Kensuke’s Kingdom
Michael Morpurgo

健介の王国
文 マイケル・モーパーゴ
For Graham and Isabella

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I disappeared on the night before my twelfth birthday. July 28, 1988. Only now can I at last tell the whole extraordinary story, the true story. Kensuke made me promise that I would say nothing, nothing at all, until at least ten years had passed. It was almost the last thing he said to me. I promised, and because of that I have had to live out a lie. I could let sleeping lies sleep on, but more than ten years have passed now. I have done school, done college, and had time to think. I owe it to my family and to my friends, all of whom I have deceived for so long, to tell the truth about my long disappearance, about how I lived to come back from the dead.

But there is another reason for speaking out now, a far, far better reason. Kensuke was a great man, a good man, and he was my friend. I want the world to know him as I knew him.

* * *

Until I was nearly eleven, until the letter came, life was just normal. There were the four of us in the house: my mother, my father, me, and Stella — Stella Artois, that is, my one-ear-up and one-ear-down black-and-white sheepdog, who always seemed to know what was about to happen before it did. But even she could not have foreseen how that letter was going to change our lives forever.

Thinking back, there was a regularity, a sameness about my early childhood. Each morning, I went down the street to “the monkey school.” My father called it that because he said the children gibbered and screeched and hung upside down on the jungle gym on the playground. And, anyway, I was always “monkey face” to him — when he was in a playful mood, that is, which he often was. The school was really called St. Joseph’s, and I was happy there, for most of the time, anyway. After school every day, whatever the weather, I’d head down to the playground for soccer with Eddie Dodds, my best friend in all the world, and Matt and Bobby and the others. It was muddy down there. Sometimes the ball would just land hard and stick. We had our own team, the Mudlarks we called ourselves, and we were good, too. Visiting teams seemed to expect the ball to bounce for some reason, and by the time they realized it didn’t, we were often two or three goals ahead. We weren’t so good away from home.

Every weekend I did a paper route from Mr. Patel’s shop on the corner. I was saving up for a mountain bike. I wanted to go mountain biking up on the moors with
Eddie. The trouble was, I would keep spending what I’d saved. I’m still the same that way.

Sunday’s were always special, I remember. We’d go dinghy sailing, all of us, on the reservoir, Stella Artois barking her head off at the other boats as if they’d no right to be there. My father loved it, he said, because the air was clear and clean, no brick dust — he worked down at the brickworks. He was a great do-it-yourself fanatic. There was nothing he couldn’t fix, even if it didn’t need fixing. So he was in his element on a boat. My mother, who worked part-time in the office at the same brickworks, reveled in it, too. I remember her once, throwing back her head in the wind and breathing in deep as she sat at the tiller. “This is it,” she cried. “This is how life is supposed to be. Wonderful, just wonderful.” She always wore the blue cap. She was the undisputed skipper. If there was a breeze out there, she’d find it and catch it. She had a real nose for it.

We had some great days on the water. We’d go out when it was rough, when no one else would, and we’d go skimming over the waves, exhilarating in the speed of it, in the sheer joy of it. And if there wasn’t a breath of wind, we didn’t mind that either. Sometimes we’d be the only boat on the whole reservoir. We’d just sit and fish instead — by the way, I was better at fishing than either of them — and Stella Artois would be curled up behind us in the boat, bored with the whole thing, because there was no one to bark at.

Then the letter arrived. Stella Artois savaged it as it came through the letterbox. There were puncture holes in it and it was damp, but we could read enough. The brickworks were going to close down. They were both being laid off.

There was a terrible silence at the breakfast table that morning. After that we never went sailing on Sundays anymore. I didn’t have to ask why not. They both tried to find jobs, but there was nothing.

A creeping misery came over the house. Sometimes I’d come home and they just wouldn’t be speaking. They’d argue a lot, about little niggly things — and they had never been like that. My father stopped fixing things around the house. He was scarcely ever home, anyway. If he wasn’t looking for a job, he’d just sit at home, flicking through endless yachting magazines and saying nothing.

