

COVER





# A DEADLY STRUGGLE AGAINST THE SEA

After a freak accident sank their sailboat, a couple's idyllic cruise turned hellish. The sole survivor tells how she endured 14 days adrift and, in the end, alone

By Janet Culver

They met through a newspaper personal ad. Janet Culver wanted a handsome, bearded sea captain to take her sailing away, and Nicholas Abbot Jr. seemed like central casting's answer to her fantasy. A former commodities broker who gave up Wall Street in order to spend most of his time on the water, Abbot was an experienced seaman who saved other people's boats from one port to another as a sideline to his job with a courier service. Five months after they started dating seriously, Culver, a New Jersey legal secretary, and her new love were preparing for the trip of their lives. Abbot had contracted to sail the sloop *Anaulis* from St. George, Bermuda, to Greenport, Long Island, a journey of about 700 miles that was scheduled to take seven days. If everything went according to plan, the trip might have ended with a wedding announcement.

Instead things went horribly awry. On the morning of July 30, a crew member aboard the *Geronimo*, a marine-research sailing vessel, spotted a rubber dinghy bobbing in the light swells of the Atlantic midway between New York and Bermuda. A slender arm feebly waved an orange life jacket. The crew found Culver just in time: She was anemic and severely dehydrated. Abbot, however, was gone. While recuperating at King Edward VII Memorial Hospital near Hamilton, Bermuda, Culver told senior writer Ron Arias the story of the nightmare journey that began as a test of love and ended as a struggle for survival.

It was a postcard perfect day when we left Bermuda on the *Anaulis*—blue sky, nice breeze and sun for a romantic departure. I was excited because this would be our first ocean voyage together, a chance to see if I could make such a trip without getting seasick. I also had to sort out whether or not I wanted to marry Nick, a divorced, 50-year-old "sailing bum" who was now asking me to share his new life delivering boats and sailing. I was 48, had



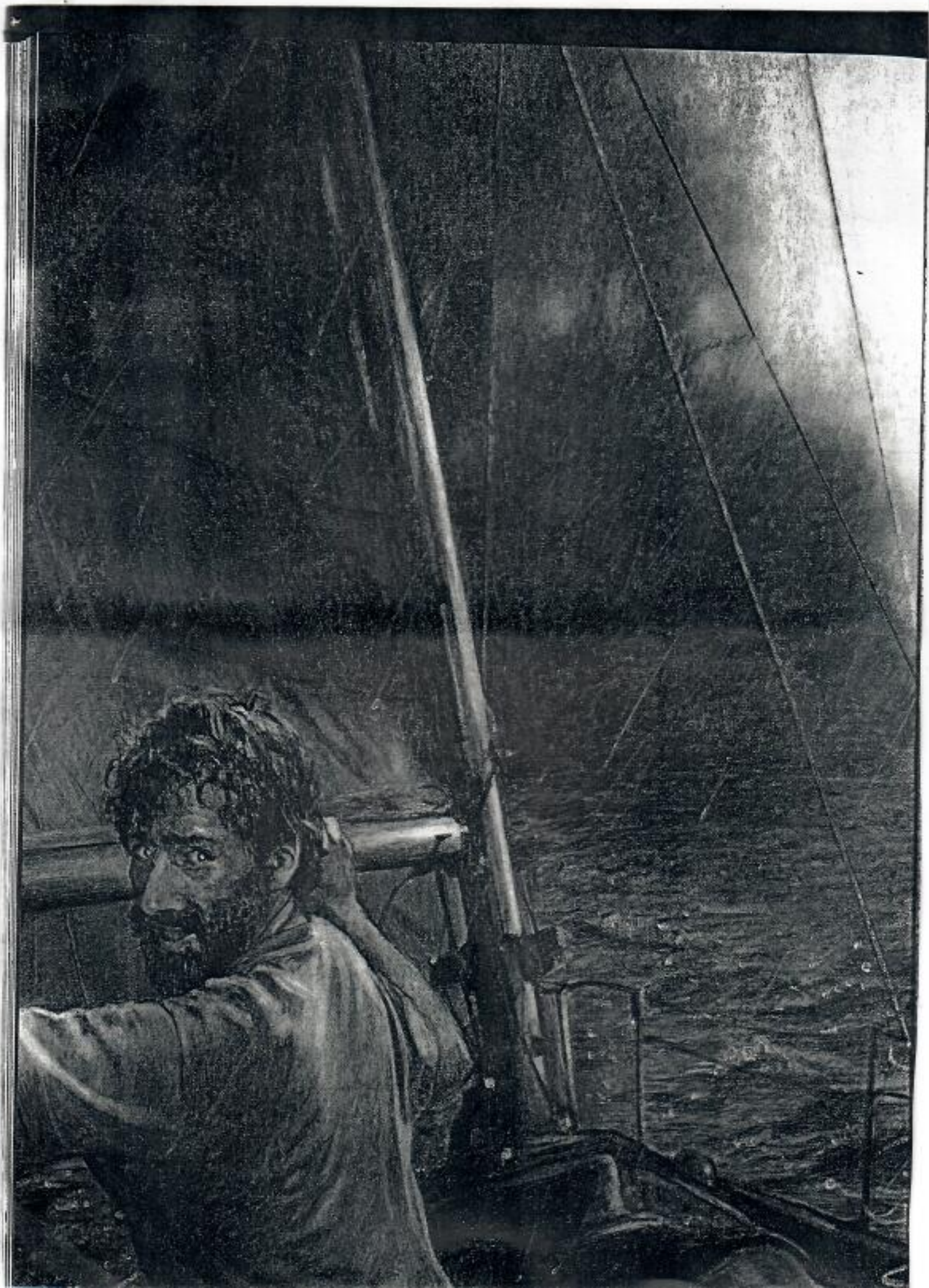
been married twice before and was hoping this time for something lasting. This was supposed to be the big test to see if we were compatible at sea. I never imagined just how big a test it would turn out to be, something that would stretch us to the limit—and in Nick's case, beyond.

