



She who must be sailed

One man's treasure
One planet's lifeboat

Merlin Smallbone

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Solo sailor, alpha (for arsehole) male, Colton follows clues to buried treasure in the Indian Ocean. What he finds makes him think he's being head-hunted to be a space sailor and this is an aptitude test. He's right, but now he's got another woman in his life and she's not like the others. Can she convince him to save the planet?

Merlin Smallbone lives in Essex and writes lots of books. Find out more at vulpeculox.net



Preview

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As TV is to television, so Socmed is to Social Media. The socmed-salute is when people reach out and up with their phones to take pictures in a crowd.

There are some changes in POV which are deliberate. There are meant to be a couple of confusions of identities (leading eventually to the last line) but in the main you shouldn't have any difficulty following who or what is doing/thinking/talking.

Treasure hunt

Night would come quickly here so he must either wait until morning or dash for the lagoon. Even when shading his eyes with his hand Colton had to almost completely shut his eyes as he turned *Tortoise* into what appeared to be a mile wide harbour of liquid gold. Straight into the plunging sun. The swell from behind was gently licking over the coral on either side of the inlet, but ahead seemed open. As soon as he was clear of the atoll reef he dropped the sails and tossed the anchor over. In the last five minutes of daylight the anchor appeared to be holding and there were no signs of life on the island. Ten minutes later *Tortoise* was the only boat with an anchor light for five hundred kilometres.

This was it! This was the island with the treasure. This was where William Hawkins had lived for two months. Now the sun had set, if it wasn't for the gentle swell and sound of the surf on the beach he could have been floating in space. Every time he looked the sky was deeper black satin with more diamonds. He was exactly on track as far as using his stores was concerned. Tonight he'd have the remaining half tin of tomatoes mixed with a half tin of stew and served with a whole packet of croutons. On his trial voyage he'd fallen for something crunchy to go with basic grub. As he'd specially laid four bottles down and this was his third and final island he'd open the last red.

William Hawkins wasn't very believable as he dressed everything in fantasy. In his so-called *True and Accurate Journal* he claimed he'd made a good living in the North Sea Alum trade during the 1750s and 60s, but then been visited by an angel called Hoxne who told him to cash-up his interests and take a passage to the East Indies. Every so often Hoxne would appear and foretell the future to William. There was a murder amongst the crew, accidents and a storm all foretold by William's angel. At Malacca he found an old sea captain desperate for a charter. According to William the boat was in better condition than the skipper but that didn't say much. Hoxne had now told William that he was to be the founder of a colony in the South Seas but first he had to find a suitable island so his people could prosper. In his journal he makes it clear he's going from one tiny coral island to another but is vague about directions and distances. However he did say, as if it was a moral

lesson, that the way would be clear to anyone who took the trouble to follow the chain of islands each one no more than sixty leagues from the next. The first two islands had proven unsatisfactory then things started going wrong. The skipper died, the boat started to break apart. William with his knowledge of the North Sea managed to get the ship beached on a small island. Once he'd paid the crew in gold to help set up a camp they started drinking and fighting. The three remaining died of their wounds next day leaving William alone. According to his account William arrived on the island he called New Lowestoft five days before his fortieth birthday. Being a practical fellow who didn't want to attract reptiles or sharks he wrestled the seven dead crew members into the lower branches of trees then moved his quarters further along the strand. He was able to salvage useful materials from the wreck. Rope, spars, oars, even a musket although he had no ammunition for it. Various casks of provisions came ashore of their own. Bodies washed up on the beach had to make do with William placing his hand on a waterlogged bible and saying a few words before being dragged to the bodies tree. In his journal William wondered if this was Christian but in the circumstances he reasoned God wanted him to survive, and so long as he respected the dead that was all that could be expected of him at this moment. For one thing he didn't yet have a shovel. For another there were thirteen bodies. They would have to take second place to the living. Hoxne showed William how to catch fish and rainwater and prepare seaweed as a substitute for bread. Soon William had repaired the ship's boat and at Hoxne's prompting managed to hook up a chest of treasure exposed on the bottom of the clear lagoon. William buried the treasure then set about returning to civilisation. From his account it appeared that William's relationship with God was a bit on and off. He prayed after sundown and waking up at dawn after dealing with whatever animals and insects were trying to eat him in small bits. The largest animal on the Island so far appeared to be a mouse. He could rely on his guardian angel Hoxne God had sent to help him.

