

# The Monsters, A Solo Sailor's

by Jeffrey S. Wettig



**I**t wasn't the real dangers involved with cruising solo for the first time but the imagined ones that bothered me on that mid-September Sunday night in Annapolis, sitting at Middleton Tavern with a beer in one hand and a tiny fork with a mussel on the end of it in the other.

Most of the sailing stories I've read talk about the high adventure and social atmosphere of a crew hard against the wind and the bottoms up afterward. I was living that story at the present, but soon enough, a different story could emerge, one much more monotonous and just maybe a little weird and terrifying. A story about a guy in the middle of the Bay on a boat heading north seems neither. But when you have to live it, and you aren't all that good at time spent alone—no people, not much modern gadgetry to keep you distracted, all

while having to be responsible and alert for hours at a time, in possibly bad weather, with the destination very far off for most of the journey—it can become both very quickly.

I had come to Annapolis over the weekend with a crew of North East River Salty Dogs, sailing four boats. Two days and one night, stopping at Hart Miller Island on the way south. We had good wind and good times. It was a welcome break from being unemployed and in between job interviews, without many prospects on the horizon. I hadn't really considered the solo aspect of the return trip when the opportunity came along, I'd just jumped at the chance to get away. About halfway through the first day, it began to sink in. I have soloed many times in my five years of sailing. Learning to operate your boat in

many conditions by yourself is something every sailor should be comfortable with, but for me, it's always been in the close proximity to home port and for not very long. Being out in the open water between Annapolis and Rock Hall hasn't always been the best experience for me, and the "what ifs" were skulking through my mind the entire time.

The next morning, after a hearty breakfast at Chick n'Ruth's Delly, I bade my friends goodbye and climbed aboard our 1974 Paceship PY26. I cast off the mooring lines at exactly 11:30 a.m. and followed an old style ketch out of the harbor and into the Bay. My hopes for making good time under sail were dashed almost immediately when I counted six sailboats in the vicinity, only one with sails up, lazily going nowhere fast, literally sitting still in glassy water. No wind! I didn't even bother faking it, leaving the main down and setting the motor to a steady five knots on the speedometer.

I made the Bay Bridge in exactly one hour and was already starting to go a bit bonkers. I made the mistake of getting out the GPS to see exactly how fast I was going, knowing the tide was against me, and it read a lousy 4.6 miles per hour, about a knot less than what the speedo was telling me. I was going even slower than I thought. Then began the long haul as I found myself north of the bridge in the open expanse of the Bay all alone, hardly a boat in sight, much less in my vicinity.

To fight the boredom, I tried to read a little of the book I had bought, The Yellow Admiral by Patrick O'Brian. After every paragraph or so, I had to look up and correct my course. At one point, I found myself headed toward Baltimore; at another, I was heading toward Kent Island. I was wasting time and effort zig-zagging around, so after about an hour, I gave up on reading and just began to stare that thousand-yard stare, into the blank horizon, and the Bay Bridge slowly receding behind me.

# the Monotony: Tale

I have heard the stories of the thirsty man stranded in the desert, thinking he sees an oasis and ending up shoveling handfuls of sand into his mouth, thinking it was water. As the sun beat down on me from the south, exceptionally hot for mid-September, I began to relate. Once, I thought I saw something moving and thought maybe Chessie was slithering just below the surface. A little while later, I was convinced that the massive pleasure yacht skimming along the western channel heading south, was indeed Johnny Depp (recently reported in Annapolis) and that he would be looking through his scope, in full Captain Sparrow regalia, spy me, my Gonzo Flag flying in his sights, and yell, "Ahoy, there be a friendly ship yonder, port side!" Of course, he would then come alongside; and invite me aboard for drinks, general merriment, and a spot in his next movie.

It all seemed very real. My fear of bad weather hadn't materialized, and there wasn't much to really be scared of out there. There was just my mind telling me that I had to be somewhere and that it wasn't going to be anytime soon and the constant droning of the motor. My thoughts wandered, and I began nodding off a bit. I went below, turned on the stereo, and blasted some Techno to get me going. I found myself dancing around and wondered if anyone was watching. It must have looked like I was ripping off Sam Davies during the Vendee Globe solo around the world race of last year, when in a moment Ellen Degeneres would be proud of, Sam was caught on video dancing up a storm amidst the waves and wind, trying to stave off boredom.

At about hour number four, as I was passing Rock Hall, I began seriously thinking about slugging back some Black Strap Rum and/or playing chicken with the ap-



proach-  
ing car carrier com-  
ing north out of Baltimore. I decided that it wouldn't be very prudent, so I began slaloming through the crab traps, getting closer and closer with every single one, daring myself to get stuck in one.

By the time two more hours had gone by, I missed about a hundred crab pots, surfed the wake of the car carrier for almost 10 minutes, passed two barges heading in different directions, listened to the weather station for a full half hour, read the chart in great detail, planning out my approach

ca-  
tastrophes,  
but still having a good distance to go, danger at every turn. I made it home, surprisingly, after only four hours of half-sailing and half-motoring. I passed Turkey Point and noticed some of the leaves were already changing, marking the beginning of fall and the impending end of our sailing season. Where did the summer go? Where did all my time go, my dreaded alone time?

Poof! It was gone!

As I

stepped onto

*"...the 'what ifs' were skulking through my mind the entire time."*

to Still Pond, and at the very last half hour, caught the turning tide, running a knot and a half above speed, just in time to finally turn into an empty anchorage.

It was peaceful though, no whine of the motor, no tiller to tame, just the setting sun and chirping of the crickets. I rowed around in my dink, just to get some exercise and run around on the little beach over by the Coast Guard Station. I saw a copperhead swimming around, ate dinner in silence, contemplated life for a while, and ultimately managed to relax a little and to keep a cell phone signal long enough to have a nice, spirit lifting conversation with my better half before heading to bed for the night.

The next day, I was anxious to finish the trip, having avoided most of my made-up

the dock, I felt a fleeting sense of relief and accomplishment that I had made it home in one piece and that the monotony of being on the water alone was over. Just as quickly I felt a sense of disappointment because fall was here. My sailing adventures were over for another year, and not unlike Admiral Jack Aubrey in The Yellow Admiral, I soon would be back to dealing with the difficulties and harsh realities of living life on the hard.

**About the Author:** Jeffrey S. Wettig sails a 1974 Paceship PY26 sloop named *Pegasus* with his better half Kimberly. Home port is Hances Point YC outside of North East, MD, where Salty Dog cruisers tip their bottle to the Lady of the Lighthouse, gentlemen race on Thursdays, and the sunsets are worth the price of admission.