

HEADING NORTH

K DAY BECAME NIGHT MORE QUICKLY than I had remembered from the previous summer, a reminder that we were already late in the season in order to be free of ice. We attempted to round Cape Matheson, beating into a northerly wind with two reefs in the sail, and sailing up and down the same track on the GPS. We may have been subject to tidal streams but it was an early reminder of last year and the difficulties ahead; we reluctantly made the decision to stop around 0230. We failed to make a safe landfall on a rocky shore but then we saw a small, wrecked motor cabin cruiser through the gloom and decided to tie up alongside it, by which time it was already starting to get light. It was a sandy beach strewn with seaweed, but very different from our first wild landfall on the sandy beach where we saw Caribou and were plagued by sand flies last year. There was a thin covering of windswept snow, clinging to rock, weed or grass which protruded above the sand. Maybe it was the dawn light but it looked foreboding, cold and uninviting. Having tested the shotgun, we slept; Tony in *Arctic Mariner* and me in the sand-filled cabin of the wrecked boat. It seemed an inauspicious start to the trip and I lay awake, albeit for only a few minutes, worrying about the winds and how to make progress.

T Determined to get around the point of Cape Matheson, we slipped at 1230 after a fitful few hours' sleep and a hot but strangely subdued meal. A long tack out and return almost got us there but it took another long tack out to sea and back before we eventually escaped the tidal rip and rounded the point into an open bay.

K Sailing on, we found that we needed us both sat out on the rail, and a maximum of one reef to punch into the waves and make progress. It was hard work but exhilarating. The iPod was blasting out a favourite song, and the sun was out. All was well in the world until the iPod suddenly stopped.

“That battery isn't holding a charge; it's just as well we have the spare.” Tony remarked. We had been lucky to get the battery on the aeroplane, reassuring the

check-in attendant that it was only a big dry cell. Further investigation showed that the battery monitor was just switching from charging (sun out) to powering (sun behind a cloud) which caused the iPod to pause. While helming in the choppy seas, Tony aptly described our the mood to the video diary,

T *“I think we are about 22 hours out of Gjoa Haven now and we seem to have had all four seasons in one day. We’ve had big seas, but we are now sailing in blue skies and it is amazing the difference having the iPod on makes. We were both sitting here feeling a little sorry for ourselves; it is cold, there is a biting wind but we are both feeling a bit more comfortable about things now I think. But the realities of how far we have got to cover really do bite. Seven hundred miles in a straight line, and we are clearly not going in a straight line. A couple of days of the elusive southerly winds would make all the difference, but if we don’t get that we will deal with that on a day to day basis. I think you have to set yourself small targets, one achievable target each day and then move on to the next one. Because the scale of the whole thing is just awe-inspiring, but taking it one piece at a time will get us there.”*

Rounding Cape Matheson proved to be a mixed blessing. It exposed us to the full force of the waves and swell that had built up under persistent biting Arctic northerly winds. We were now charging along a lee shore with four-to-six-foot waves taking our tiny 17-foot open boat full on the beam, with both of us hiked out on the rail to keep her level. It was an exhilarating but unnerving sail and we began to ship a lot of water over the side. Maybe we ventured closer to the shore or perhaps the beach gradient changed because suddenly we were amidst huge breaking waves threatening to pick up and roll our small boat. Excitement turned to genuine concern and every ounce of my concentration was focused on trying to anticipate the wave patterns and react before they could wrestle control of the boat away from me. The prospect of being swept up onto the beach in this crashing surf so far from civilization was not something I wanted to imagine. The waters around us were bone-numbingly cold and the beach devoid of shelter. We rode our luck for a while but it couldn’t last and inevitably as we dropped down into the deep trough of a wave I read the sequence slightly wrong. As one giant

wave rolled under us I was not quite quick enough to get the boat's nose round and through the next one. We looked up to see the water tower above us, curl and then break. The wave took us full on the beam and a torrent of foaming icy water crashed down into the boat. For an agonizing moment I looked vertically down on Kev, convinced that we were going over, but slowly the angle dropped and the wave released us. We were upright and afloat but the boat was full almost to the gunwales with freezing cold water and had lost all headway. We were heavy and beam-on, half submerged and wallowing in the Arctic swell but somehow I managed to get the nose round in time to meet the next wave head on.

- K** As the boat now bounced head-on into the waves having lost all its speed, Tony handed the tiller to me and took to the highly efficient bilge pump to empty the cockpit. It was a race to empty the boat and get her responding to the helm again, and within a minute the cockpit was clear and we contemplated how we would have fared if we had not requested the design changes to the boat with its raised cockpit floor and the watertight under-floor storage lockers that contained all our food. The boat had remained stoically upright throughout. We were now only a few hundred yards from a wide beach, but the surf crashing onto it made it impossible to land safely and roller the boat up it. We had ten miles to go west to the nearest realistic landfall that would provide shelter from the swell. With a north westerly wind we would be beating all the way, taking the swell broadside.
- T** The rest of the day was hard, cold and tiring and the enormity of our task started to intrude a little. The iPod helped restore spirits enormously and when the sun briefly broke through we felt our confidence returning. We just needed the right set of winds for seven days and we were there. Still, Pond Inlet was beginning to feel like a very long way. Finally we found a small cove where we could get the boat at least partially ashore, anchored by a long line.
- K** With the boat secure, we set about mending a three-inch tear in our invaluable canvas cover that had been caused by the weight of water crashing on to it earlier in the afternoon. We took our time, carefully stitching over some sail tape knowing we had only once chance to prevent the tear growing and rendering our cover

useless. Over supper, dressed in our thick down jackets (hood up) to keep warm, our conversation turned to progress. We predicted that this was going to be a harder trip than last year, and even contemplated that we might have to return to Gjoa Haven, but it was early days and we just had to take each day as it came. My journal for 15th August 2010:

I'm really not sure I wanted to come back, laying here now cooped up in the boat [I must have forgotten how tight it was to sleep in the boat]. Why do I do this? It really is time in my life to be more comfortable. Still we only need 7 days of favourable winds out of 25—is that too much to ask?

In a taste of things to come, we spent all the next day tacking north, ticking off headlands and a few islands, both of us up and on the rail. The boat was well balanced but without the extra weight hiked right out, the leeward gunwale was in the water and the boat started to fill up. We needed the sail area to punch into the wind and the waves. It was working, laboriously tacking up the coast. The time didn't drag but it was hard. I watched the grey sea, anticipating the movement of the boat whether I was helming or leaning out trying to balance her. We were harnessed on, and changing over was reasonably easy, provided we didn't change the big green wader boots. Thick Gore-Tex mittens stayed on virtually the whole time. Tony decided to rewarm himself having just finished a long watch and his violent punching of an imaginary bag suspended just below the sail made the boat rock, against the motion of the waves. Lunch consisted of a hot meal, prepared not as last year over an open stove but in a bag containing special chemicals which when wetted warmed the foil container of food. This was excellent and we have brought a good supply for just such occasions. I developed a headache, probably brought on by dehydration, as without using the stove we have not consumed our normal quantity of tea. We were aiming for another point of shelter on the large scale chart five miles away. With three miles to go, Tony said, "How about going on to the next inlet, it's only another eight miles and we would make it by midnight?"

I was not keen but I could see his point, as we started late that morning and I knew we had to make the distance. We decided against it, but I still felt guilty as