Colton knew about plagues of insects. God was not Colton's thing despite his school's insistence on the matter. To him religion meant creepy vicar with the buck teeth having seething secrets that needed one-to-one discussion. Word had gone ahead, so as far as he knew nobody in his year was fooled but it was still creepy. If he went back to Ketterham College and the worm was still there pleading for understanding over half-moon spectacles then he'd probably kick him so he was never a menace to boys ever again. That was coming-up to twenty years ago, since when Colton had married, left his family, 'played-

around' and realised he felt perfectly at ease alone without a 'higher being' or soul-mate. Except sometimes there were pangs for peaceful happiness.

One day, a trivial argument between a couple in the street caused a fuse to blow in his personality to make him a protector as well as predator of women. Then he wondered what the difference was. First he'd gone for night walks through the Surrey countryside returning by train if it was a work day or taking a country bus to as far as it went then walking some more until he phoned second wife Gemma to pick him up. Now every Monday morning at the office was a new rock face for him to climb. He'd always been the 'man with the plan' coupled with force of personality to deal with problems. He was the boss they all feared and the others were used to it. He was never angry, never threw scarecrow ideas at them to deal with, never complained when they questioned or shattered his dream. He was good at business and negotiation but sharing his visions was like the scraping of fingernails down a blackboard. Now, he understood he was stressed, he had to let his imagination burst every Monday morning, but it was white water rafting over barbed wire. Gemma tried to coax him or get him to share ideas but she failed. He was a manic imaginist. Sometimes he'd go to sleep telling her he was dreading dreaming.

Tonight, on the other side of the world from wrestling with work and women, he didn't have to explain anything to anybody. Colton was sozzled and satisfied. Even if the treasure was one of those grim symbols that made you reflect on the treasure of leading a godly life it would be fine. He tried to think of a 'treasure' that would disappoint him but even finding a message saying "We got here first" would be OK if it was nicely written. When Colton was able to organise his life without interference, he was curious not competitive, thinking ahead not scheming avoidance.

At Hoxne's suggestion William only carried a couple of pocketfulls of gold balls and blood-red rubies, then set off with simple navigation to island-hop his way back to Malacca. Colton had followed the reverse of this journey at each sand-bar of an island. He found the first buried bottle by intelligent guesses and careful interpretation of William's journal. The first bottle was buried by the most prominent landmark as described. The bottle itself was over a metre down but a tarred rope came up to close to the surface where it was attached to an old tarred net covered by up to a foot of sand. This was relatively easy

the first time and much easier for the next two hops. The exact location of the next island cache was written on old paper torn from what appeared to be a ship's log. Also in the bottles were three gold balls and three blood red rubies.

Colton didn't really go to sleep that night. He slept in bits but tumbled between sleep, half sleep, broken sleep, repetition and great thoughts verging on revelations. At last, after two uninterrupted hours of morning sleep, he could plan his day with the luxury of breakfast then rowing ashore. Lots of nautical calculations, options and risks rattled through his mind like a refreshing summer hail storm. He was anchored in an excellent position so he pulled the dinghy close, filled it with a day's essentials then himself. Rowing to the shore across the glass-clear lagoon was a battle of two intellects. The practical sailor getting the voyage done and the tourist wanting to soak up the moment that can never be relived. Three metre wide coral flowers edged with blue and pink drifted beneath. Gray fish in shoals taking their lightning paths. Harlequin fish in ones and twos out for a morning graze in the coral trees. God's underwater garden with God's hoards of school children and God's fashionable duchesses teasing them. God's tiny polyps waving to him flying in space as they floated in their coral colonies.

Colton's guardian angel, or possibly his seamanship, meant the dingy drifted towards the shore without Colton being aware of time or place... Except that when the fairytale theatre became close something deep in his brain told him the real world was calling and he should take note. The waves were playful and less than knee height. Half a minute of rowing and the dinghy was neatly kissing the white sand of the beach. Colton was now treasure-curious. This should be the moment of truth. He could see the tumble of overgrown rocks William called The Citadel. The 'gateway' was not obvious until he guessed that there must have been some changes since 1776. The sun was hot, the earth around the base of the rocks had baked into hard orange clay. There would never be a better time to see if anyone had got here first. Perhaps William had returned in secret later. Colton dictated into his tablet the date, time and place then set it on a rock to take a photograph of him with pick and shovel at the chosen spot. On past experience in twenty minutes he'd know if the two years of preparation and research had been worthwhile.