I tried to stay out of the house and play soccer as much as I could, but then Eddie moved away because his father had found a job somewhere down south. Soccer just wasn’t the same without him. The Mudlarks disbanded. Everything was falling apart.

Then one Saturday I came home from my paper route and found my mother sitting at the bottom of the stairs and crying. She’d always been so strong. I’d never seen her like this before.

“Silly beggar,” she said. “Your dad’s a silly beggar, Michael, that’s what he is.”
“What’s he done?” I asked her.
“He’s left us,” she told me, and I thought she meant for good. “He wouldn’t hear
reason, oh no. He’s had this idea, he says. He wouldn’t tell me what it was, only that he’s sold the car, that we’re moving south, and he’s going to find us a place.” I was relieved, and quite pleased, really. South must be nearer to Eddie. She went on: “If he thinks I’m leaving this house, then I’m telling you he’s got another think coming.”

“Well, there’s the house, for a start. Then there’s Grandma, and there’s school.”

“There’s other schools,” I told her. She became steaming angry then, angrier than I’d ever known her.

“You want to know what was the last straw?” she said. “It was you, Michael, you going off on your paper route this morning. You know what your dad said? Well, I’ll tell you, shall I? ‘Do you know something?’ he says. ‘There’s only one lousy wage coming into this house — Michael’s paper money. How do you think that makes me feel, eh? My son’s eleven years old. He’s got a job, and I haven’t.’”

She steadied herself for a moment or two before she went on, her eyes filled with fierce tears. “I’m not moving, Michael. I was born here. And I’m not going. No matter what he says, I’m not leaving.”

I was there when the phone call came a week or so later. I knew it was my father. My mother said very little, so I couldn’t understand what was going on, not until she sat me down afterward and told me.

“He sounds different, Michael. I mean, like his old self, like his very old self, like he used to be when I first knew him. He’s found us a place. ‘Just pack your stuff and come,’ he says. Fareham. Somewhere near Southampton. ‘Right on the sea,’ he says. There’s something very different about him, I’m telling you.”

My father did indeed seem a changed man. He was waiting for us when we got off the train, all bright-eyed again and full of laughter. He helped us with the suitcases. “It’s not far,” he said, ruffling my hair. “You wait till you see it, monkey face. I’ve got it all worked out, the whole thing. And it’s no good you trying to talk me out of it, either of you. I’ve made up my mind.”

“What about?” I asked him.

“You’ll see,” he said.

Stella Artois bounded along ahead of us, her tail held high and happy. We all felt like that, I think.

In the end we caught a bus because the suitcases were too heavy. When we got off we were right by the sea. There didn’t seem to be any houses anywhere, just a yachting marina.

“What are we doing here?” my mother asked.

“There’s someone I want you to meet. A good friend of mine. She’s called Peggy Sue. She’s been looking forward to meeting you. I’ve told her all about you.”

My mother frowned at me in puzzlement. I wasn’t any the wiser, either. All I knew for certain was that he was being deliberately mysterious.
We struggled on with our suitcases, the gulls crying overhead, the yacht masts clapping around us, and Stella yapping at all of it, until at last he stopped right by a gangplank that led up to a gleaming dark blue yacht. He put the suitcases down and turned to face us. He was grinning from ear to ear. “Here she is,” he said. “Let me introduce you. This is the Peggy Sue. Our new home. Well?”

Considering everything, my mother took it pretty well. She didn’t shout at him. She just went very quiet, and she stayed quiet all through his explanation down in the galley over a cup of tea.

“It wasn’t a spur of the moment thing, you know. I’ve been thinking about it a long time, all those years working in the factory. All right, maybe I was just dreaming about it in those days. Funny when you think about it: If I hadn’t lost my job, I’d never have dared do it, not in a million years.” He knew he wasn’t making much sense. “All right, then. Here’s what I thought. What is it that we all love doing most? Sailing, right? Wouldn’t it be wonderful, I thought, if we could just take off and sail around the world? There’s people who’ve done it. Blue-water sailing, they call it. I’ve read about it in the magazines.