After fueling up with diesel, we left St. George, heading for open water. That was on Wednesday, July 12. Nick was checking the charts, trying to spot channel buoys and avoid the reefs. Right from the time we met I really admired him, wishing I could be more like him. He knew so much and was such an independent spirit, always doing what he set out to do, whether it was biking 100 miles in one day or sailing across the ocean.

The *Anaulis*, a 37-footer, really impressed me—full of electronic controls, a refrigerator and cabinets stocked with canned food, and a canopy over the rear deck to protect you from the sun. Nick apologized, however, for not repairing

Culver (above, in her hospital bed) gamely signed on to be Abbot's mate on the voyage from Bermuda to New York.







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the toilet and the autopilot steering device. He said he couldn't obtain the parts. I told him not to worry, that we would get by. As for the autopilot not working, that's why I was along—to spell him at the wheel so he could sleep. He told me I would do four- to six-hour watches. He knew I was a novice, having made only one deep-water trip before. But I liked sailing. I grew up on Long Island near the sea, and my father used to take me out in his little sailboat.

The perfect day didn't last for long. By the time we lost sight of land, the seas started to pick up and I got seasick. I only vomited once, but I was queasy and nauseous, and when the storm hit that night, I certainly didn't get any better. I didn't feel like doing anything. Nick did the cooking, and the dishes piled up in the sink because I didn't have the energy to wash them. That was supposed to be my chore, but when I wasn't standing watch, all I wanted to do was crawl into the berth and hope I'd feel better. For three days it rained—Nick called it a tropical depression. The waves were about 10 feet high, and we had to stay attached to a lifeline at all times. On deck we'd get hit by the

spray as we plunged into the troughs, then ride up to the top of the next wave. Up and down, day and night. Sometimes a rogue wave would hit us from the side and drench us.

I couldn't believe I was doing this. He trusted me, though, calmly going off to sleep as if I could take care of things. Standing watch was agony. I kept wondering if I'd hold out. I was weak and kept checking the time, counting each half hour. But I didn't let him down. I was determined not to be a burden.