Two burning-hot hours and three holes later there were none of the usual bits of net and tell-tale twine. Was it a cruel hoax? He left his tools and went two

metres into the lagoon to cool off. He could stay another hour before needing more drinking water from Tortoise. Fully clothed in boots, shorts, long sleeved shirt and sun hat he waded into the refreshing sea to be caressed by the chuckling of waves. At least he'd given it his best shot. The last six weeks all on his own had been calming and a welcome release from all 21st century pressures back in London. Now he hardly worried about the mess those at home would be making. If he didn't find the treasure then he knew where to come back another time. Whatever happened, he'd have a camp on the beach tonight and build a child's sandcastle.

Long past his 'hour's limit' he still wasn't a millionaire. What would a strong man do? Row back to Tortoise and try again. Perhaps he was looking in the wrong place. Yes, that was it. He'd take lots of photographs of the rocks, then later he could work out what they might have been like two hundred years ago by reverse engineering a computer simulation. He could come back next year with a TV crew and unbelievable mystery story with him as the hero. There must be another side to women. So far everyone he stroked contained a lawyer like a genii in a lamp. Five! No time to think of those swamp alligators now! Tortoise, water, memory card, camping gear, insect repellent, fresh approach. An hour later, having checked the weather via satellite and set up a camp, more a heap of gear under a couple of palm trees, he set out to photograph a mystery. He hadn't really failed. Of course without the treasure he wouldn't be able to vanish from the clutches of the harpies. Perhaps he should have learned sooner. Tonight by the light of the first electric light ever to shine on this part of the earth, he'd brought progress, good for him, he would write a 'postcard from paradise' to each of the faithless five. He'd got enough bottles to put them in!

Solo sailors don't dine at the Ritz. They probably get every bit as much pleasure from the tenth tin of lamb mince and instant mashed potato as brandy-soaked profiteroles and whipped cream with a lounge pianist in the background. Colton added a fish fried-in-the-pan caught twenty minutes earlier. It didn't taste of much but oil and seasoning with plump texture of the split-open flesh but it was another achievement for a denied Boy Scout. That would definitely go into 'postcards from paradise', the self-sufficient hunter cooking his own catch. After washing up, somewhere, thirty years ago perhaps, he'd read you must do that straight away to avoid attracting wild animals, the largest animal here might be a hedgehog. Um. Spiders? What about crabs? No, turtles laying their eggs on the beach. He would have seen

a lot more crab shells if they were a problem wouldn't he? Fifteen minutes later he was back home on Tortoise. Anyway, what was the point of sleeping on the shore when a captain should be with his boat.

He used a flattened cereal packet to write to Louisa 'the bitch with the needy brother', as in needed to keep ahead of the police and other drug gangs. It was great to boast of his paradise in small capitals of streaky biro. In two months she'd invented a false story and sworn affidavits that her disabled child was his. The trouble with this sort of paperwork-driven crime was it didn't go away, especially if the police were dim and disinterested. He'd tried everything he could think of short of a bribe but Thames Valley Police had more important things to do. If he'd found the treasure then he could live in Spain and make the Chief Constable's life a misery with a month of pin-money stooges on Facebook demanding his resignation.

The next morning Colton decided to place his feet back on New Lowestoft as William called it and do a proper survey, On the long watches Colton had thought of it as Treasure Island until the tangled tragedies of that story came back to him. It would definitely remain New Lowestoft. Less than two miles long by half a mile wide, hardly more than white coral sand and green-leaved palm trees, this should be a homage to a great explorer and memories to come back to for him in person, or him in an old people's home, or some other adventurer with more luck. After chomping through two sticky cereal bars and checking the forecast he rowed to the shore. This would be his last time here for a while at least, or perhaps ever, so he was trying to absorb and record every sense and at the same time realising how brittle the days of perfection were. After three quarters of an hour having his boots washed by inches of surf he rounded the far end of the island to see a citadel! A tumble of rocks but these looked more imposing, better organised. He jogged to the confusion of palms, creepers and rocks in ten minutes. Sailing long distances makes you lean but not fit at running across sand. The 'gateway' was obvious. Without his pick and shovel Colton started digging into the crumbly root-infested red earth with his hands until he realised he was being stupid. A walk along the shore gave him a scallop-like shell, a flip-flop, a couple of sticks and two plastic bottles he might turn into shovels. He could go back to the boat but in five minutes of digging with his stone-age tools he should hit something. And he did!