“Like I said, it was just a dream to start with. And then, no job and no chance of a job. So why not a boat? We’ve got our severance pay, what little there was of it. There’s a bit saved up, and the car money. Not a fortune, but enough. What to do with it? I could put it all in the bank, like the others did. But what for? Just to watch it dribble away till there was nothing left? Or, I thought, I could do something really special with it, a once-in-a-lifetime thing: We could sail around the world. Africa. South America. Australia. The Pacific. We could see places we’ve only ever dreamed of.”

We sat there completely dumbstruck. “Oh, I know what you’re thinking,” he went on. “You’re thinking, all we’ve ever done is reservoir sailing, dinghy sailing. You’re thinking, he’s gone crazy, loopy in the head. You’re thinking, it’s dangerous. You’re thinking, we’ll be flat broke. But I’ve thought it all out. I even thought of your grandma — there’s a thing. We won’t be gone forever, will we? She’ll be here when we get back, won’t she? She’s perfectly healthy.

“We’ve got the money. I’ve done my math. We’re going to do six months’ training. We’ll be away a year, eighteen months maybe, just so long as the money lasts. We’re going to do it safe, do it properly. Mom, you’ll get your Yachtmaster’s certificate. Oh, didn’t I say? I didn’t, did I? You’ll be the skipper, Mom. I’ll be first mate and handyman. Michael, you’ll be ship’s boy, and Stella — well, Stella can be the ship’s cat.” He was full to it, breathless with excitement. “We’ll get ourselves in shape. Do a few trips across the Channel to France, maybe over to Ireland. We’ll get to know this boat like she’s one of us. She’s a forty-two foot. Bowman, best make, best design. Safest there is. I’ve done my homework. Six months’ time and we’ll be off around the world. It’ll be the adventure of a lifetime. Our one chance. We’ll never get
another one. What do you think then?"

“Ex … cell … ent,” I breathed, and that was exactly what I thought.

“And I’ll be skipper, you say?” my mother asked.

“Aye aye, Cap’n,” my father said, and he laughed and gave her a mock salute.

“What about Michael’s school?” she went on.

“I’ve thought of that, too. I asked in the local school down here. It’s all arranged. We’ll take all the books he’ll need. I’ll teach him. You’ll teach him. He’ll teach himself. I’ll tell you something for nothing, he’ll learn more in a couple of years at sea than he ever would in that monkey school of his. Promise.”

She took a sip of tea, and then nodded slowly. “All right,” she said, and I saw she was smiling. “Why not? Go ahead then. Buy her. Buy the boat.”

“I already have,” said my father.

Of course it was madness. They knew it, even I knew it, but it simply didn’t matter. Thinking back, it must have been a kind of inspiration driven by desperation.

Everyone warned us against it. Grandma came visiting and stayed onboard. It was all quite ridiculous, she said, reckless, irresponsible. She was full of doom and gloom. Icebergs, hurricanes, pirates, whales, supertankers, freak waves — she heaped up horror upon horror, thinking to frighten me and so frighten off my mother and father. She succeeded in terrifying me, all right, but I never showed it. What she didn’t understand was that we three were already bound together now by a common lunacy. We were going, and nothing and no one could stop us. We were doing what people do in fairy tales. We were going off to seek adventure.

To begin with, it all happened much as my father had planned it, except that the training took a lot longer. We soon learned that handling a forty-two-foot yacht was not just dinghy sailing in a bigger boat. We were tutored by a whiskered old mariner from the yacht club, Bill Parker (“Barnacle Bill,” we called him, but not to his face, of course). He had been twice around Cape Horn and had made two single-handed Atlantic crossings, and he’d been across the channel “more times than you’ve had hot dinners, my lad.”

To tell the truth, none of us liked him much. He was a hard taskmaster. He treated me and Stella Artois with equal disdain. To him, all animals and children were just a nuisance and, on board ship, nothing but a liability. So I kept out of his way as much as I could, and so did Stella Artois.

To be fair to him, Barnacle Bill did know his business. By the time he had finished with us, and my mother was given her certificate, we felt we could sail the Peggy Sue anywhere. He had inculcated in us a healthy respect for the sea but, at the same time, we were confident we could handle just about anything the sea could hurl at us.

