeled boats like ours high and dry. They also offer greater accommodation for any given size. When the weather gets bad however, and the sea starts to build, I would take a solid heavy displacement boat like *Kra* over a twin keel any day, or so I reckoned.

I wasn't looking forward to Monday. We'd read in the local rag that a clinic close to our yard was offering free yellow fever jabs. I hadn't been aware that they were necessary. Not wishing to take any more risks, Debbie and I decided that we would have to submit the family to the ordeal.

We drove to the little cinderblock and tin-roofed clinic in the ramshackle town of Carenage, a few miles east along the coast road back toward the city. Scrawny chickens ranged freely, pecking at the dirt while studiously ignoring the smartly dressed children passing on their way to school, all laughter, chatting and carefree smiles. Tethered goats chewed slow circles in the grass by the roadside between the stalls of a small fish market, already busy with early shoppers seeking the best of the catch: kingfish, wahoo and snapper all laid out on display and glistening in the sun.

The nurse suggested that Craig should not receive his jabs until his course of antibiotics was complete, and that we should discuss the idea first with Doctor Landreth-Smith. She also suggested that Debbie, Blake and Craig receive tetanus jabs in addition to the yellow fever. I was up to date.

Although everything was free, the clinic was asking for voluntary donations toward its own upkeep. Standing in the crowded waiting room filling in forms, it was obvious that Carenage was a town needing all the help it could get. Tired but indefatigable mothers nursed crying infants on their laps, concerned couples nervously held hands and the old and frail awaited their turn with a lifetime's patience. A rooster stepped in through the open doorway, scratched at the bare concrete floor a couple of times then, tail held high in an air of distain, stepped back out into the sharp morning sun. We donated ten pounds from each of us and the nurse seemed genuinely impressed with our modest contribution, administering the shots with as much gentle care as anyone could muster. Craig was thrilled at being exempt.

Alan was waiting for us when we returned to the boat. The next job would be cleaning out the fuel tanks.

Bacteria feeding on the diesel excrete non-digestible solids which produce a thick sludge that sinks to the bottom of the tank, Alan explained. If allowed to go unchecked, the crap eventually clogs the engine's delicate fuel injectors. This was all news to me: I'd never heard of little critters that eat hydrocarbons.

It was a filthy, hot and awkward job that covered me in cuts, grazes and bruises. Having first drained almost fifty gallons of old fuel, we removed the inspection plates and I set about scooping out the muck, which had accumulated to a depth level with the fuel intake pipe. Had Alan not suggested

cleaning the tanks it would soon have led to engine failure. The man was proving his worth. I spent more time than usual in the showers that night. The foul sludge was even in my hair.

Debbie and I decided to grab the car to escape again. I was feeling guilty about the meagre time the family was playing together. I was spending almost all my hours working on the boat and we seemed forever trapped in the yard. We opted to visit the famous Asa Wright Nature Centre, a two hour drive away. The Centre is one of Trinidad's most famous attractions, after the Pitch Lake and the multitude of scarlet ibis that roost every evening in the impenetrable Caroni Swamp.

A non-profit making trust, the estate consists of a large colonial house surrounded by mountainous jungle that once belonged to a certain Dr Newcome Wright and his wife Asa, both keen amateur naturalists. We spent a couple of happy hours watching hummingbirds flying up to the veranda, sipping sugar water from face level feeders while large iguana and other reptiles trampled about below. Coloured iridescent greens and blues, the impossibly tiny hummingbirds seemed to have no fear of human onlookers. Asa began feeding them over half a century ago and though not tame, they certainly have little fear of people.

Monday saw me back at work on *Kra*, with a brief drive into Carenage for Craig's jabs. Speaking to Dr Landreth-Smith shortly before his departure, he agreed that as soon as Craig had completed his course of antibiotics, it would be safe and wise to immunise. We softened the ordeal with mango flavoured ice cream as soon as we left the clinic.

Blake and Craig began making friends around the yard. Blake found Richard, a shy thirteen-year-old Canadian lad with almost waist-length pale blond hair that he wore loose. His family consisted of two elder brothers, his parents and three cats. They were in the process of finishing work on their thirty-six foot boat, called *Windpsalm*. Like us, they were new to sailing and had spent eighteen months getting their second-hand ketch ready to go cruising.

Craig teamed up with a lad a couple of years older than him called Arturo, whose parents lived on a catamaran located on the far side of the yard. Arturo's father was a small, thin American man, a retired teacher. I guessed him somewhere in his late seventies. His mother was an attractive South American woman in her mid-thirties. I was pleased that Craig had found a friend close to his own age, but Arturo was a handful. I have never met a more hyperactive child: give him something to play with and he would be instantly bored by it, unable to stay still or quiet for a second. On one occasion, while gallantly trying to get Arturo under control, Blake suggested a game of hangman. Alan was working with his head down in the bilges at the time. Hearing Blake's idea, he called out loudly, 'Just give me a minute, I'll find some rope.'

I began making friends with the local lads who worked in the yard. When it rained midday, as it frequently did, the guys took shelter under our plastic shed to eat lunch. On a few occasions I joined them to shoot the breeze—liming, as they call it in Trinidad. It gave Debbie and me a great sense of security, a growing feeling of being members of a small but tight community, knowing we had friends in the yard. This feeling came to a head one afternoon while we were walking back after visiting Elisabeth at Ankh Internet.

About a hundred metres down the road ahead of us I spotted Blake and his friend Richard standing at a bus stop opposite our boatyard's main gate. A staggering drunkard dressed in filthy rags appeared to be harassing them. Before I'd taken in what was happening, a friendly tractor driver we knew ran out of the boatyard and across the road brandishing a machete. With sparks flying, he sharpened the blade against the asphalt road as he ran. They don't call them machetes in Trinidad. Harking back to the days of swashbuckling, cutlass is still the proper name. Blake's would-be assailant scuttled away as fast as his drunken stumble would allow.

Thinking about getting *Kra* across the Atlantic and back to England, a thought that had now lodged itself firmly in my dreams, I began arriving at the idea of sailing her up the Caribbean to St Martin, from where I had discovered yachts can be transported across the ocean aboard huge purpose-built ships. I heard the going rate was comparable to what I could expect to pay a professional skipper and crew to sail her all the way, but without the hefty wear and tear of an Atlantic voyage. That would get *Kra* to Europe, from where I hoped I could find crew to sail the final leg home. Alan was up for the

job of skippering us the four hundred miles up the islands to St Martin before flying back to Trinidad. I emailed my sisters the plan, and a couple of shipping companies to get prices and dates of departure. The only foreseeable problem was insurance. There was no way I could get cover myself due to my inexperience. I hoped that the insurance company would accept Alan as skipper. He told me he had over thirty thousand miles under his sea boots, but no paperwork to prove it as his logbooks were unfortunately destroyed when his previous yacht sank.

My biggest fear was hitting some American mega-yacht, causing extensive and mind bogglingly expensive damage. A lawsuit would be sure to follow. I reassured myself that you can't get blood from a stone.

I quickly gave up on the idea of selling *Kra* in Trinidad, discovering that the island is full of cheap boats. It seems that many people arrive from Europe, cruise for a season or two and then stop because they've run out of money, scared themselves silly in bad seas, succumbed to ill health, or just had enough and got divorced. The boatyards are full of neglected yachts looking for new owners. Debbie spotted one advert that left no doubt as to the reason for selling. It ran,

Forty foot yacht for quick sale,
More cherished than wife,
His loss, my gain,
Any offers.