At first he didn't seem to mind my condition. He joked about it, saying even *he* was vulnerable. "I've never been seasick," he said, "not until my last trip. So even I can get sick." He laughed about that. I was surprised when he said that because he wasn't the kind to easily admit his weaknesses or faults. But I was very proud of him, watching him do so many things—reef the mainsail, haul up the jib, check the lines, fix our position. It was all pretty dazzling. With him in control, I was never anxious, even though I was a bit annoyed because he should have known about the storm. But all he had was a little radio for harbor use. I don't know why the boat didn't have a radio with more range. If it had one, Nick didn't use it. Since it wasn't really his

boat, maybe he didn't want to spend money on repairing the boat or buying expensive equipment. That's also why we didn't have an emergency locator that transmits to planes and ships when you're in trouble. They cost a few hundred dollars, and he thought we could make the trip without it.

"Why didn't you rent one?" I asked.

"I didn't have time," he said, irritated.

"What about one of the portable water-making kits? Why didn't you get one?"

"You've got to order those from catalogs, and there just wasn't enough time."

I didn't carry on, but I was getting pissed that he could forget these things. Even I knew better and I'd only taken one course in navigation and sailing. So I let myself be intimidated and I shut up, thinking he must know what he was doing. Another thing I noticed was his attention to his sextant, which he kept in a nice vinyl box. I think it was his most treasured possession, and he would use it with a \$300 calculator to fix our position.

After three days the storm eased up, and so did my seasickness. Saturday evening was beautiful, and I felt fine. You could see the stars and the moon. I asked Nick to take down the canopy so I could get a good look. He did, but about this time he started to act cold and irritable, bitching about every little chore or problem. I asked him what the matter was, and he said, "The way you move around the boat, you're always losing your balance." I said, "Yeah, we're out in the middle of a storm, and I'm just a beginner."

"Well," he said, "it takes you three days to get over a little seasickness. And another thing—you don't react quickly to orders. Your reaction time is too slow to be a sailor."

And I said, really angry because I thought I had done a good job, sick as I was, "That's only under pressure from you screaming at me to turn the boat or grab this line or that line." Maybe he thought I had used my seasickness as an excuse not to help out. Or maybe he was angry at himself because he honestly didn't think we'd have to go through that storm. I don't know, but I hate to be criticized when I'm really trying to do my best. Normally I'm a hard worker, and I'd never pretend to be sick. Later on, he changed his mind and was very kind. He was always changing his mind—one minute optimistic, the next, pessimistic. None

"It all started when I heard a noise on deck," says Culver of the final night shipboard. "Then things just got worse."







"I'm ashamed of myself," Abbot said dejectedly as they drifted away from the *Anaulis*. "I made mistakes and we lost the boat."

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of this helped the romance between us.

After that one beautiful day, it started to cloud up again. It was our fourth full day out of Bermuda, and I was sorry it wasn't totally clear because I had visions of sailing on beautiful, starlit nights. It was also starting to get cold. About 8, I went below and climbed into my berth. Then all of a sudden, around midnight, I heard this tremendous racket on deck.

I scrambled up there and saw the mainsail flapping from one side of the boat to the other. "I'm trying to balance the boat, trying to heave to and drift," Nick said. It was windy, and he explained that sometimes with certain seas it's unwise to try to sail and it's better to drift. The noise came from a metal bar that I think was banging against the boom. The noise was scaring me, but I said I was ready to take my watch. He'd gone up front, then something broke and he started swearing. Maybe it was that bar, I don't know. I took my place behind the wheel to start my watch, and I could see the moon peeking in and out of black

clouds that seemed ready to launch a rainstorm. Suddenly, Nick looked alarmed. The long sheet, or line, attached to the jib, had slipped out of the grommet—the eyehole. "What's the matter?" I shouted, and he said, "The worst thing that could happen. I think the sheet's tangled in the propeller." "So what's the big deal?" I said. "This is a sailboat. Let's play it safe and not turn on the engine."

But he was worried about not being able to run the bilge pump off the motor, so I told him to try running the engine in neutral. I could tell he didn't want my opinion, but he did put it in neutral. Then he discovered two holes about an inch in diameter on the inside of the hull. He said the rope around the propeller probably made the holes. It didn't make any sense to me, and it still doesn't. How could a rope make a hole? But he had no time to explain, nor did he ever explain.