Mind you, there were times I was scared stiff. My father and I shared our terror together, silently. You can’t pretend, I learned, with a towering green wall of water twenty feet high bearing down on you. We went down in troughs so deep, we never
thought we could possibly climb out again. But we did, and the more we rode our terror, rode the waves, the more we felt sure of ourselves and of the boat around us.

My mother, though, never showed even the faintest tremor of fear. She and the *Peggy Sue* saw us through our worst moments. But she was seasick from time to time, and we never were. So that was something.

We lived close, all of us, cheek by jowl, and I soon discovered parents were more than just parents. My father became my friend, my shipmate. We came to rely on each other. And as for my mother, the truth is — and I admit it — I didn’t know she had it in her. I had always known she was gritty, that she’d keep on at a thing until she’d done it. But she worked night and day over her books and charts until she had mastered everything. She never stopped. True, she could be a bit of a tyrant if we didn’t keep the boat shipshape, but neither my father nor I minded that much, though we pretended to. She was the skipper. She was going to take us around the world and back again. We had absolute confidence in her. We were proud of her. She was just brilliant. And, I have to say, the ship’s boy and the first mate were pretty brilliant, too, on the winches, at the helm, and with the baked beans in the galley. We were a great team.

So, on September 10, 1987 — I know the date because I have the ship’s log in front of me as I write — with every nook and cranny loaded with stores and provisions, we were at last ready to set sail on our grand adventure, our great odyssey.

Grandma was there to wave us off, tearfully. In the end she even wanted to come with us, to visit Australia — she’d always wanted to see koalas in the wild. There were lots of our friends there, too, including Barnacle Bill. Eddie Dodds came, along with his father. He threw me a soccer ball as we cast off. “Lucky mascot!” he shouted. When I looked down at it later I saw he’d signed his name all over it like a World Cup star.

Stella Artois barked her farewells at them, and at every boat we passed in The Solent. But as we were sailing out past the Isle of Wight, she fell strangely quiet. Maybe she sensed, as we did, that there was no turning back now. This was not a dream. We were off around the world. It was real, really real.
They say that water covers two-thirds of the earth’s surface. It certainly looks like that when you’re out there, and it feels like it, too. Seawater, rainwater — all of it is wet. I spent most of the time soaked to the bone. I wore all the right gear — the skipper always made sure of that — but somehow the wet still got through.

Down below, too, everything was damp, even the sleeping bags. Only when the sun shone and the sea had stopped its heaving could we begin to dry out. We would haul everything out on deck, and soon the Peggy Sue would be all dressed up, one great clothesline from bow to stern. To be dry again was a real luxury, but we always knew it could not last for long.

You may think there was not a lot for three people to do onboard, day after day, week after week. You’d be quite wrong. In daylight there was never a dull moment. I was always kept busy: taking in sail, winching in, letting out, taking my turn at the wheel — which I loved — or helping my father with his endless mending and fixing. He often needed another pair of hands to hold and steady as he drilled or hammered or screwed or sawed. I’d forever be mopping up, brewing up, washing up, drying up. I’d be lying if I said I loved it all. I didn’t. But there was never a dull moment.

Only one of the crew was allowed to be idle — Stella Artois — and she was always idle. With nothing much to bark at out on the open ocean, she spent the rougher days curled up on my bed down in the cabin. When it was fine and calm, though, she’d usually be found on watch up at the bow, alert for something, anything that wasn’t just water. You could be sure that if there was anything out there, she’d spot it soon enough — an escort of porpoises, perhaps, diving in and out of the waves, a family of dolphins swimming alongside, so close that you could reach out and touch them. Whales, sharks, even turtles — we saw them all. My mother would be taking photographs, video and still, while my father and I fought over the binoculars. But Stella Artois was in her element, a proper sheepdog again, barking her commands at the creatures of the sea, herding them up from the deep.

Annoying though she could be — she would bring her smelly wetness with her everywhere — we never once regretted bringing her along with us. She was our greatest comfort. When the sea tossed and churned us, and my mother felt like death
from sea-sickness, she’d sit down below, white to the gills, with Stella on her lap, cuddling and being cuddled. And when I was terrified by the mountainous seas and the screaming wind, I would curl up with Stella on my bunk, bury my head in her neck, and hold her tight. At times like that — and I don’t suppose they were that frequent, it’s just that I remember them so vividly — I always kept Eddie’s soccer ball close beside me as well.