He found the top of what appeared to be a small barrel covered in tarred canvas. Judging from the top it was probably big enough to put a four-year-old in. What a strange thought! Anyway he was a sailor focussing on tasks so that meant serious labour with serious tools, rope, hooks or some net to get a purchase and lift what must be heavy. After a few photographs he scattered sand over the top in a completely pointless gesture to hide it from others! Once he'd returned with a dingy full of tools, water and his last two rather squashed chocolate bars, it took Colton the rest of the day to excavate the cask. He wasn't used to this sort of labour. There weren't many places to go for long walks, fell trees and dig graves on a 14 metre boat. After digging a two metre deep trench beside the cask he eventually managed to burrow under it to get a purchase then wiggle it free from 236 years of sand. It needed a double purchase block and tackle to inch it up. He needed frequent rests and water. His hands were chafed with the sand. Bloody insects, they were bloody if you squashed them, must have been waiting over two centuries years for him. Even though he was determined to solve the barrel problem he didn't allow it to own him. With the cask captured but not pulled from the hole there was an hour of daylight so no hope of leaving today. Best catch a couple of fish and have a relaxing swim to take the sweaty crusts from his eyes and sooth the bites. Ha! Bites of the women back in London. This was really soothing. How different to holidays in Devon where no beach was safe from his spade. This was the sort of beach that didn't need sandcastles or moats. It was too lovely to defile with human footprints.

The next day Colton's preparations made pulling the cask to the surface straightforward. Then it could be rolled down to the water's edge. The dinghy wasn't suitable transport. No matter because Colton had foreseen the problem and decided that he could rig a tackle on Tortoise to haul the cask on board, and if it had to come vertically up through a few metres of water that was no problem. Even if the cask wasn't waterproof, treasure like the rubies and gold balls he'd found in the other bottles wouldn't be worried by a bit of sea water. In preparation he glided Tortoise along the lagoon. It was much easier for him to use sails instead of the engine. And much more satisfying. Having secured the lashings of the cask to Tortoise sitting 30 metres offshore he rolled it into the surf. Of course filled with gold it was unlikely to float and it didn't. Nevertheless he'd chosen a sandy strip down which the cask could roll. After three hours of careful seamanship and making sure not to get any fingers or limbs crushed, the cask was safely stowed in the 'Bosuns' stores' or forward cabin.

During the four week voyage onward to Chennai Colton dodged the nasty weather and drank the last bottle of wine. He'd never been a big drinker except to join-in. Now he wished he had a double dozen. He had left Paradise Island as soon as he could after roping the cask on board. The wind would be fair as soon as he was out of the lagoon, and why stay when he could come back. The two and a half days had drained him mentally and so once he was clear of the island he set the auto pilot to whisk them a hundred miles due North West and held a one man Monday morning review meeting. Even though the charts were plain blue he knew how quickly hidden islands could appear. About a minute from suspicion to point of disaster. That was the trouble with volcanic islands, you were flying in the clouds and never normally touched one. It would be ironic if he fell at the final fence. Colton resolved to watch for surf and birds.

This was like Christmas as a boy. He could enjoy the anticipation and speculation. The present was more exciting wrapped in mystery. He decided to wait until daylight to cut into the cask so he could take photographs. Not for the lawyers, who should never know, but posterity.

Friday 7th April 2019 08:30 local time. Position as per GPS log. Roughly 11N 91E. Wind perfect ESE stdy 4 or 5. Course 270. No issues with food water or boat. About to open cask discovered by chance on Paradise Island. Somebody must have loved Brandy to cover it in tarred canvas. Perfect after all these years. When rolled doesn't feel like it contains liquid.

Subsequent entries in Tortoise's log stick to navigation, meteorology and nutrition.

Discovery

With Tortoise steering herself on a steady course in steady weather Colton wedged himself into the fore cabin, where the weight of the cask was best placed, and used his stainless steel knife to peel away the outer covering with a series of rips. He'd already got nine gold balls and nine bits of bright red crystal. What would he do with all the gold balls? Stay in India? No! Too much corruption. But then how would he smuggle it somewhere? Why was he worried? He'd found it and wasn't smuggling anything anywhere! Customs at any port would suffocate that with seizure first then lawyers like his women. BASTARDS. Perhaps William had the right idea? Was it too late to go back to Paradise Island?