The soccer ball had become a sort of talisman for me, a lucky charm, and it really seemed to work, too. After all, every storm did blow itself out in the end and, afterward, we were always still there, still alive and still afloat.

I had hoped my mother and father might forget all about the planned schoolwork. And to begin with, it seemed as if they had. But once we had weathered a few storms, once we were settled and well into our voyage, they sat me down and told me the unwelcome news. Like it or not, I was going to have to keep up with my schoolwork. My mother was adamant about it.

I could see that any appeals to my father would be pointless. He just shrugged and said, “Mom’s the skipper.” And that was the end of the matter. At least at home she had been my mother and I could argue with her, but not on the Peggy Sue, not anymore.

It was a conspiracy. Between them, they had devised an entire program of work. There were math books to get through — my father would help me with that if I got stuck, he said. For geography and history I was to find out and record all I could about every country we visited as we went around the world. For environmental studies and art I was to note down and draw all the birds we saw, all the creatures and plants we came across.

My mother made a particular point of teaching me navigation, too. “Barnacle Bill taught me,” she said, “I’m teaching you. I know it’s not on the curriculum, but so what? It could come in handy, you never know.” She taught me how to use the sextant, take compass bearings, plot a course on the chart. I had to fill in the longitude and latitude in the ship’s log, every morning, every evening, without fail.

I don’t think I had ever really noticed stars before. Now, whenever I was on watch in the cockpit at night, with the Peggy Sue on her wind-vane self-steering, the others asleep below, the stars would be my only company. Gazing up at them I felt sometimes that we were the last people alive on the whole planet. There was just us, and the dark sea around us and the millions of stars above.

It was on watch at night that I would often do my “English” homework. This was my own version of the ship’s log. I didn’t have to show it to them, but I was encouraged to write in it every few weeks. It would be, they said, my own personal, private record of our voyage.

At school I had never been much good at writing. I could never think of what to write or how to begin. But on the Peggy Sue I found I could open up my log and just
write. There was always so much I wanted to say. And that’s the thing. I found I didn’t really write it down at all. Rather, I said it. I spoke it from my head, down my arm, through my fingers and my pencil, and onto the page. And that’s how it reads to me now, all these years later, like me talking.

I’m looking at my log now. The paper is a bit crinkled and the pages are yellowed with age. My scribbly writing is a little faded, but it’s mostly quite legible. What follows are just a few chosen extracts from this log. The entries are quite short, but they tell the tale. This is how I recorded our great journey. This is how it was for an eleven-year-old boy as we rode the wide oceans of the world onboard the Peggy Sue.
Ship’s log

September 20
It’s five in the morning. I’m on watch in the cockpit and no one else is awake. We left Southampton ten days ago now. The Channel was full of tankers. There were dozens of them. So, either Mom or Dad took turns on watch the first two nights. They wouldn’t let me. I don’t know why not. There wasn’t any fog, and I can see as well as they can.

We were planning on sailing about two hundred miles a day — that’s about eight knots. But in the first week we were lucky if we made fifty miles a day.

Barnacle Bill warned us about the Bay of Biscay, so we were expecting it to be bad, and it was. Force 9 gale. Force 10 sometimes. We were slammed all over the place. I thought we’d sink. I really did. Once, when we came to the top of a wave, I saw the bow of the Peggy Sue pointing straight up at the moon. It was like she was going to take off. Then we were hurled down the other side so fast, I was sure we were going to the bottom. It was bad. I mean, it was horrible, really horrible. But the Peggy Sue didn’t fall apart, and we made it to Spain.

Mom gets quite snappy with us sometimes when we don’t do things right. Dad doesn’t seem to mind, not out here, not at sea. He just winks at me and we forget about it. They play a lot of chess together, when it’s calm enough. Dad’s winning so far, five games to three. Mom says it doesn’t bother her, but it does. I can tell.

We only spent a couple of days in La Coruña. Mom slept a lot. She was really tired. Dad did some work on the rudder cable while we were there. He’s still not happy with it, though. We set off for the Azores two days ago.

Yesterday was the best day we’ve had for sailing. Strong breeze, blue sky, and warm sun to dry things out. My blue shorts blew off the clothesline into the sea. It doesn’t matter. I never liked them much, anyway. We saw gannets slicing into the sea all around us this afternoon. Really excellent. Stella Artois went crazy.

I’m sick of baked beans already, and there’s still stacks of them down below.

* * *

October 11

Today I saw Africa! It was in the distance, but Mom said it was definitely Africa. We’re going down the west coast. Mom showed me on the chart. The wind will take us
down the coast for a few hundred miles, then across the Atlantic to South America. We mustn’t drift off course, or else we’ll get into the Doldrums. There’s no wind there at all, and we could just sit there becalmed for weeks, maybe forever.

It’s the hottest day we’ve had. Dad’s very red in the face, and the tops of his ears are peeling. I’m more nutty brown, like Mom.

Saw flying fish early this morning and so did Stella. Then Mom spotted a shark off the port bow. A basking shark, she thought. I got the binoculars out, but I never saw it. She said I had to write it down in my notebook, anyway, and then draw it. I looked them up. They’re massive, but they don’t eat people, just fish and plankton. I like doing my drawings. My best one so far is a flying fish.

I sent a card to Eddie from the Cape Verde Islands. I wish he could be here. We’d have a great time.

Stella loves to chase the soccer ball around the cabin and pounce on it. She’ll puncture it one day, I know she will.

Dad’s been a bit gloomy, and Mom’s gone to lie down. She’s got a headache. I think they’ve had a bit of a tiff. Don’t know what about, exactly, but I think it’s about chess.

* * *

November 16

We’ve just left Recife. That’s in Brazil. We were there four days. We had a lot of repairs to do on the boat. Something was wrong with the wind generator, and the rudder cable’s still sticking.

I’ve played soccer in Brazil! Did you hear that, Eddie? I’ve played soccer in Brazil, and with your lucky ball. Dad and me were just kicking it around on the beach, and before we knew it we had a dozen kids joining in. It was a proper game. Dad set it up. We picked sides. I called my side Mudlarks and he called his Brazil, so they all wanted to play on his side, of course.

But Mom joined in on my side and we won. Mudlarks 5 — Brazil 3. Mom invited them back for a Coke onboard afterward. Stella growled at them and bared her teeth, so we had to shut her down in the cabin. They tried out their English on us. They only knew two words: “Goal” and “Manchester United.” That’s three, I suppose.

Mom had her film developed. There’s a picture of some leaping dolphins, another of me at the winch. There’s one of Mom at the wheel, another of Dad hauling down the mainsail and making a mess of it. There’s one of me diving off a rock into the sea when we stopped in the Canaries. There’s one of Dad fast asleep and sunbathing on deck and Mom giggling. She’s about to dribble the sunblock all over his tummy. (I took that one, my best photo.) Then there’s one of me doing my math, sulking and sticking my tongue out.
December 25

Christmas Day at sea. Dad found some carols on the radio. We had crackers, all of them a bit soggy so none of them cracked, and we had the Christmas pudding Gran made for us. I gave them a drawing each — my flying fish, for Dad, and one of the skipper, in her hat, at the wheel, for Mom. They gave me a really cool knife they’d bought in Rio. So I gave a coin back. You’re supposed to do that. It’s for luck.

When we were in Rio we gave the Peggy Sue a good scrub down. She was looking a bit gross inside and outside, but she’s not anymore. We packed up a lot of supplies and water for the long haul to South Africa. Mom says we’re doing fine, just so long as we keep south, so long as we stay in the west-to-east South Atlantic current.

We passed south of an island called St. Helena a few days ago. No need to stop. Nothing much there, except it’s the place where Napoléon was exiled. He died there. Lonely place to die. So, of course, I had to do a history project on Napoléon. I had to look him up in the encyclopedia and write about him. It was quite interesting, really, but I didn’t tell them that.