Best to find out what was in the cask. Facts before suspicion! That's what they taught you in management school. Graphs for generalisations was what one of the subversive lecturers had said. Colton had despised Mister Drewry at the time as a Left Wing agitator who wanted to see society implode. Now he was ashamed for being so narrow minded. That's what a public school education did for you. There was no ring-pull, no dotted lines to show where to cut, no clever pop-out release. How could he get into cask a metre high? After ten minutes the ambitious child Colton asked the wise sailor Colton and the answer was knock off the end hoop and then the staves will spring out and Bob's your Uncle. It's quite difficult to bang with hammer and chisel against a tub in a confined space. It's annoying when after at last releasing the end-piece you find a piece of printed paper saying open from other end.

After rolling, wedging, levering, sweating and swearing, the cask was ready to have its other end released. Colton had numerous tar scars which seemed to spread from one limb to another and then clothes and beard. He'd started tapping round the end hoop when his jaw dropped, the screwdriver he was using as a punch dropped on his foot and the hammer slid out of his hand in slow motion to bring pain to his shin bone. The 'open other end' note was printed! And in a modern font. Oh no. He must be dreaming. Polystyrene chips would be next and then the doctor would come round with a big syringe of medication. He scrambled back to the main cabin. Wiped the sweat from his face. Drank twice the morning's ration of water and lay on the windward side of the deck making sure he breathed slowly and deeply. The sun was

warm, little sprays blown onboard were refreshing. Something must have rotted inside the cask and given off fumes in the confined space of the forepeak. He was lucky to survive. After a pleasant half hour of deep breathing, scanning the swells, sails, sheets and rainbow sprays he scanned them all again. Swells moving like many night time sighs with the occasional one that suddenly seemed to slip backwards to be picked up by its follower. Sails gently shivering in perfect curves of tension. Straight sheets on parade waiting for commands. Salty sprays hissing as they kissed the hull. Who should he write a letter to about this? Stephen and Michael were too young to appreciate it. Still, he could write it now for the future. Yes, he'd do that but first he had to ventilate the forepeak and drag the cask at least into the open cockpit. Tortoise was already a bit stern heavy but it would only be for twenty minutes then he could redistribute the contents or throw whatever rotted thing overboard.

In a series of two minute sessions he roped the cask then pulled it through the main cabin and then up into the cockpit. He lowered the dodger to get the best air circulation even if the sun made everything too hot to touch. The end hoop came off by millimetres and then centimetres. With a deep breath Colton removed the end-wood and retreated onto the deck to give fumes a chance to disperse. There wasn't even a sea bird to watch him make the discovery of his life. There would never again be a moment like this. Even if it was rotted remains, every inch of this quest had been his own. His money, self persuasion, vision. His research, desperation, excuse for loneliness.

The moment had come. He set the camera to take a photo of him next to the cask in the cockpit, then another of the straw padding. That was to be the last moment of normality in Colton's life. When he pulled the straw away there was a layer of polythene bags and food containers. Some poison from that barbecued fish from last night must be making him hallucinate. No. Yes. What the fuck! He sat down then stood up as the wooden seat burned the back of his legs. Aha! Sunstroke! He struggled to raise the well-travelled dodger without tearing it. At last he was in the shade. More water. One day a weedy boat would be found drifting with the only clue of what happened in the log. Pencil lasted better than ink. At least now he'd got plastic bags to keep it dry! He went back to the cockpit but the contents sitting in the cask hadn't changed. A glance at one of the bags showed it contained an instruction manual in English. Of course it would be in English. Of course it would say look at the hidden camera and grin like an idiot. Of course he'd been fooled.

He knew every tiny part of Tortoise but even so he hunted for a hidden camera in the cockpit and cabin. But who would go to all this trouble? The glass rubies and gold painted ball bearings were probably worth pennies.

The alarm started beeping to warn him there was ten minutes to go until noon. Noon being his daily fix that always went on the chart. What did people do before computers and GPS! Noon also meant a once round the boat checking every bit of rigging, batteries, checking the stores and recording any anomalies in the log. He would also use the noon log to write about the weather and plan for the next twenty four hours. He trusted his log because he'd been faithful to it. Now, after the formalities he added he may be hallucinating after opening a cask found where William left it in 1776 but it was getting rid of any putrid fumes in the cockpit. He enjoyed the feeling of offering a mystery to anyone who stumbled across his log as he'd stumbled across William's.

A sailor has to face facts. Somebody was using him or playing with him. Who? That could wait. After a lunch of sun-heated tinned hotdogs in tomato sauce, garnished in three part-baked bread rolls saved from last night, he could face whatever weird thing it was in the barrel. He'd had glimpses of cables so it was probably some electronics. Knowing his luck and guessing that anyone who sent him on a two thousand mile sailing trip wasn't a normal person, it wouldn't be made by Samsung or Hewlet-Packard. He was right. Each bag or box or Toby Jug – Three of them! was photographed in-situ, numbered with a permanent felt-pen, opened and contents written in his private diary. A camera couldn't have hallucinations! There was a layer of shrink-wrapped books covering human biology, space physics, mathematics and one called 'If you can read this you're too close to the present time'. He left them in their vacuum sealed jackets for now. So far he'd got what appeared to be three power supplies, not much use on a small boat like Tortoise, a couple of dozen hinged rods, a dozen packets of nuts, bolts brackets and tools, packets of various electronic components, that was his best guess, various user guides, assembly manuals, reference guides printed on pale blue paper and a warranty card in twenty languages plus a seven-day-only offer of 'Premier-Gold' service and parts warranty at 25% off. Only £106!. Colton's initial angry reaction was being tempered by the knowledge that somebody had gone to a lot of trouble to tease him. Yes! that was it. He was being teased. There were still some beer cans unopened. Tonight he would toast his persecutor with a smile. Beneath the books was a layer of scrunched-up

newspaper. It was normal newspaper with pictures, columns and headlines and from a distance the text looked normal but it turned out to be mangled or unsuitable words. He photographed one piece then put the other ten bits in a spare pillowcase.

Underneath the layers of packets and books was a bright yellow plastic warning plate covering the lower two thirds of the cask with 'Read the manual' in ten languages spiralling out of a hazard sign with RTFM inside. Against his instinct to be the captain on his own boat he retreated into tea-making in the cabin. Most afternoons, and whenever he got stressed Colton would go through the routine of boiling water on the gimbaled stove, ticking a rationing chart, taking a tea bag and shaking it inside a cocktail shaker full boiling water. It didn't taste like tea at home. It wasn't meant to. He dropped in some lemon juice from a bottle then depending on his need he might add cold water and savour the smoky aroma and cheek scraping taste of China tea. 'Old ships rigging' his father had called it when Colton brought Lapsang Souchong back from boarding school. Still, his father drank a whole cup with milk the day they had dug out and lined the garden pond together. Hey! Of course! Only his father loved him enough to play this game with him. So it was dad! Dad died last year of creeping undefined causes. Colton had kept in touch with him and mum with weekly phone calls and sometimes visits. The last thing dad had said to him was "If we meet again it will be in heaven or hell. I'm sorry your marriage didn't work out but you've got a long way to go yet. Don't give up. Look after mum." Colton was ashamed now that he couldn't face the emotion of those last couple of weeks. The truth was, as he now realised, and suspected his father realised, was he didn't know how to look after mum. Or anybody.

Fortified by the tea and calmed by yet another acknowledgement of his incompetence in loving relationships, he sliced-open the polythene wrapping of the installation guide. It was a typical A4 book of about thirty pages. Needless to say, this instructed the reader to read the safety booklet first. Colton couldn't find any safety booklet. Then came pages of black and white outline drawings with ticks and crosses. Ah yes – A plastic bag is an excellent way to suffocate children. Stick your fingers in a power socket if you want to end up with two plus symbols instead of eyes. This isn't a vegetable so don't drizzle it with a watering can. Who knew! Colton laughed. He actually laughed. "Thanks dad. This is the best present ever. I'm sorry I was so mean with my love." Colton wanted a ship's cat to rub up against him like Aristide used to at home with dark questioning eyes

dipping for a second into his mind then tempting him to imagine the more important affairs of cats.

Following the instructions, he removed the warning plate then the central metal tube about 20 centimetres in diameter. It was heavy and covered with sticky yellow and black warning signs. He wasn't to eat it or take it to bed or throw it at cows or horses. Looking ahead in the booklet, this was a container for various alarming modules labelled with words like 'radiation', 'interrogator', 'Galactic positioning system' and 'destructor destructor'. He wanted a good look at what had been wrapped around it like carpet. It was packed in heavy duty polythene. Without removing it he saw something incredibly weird. It was a cross between a bar of chocolate and a printed circuit board. Lots of grey bumps, perhaps ash-silvery in places, in irregular but organised patterns. This wasn't an IKEA bed. From the edges he could see it looked more like an American city with a grid but perverted in all sorts of ways. He decided to leave this weird carpet of whatever rolled-up in the barrel then reached down to the bottom where he found the safety instructions.