Stella’s sulking on my bunk. Maybe it’s because no one gave her a Christmas present. I offered her a taste of Gran’s Christmas pudding, but she hardly gave it a sniff. Can’t say I blame her.

I saw a sail today, another yacht. We shouted Merry Christmas and waved, and Stella barked her head off, but they were too far away. When the sail disappeared, the sea felt suddenly very empty.

Mom won the chess game this evening. She’s ahead now, twenty-one games to twenty. Dad said he let her win because it was Christmas. They joke about it, but they both want to win.

January 1

Africa again! Cape Town. Table Mountain. And this time we’re not just sailing by — we’re going to stop for a while. They told me this evening. They didn’t want to tell me before, in case we couldn’t afford it, but we can. We’re going to stay for a couple of weeks, maybe more. We’re going to see elephants and lions in the wild. I can’t believe it. I don’t think they can, either. When they told me, they were like a couple of kids, all laughing and happy. They were never like this at home. These days they really smile at each other.

Mom’s getting stomach cramps. Dad wants her to see a doctor in Cape Town, but she won’t. I reckon it’s the baked beans. The good news is the baked beans have at last run out. The bad news is we had sardines for supper. Yuck!
February 7

We’re hundreds of miles out in the Indian Ocean, and then this happens. Stella hardly ever comes up on deck unless it’s flat calm. I don’t know why she came up. I don’t know why she was there. We were all busy, I suppose. Dad was down in the galley, and Mom was at the wheel. I was doing one of my navigation lessons, taking bearings with the sextant. The Peggy Sue was pitching and rolling a bit. I had to steady myself. I looked up and I saw Stella up at the bow of the boat. One moment she was just standing there, the next she was gone.

We had practiced the “man overboard” drill dozens of times back in The Solent with Barnacle Bill. Shout and point. Keep shouting. Keep pointing. Turn into the wind. Get the sails down quick. Engine on. By the time Dad had the mainsail and the jib down, we were already heading back toward her. I was doing the pointing, and the shouting, too. She was paddling for her life in the green of a looming wave. Dad was leaning over the side and reaching for her, but he didn’t have his safety harness on, and Mom was going crazy. She was trying to bring the boat in as close and as slow as she could, but a wave took Stella away from us at the last moment. We had to turn and come back again. All the time I was pointing and shouting.

Three times we came in, but each time we passed her by. Either we were going too fast or she was out of reach. She was weak by now. She was hardly paddling. She was going under. We had one last chance. We came in again, perfectly this time and close enough for Dad to be able to reach out and grab her. Among the three of us we managed to haul Stella back into the boat by her collar, by her tail. I got a, “Well done, monkey face,” from Dad, and Dad got a huge lecture from Mom for not wearing his safety harness. Dad just put his arms around her and she cried. Stella shook herself and went below as if nothing at all had happened.

Mom has made a strict rule: Stella Artois is never to go out on deck — whatever the weather — without a safety harness clipped on, like the rest of us. Dad’s going to make one for her.

I still dream of the elephants in South Africa. I loved how slow they are, and thoughtful. I loved their wise, weepy eyes. I can still see those snooty giraffes looking down at me, and the lion cub sleeping with his mother’s tail in his mouth. I did lots of drawings and I keep looking at them to remind me. The sun in Africa is so big, so red.

Australia next. Kangaroos and possums and wombats. Uncle John’s going to meet us in Perth. I’ve seen photos of him but I’ve never met him. Dad said this evening he’s only a distant uncle. “Very distant,” Mom said, and they both laughed. I didn’t get the joke till I thought about it again when I came on watch.

The stars are so bright, and Stella was saved. I think I’m happier than I have ever been in my life.
April 3

Off Perth, Australia. Until today it has been nothing but empty ocean all the way from Africa. I love it more and more when it’s just us and Peggy Sue and the sea. We all do, I think. But then, when we sight land, we always get so excited. When we saw Australia for the first time, we hugged one another and jumped up and down. It’s like we’re the first sailors ever to discover it. Stella Artois barked at us as if we were crazy as loons, which we probably are. But we’ve done it. We’ve sailed all the way from England to Australia. That’s halfway around the world. And we did it on our own.