Colton was at peace in his existence yet intrigued by what had happened to him. He was still alive, still functioning, still in charge. Um. OK not 100% in charge, but there was no pressure, no demands, no need to be panicked into a plan. This sort of thing only happened to special people. Even if he was drugged in a hospital he had to work with what he believed to be reality. Being on a boat alone in the middle of an ocean was a good test of individual strength and self-belief. Every move and silly annoyances felt real, so after the scare of being gassed by the cask, he read the manuals and even the dos and don'ts of the safety guide buried at the bottom. Boats had auto-helms but on a boat you were hungry man against indifferent nature. You could win against the wind and waves but you needed to know how to play the game. As a solo sailor you only had so many alert hours to give at a time. There was no rescue-me button. Well, technically speaking there was, but if it got that serious then your chance of survival had decreased by a factor of ten or more. Emergency satellite beacons are all very well, but with the nearest real land a thousand kilometres away, he was hardly likely to be picked-up by any lawful boat. Rescue services out here to the East of India were non-existent except in the Unicorn sense. If they rescued somebody, the episode became a legend.

He had no intention of letting-down the joker who had set him up with such an elaborate hoax. Whoever it was deserved respect for their hard work. It could be his own dad or something related. It was too early to tell. During the eleven day passage to Chennai Colton read the paperwork and scribbled many things in the margins. The weather was acceptable and at this rate he would make landfall with three weeks of stores to spare. He wrote two postcards everyday except they were to dead people. He wrote a postcard to himself to try and break out of just sitting with a DIY super-computer. Someone had chosen him to take this beast into space. Why did it need a human? What had his dad known? Was his dad an alien... Which would make him one too. Colton felt he had been treated like one... but that wasn't proof.

When the landfall came it was brutal. The auto-helm had targeted Chennai. Colton knew the inevitable return to oversight by bastards. He had nothing to hide except the incredible machine he didn't understand. He'd thrown the cask overboard, used the electro carpet as a carpet and had a clear log reading of straight sailing with no island or sandbars. The perfunctory and blatant demand of \$40 bribe from customs was an insult! Colton had worked for days and thought for nights about disguising his treasure. The supercomputer was rubbery and made an ideal carpet. The manuals and books could all be filed in the bookshelf after some of his novels had been jettisoned. After taking care to remove the seal in a way it could be replaced he discharged one of the fire extinguishers then removed the top and filled it with damp rice, red glass and brass balls. He kept wondering what the significance of the grotesque Toby jugs was, they would have to look after themselves in a bit of spare bubble wrap.

After the customs and harbour formalities, Colton went to the Yacht Club and introduced himself. Yes they had a room and he could use one of the guest moorings as a long distance yachtsman he was very welcome. Once Tortoise had been officially booked-in, Colton knew the pennant flying protocol which let people know you were experienced and respectful of traditions, servants appeared to help him bring his baggage ashore. Twenty minutes later a bath had been run for him and he was looking at himself and his clothes in the light of civilisation. Dirty, frayed, thin. He needing a hair cut. He must relearn being sociable and how to go 100% to sleep. Even now in a hotel room full of Indian smells he didn't need the alarm to tell him it was time for the noon fix. He hadn't got any Indian currency to tip the servant, so he gave him a five ten dollar notes with instructions to get them changed into something local and smaller at reception, and get a barber to visit in an hour's time when there would no doubt be some reward.

Then...

Colton has to fight his supercomputer. Gradually a misunderstanding is resolved and there's a fight to save the world against its dependency on electronics. There's a good reason why somebody like Colton was head-hunted for the job.

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Merlin lives in Witham, Essex and writes when he's not programming computers. He is what they call a character, but whether it's a ! or ? remains a mystery. Most of his leading characters are strong and positive, although of course the interesting bits are their weaknesses and doubts. A glance at the catalogue shows a wide range of settings. Typically he writes interesting characters in interesting situations so that 'stuff happens' but there will be ideas and issues that hover in full view yet in the background until spotlighted, when for many readers that's the moment they realise they've been reading a proper book not just a story.