Mom’s been getting her stomach cramps again. She’s definitely going to see a doctor in Australia. She’s promised us, and we’ll make her keep to it.

* * *

May 28

At sea again after nearly six weeks with Uncle John. We thought we were going to stay in Perth for just a few days, but he said we had to see Australia properly while we were there. He took us to stay with his family on a huge farm. Thousands of sheep. He’s got tons of horses, so I went riding a lot with my two little cousins, Beth and Liza. They’re only seven and eight, but they could really ride. They called me Mikey, and by the time we left they both wanted to marry me. We’re going to be pen pals instead.

I saw a snake called a copperhead. Uncle John said it could have killed me if I’d stepped on it. He told me to watch out for Redback spiders in the bathroom. I didn’t go to the bathroom very often after that.

They called us their “pommy cousins” and we had barbecues every evening. We had a great time with them. But I was happy to get back to the Peggy Sue. I missed her while I was gone, like I miss Eddie. I’ve been sending him cards, funny animal cards, if I can find them. I sent him one of a wombat. I saw a wombat too, and hundreds of possums and tons of kangaroos. And they’ve got white cockatoos in Australia like we’ve got sparrows at home — millions of them.

But out here it’s gulls again. Wherever we’ve been in the world there’s always gulls. The plan is we’re going to stop in Sydney, explore the Great Barrier Reef for a bit, then go through the Coral Sea and up toward Papua New Guinea.

Mom’s stomach cramps are much better. The doctor in Australia said that it was most probably something she’d eaten. Anyway, she’s better now.

It’s really hot and heavy. It’s calm too. No wind. We’re hardly moving. I can’t see any clouds, but I’m sure a storm is coming. I can feel it.

* * *
July 28

I look around me. It’s a dark, dark night. No moon. No stars. But it’s calm again, at last. I’ll be twelve tomorrow, but I don’t think anyone except me will remember it.

We’ve had a terrible time, far worse even than in the Bay of Biscay. Ever since we left Sydney, it’s been just storm after storm, and each one blows us farther north across the Coral Sea. The rudder cable has snapped. Dad’s done what he can, but it’s still not right. The self-steering doesn’t work anymore, so someone’s got to be at the wheel all the time. And that means Dad or me, because Mom is sick. It’s her stomach cramps again, but they’re a lot worse. She doesn’t want to eat at all. All she has is sugared water. She hasn’t been able to look at the charts for three days. Dad wants to put out a Mayday call, but Mom won’t let him. She says that’s giving in, and she’s never giving in. Dad and I have been doing the navigation together. We’ve been doing our best, but I don’t think we know where we are anymore.

They’re both asleep down below. Dad’s really wiped out. I’m at the wheel in the cockpit. I’ve got Eddie’s soccer ball with me. It’s been lucky for us so far. And now we really need it. We need Mom to get better, or we’re in real trouble. I don’t know if we could stand another storm.

Thank God it’s calm. It’ll help Mom sleep. You can’t sleep when you’re being slammed about all the time.

It is so dark out there. Black. Stella’s barking. She’s up by the bow. She hasn’t got her harness clipped on.

* * *

Those were the last words I ever wrote in my log. After that it’s just empty pages.

I tried calling Stella first, but she wouldn’t come. So I left the wheel and went forward to bring her back. I took the ball with me to sweeten her in, to tempt her away from the bow of the boat.

I crouched down. “Come on, Stella,” I said, rolling the ball from hand to hand. “Come and get the ball.” I felt the boat turn a little in the wind, and I knew then I shouldn’t have left the wheel. The ball rolled away from me quite suddenly. I lunged after it, but it was gone over the side before I could grab it. I lay there on the deck watching it bob away into the darkness. I was furious with myself for being so stupid.

I was still cursing myself when I thought I heard the sound of singing. Someone was singing out there in the darkness. I called out, but no one replied. So that was what Stella had been barking at.

I looked again for my ball, but by now it had disappeared. That ball had been very precious to me, precious to all of us. I knew then I had just lost a great deal more than a soccer ball.

I was angry with Stella. The whole thing had been her fault. She was still barking.