He patched the holes with putty, though by now water was rising above the floorboards. But we weren't worried because we had the bilge pump. A while later he turned off the engine because he thought it would overheat. Then the

strangest thing happened. When we started the engine again, it wasn't in neutral—it was in gear. Then he quickly turned it off, thinking he'd put it back in neutral, and he started it up again. Unfortunately it was in gear. Somehow the propeller shaft seemed to have come loose, leaving a hole about two feet in diameter in the stern hull. That was it—water immediately came pouring in with a loud whoosh.

For the next 10 minutes we scrambled frantically. The boat's batteries were getting soaked and Nick said, "Let's not hang around here because the way the water is rising, a chemical reaction from the battery acid could hurt us. So don't dillydally. I'll get the dinghy."

I started rushing around collecting things. The water was already up to the top of the kitchen counters. He kept saying, "Hurry, hurry," and we could hear the dinghy pounding up against the hull. He was afraid the chafing would cut a hole in the raft. I kept screaming, "Water, water, find the water!"

He was worried about food, so he got the stuff that was in the fridge and a half gallon of water in a plastic jug but forgot





When a huge wave capsized the life raft, an all-too-precious half-finished bottle of Coke bobbed out of reach.

the boat. I'm not a hysterical, panicky type of person. I just figured, accidents happen and you go on from there. I wasn't really afraid—more like concerned.

At dawn of the first day adrift, it was raining, with lightning in the distance. It looked like it would rain forever. I suggested we collect some for later since we only had half a gallon of drinking water and a couple bottles of soft

drinks. But Nick kept putting me off, saying we didn't have anything to collect the water in. I said we could use the sextant box, which was about a foot square and four inches deep. We could have caught something in it, but he wasn't about to ruin his precious, foam-lined box. I should have insisted, but he intimidated me into silence about it. He used to do that a lot. I'd suggest something, he'd disagree, and I'd let it go. I wouldn't stand my ground, even when I was sure I was right. So I share the blame about not using the box. I shouldn't have backed down.

That first day we talked a lot. I said I wanted to try to have a child before I got any older. He said, "No problem, we can have a child." I asked him why he was so cooperative—he never wanted one with me before, and he already had two grown sons. "This experience has changed my life," he said. "I want you to stay with me, and if that's what makes you happy, that's what I want."

We also made plans about living abroad, buying our own boat, sailing the Greek islands, for example, then selling the boat and moving on. When we needed money, I could work as a secretarial temp, and he could deliver boats or work on them. We talked about moving to Long Island because I have a house there paid for by my father, and that's where we could build our dream boat or open a restaurant, since we both liked to cook.

Later the first day, when the huge waves started up, we stopped dreaming and got serious about survival. Some rollers were about 16 feet high and came

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the canned food in the cabinet. He stuffed fishing gear and his sextant box in a duffel bag. I got into the raft, and in the rush forgot the bag with the flares. We also took the little radio, but it only had a battery lasting less than two hours. Once we were in the raft, we pushed away in the dark. The waves weren't too high, so we could see the boat lights for a long time, watching the outline slowly recede.

Neither of us could believe the boat had sunk, that all this was happening to us. And we couldn't believe we were in the raft. It only happens in storybooks, to other people. "This is the worst luck anybody could have," Nick said. He was

stunned. I was shocked, too, but he took it much harder. He knew a lot about the technical side of sailing, and now here he was, in a rubber dinghy, maybe thinking I wouldn't be much help surviving.

The rest of the night we were very cold, exposed to the wind and salt spray, our teeth chattering. Nick was worried our chills would lead to hypothermia. To make things worse, there were pinholes in the bottom of the raft, causing enough seepage to keep us sitting permanently in two or three inches of seawater no matter how much we bailed. We huddled under one of those lightweight Space Blankets to keep each other warm.

If Nick had been a novice, we would have died that first night. He knew just what to do. But I did think it was ironic that he knew so much and yet we lost



"We rationed water," says Culver. "We watched each other like hawks, to make sure the other didn't cheat."



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in sets of two or three. We hung on, keeping the dinghy balanced, confident we wouldn't capsize. We ate cold cuts, drank 7 Up, and Nick started on the saltine crackers and peanuts. I didn't touch them, because I thought the salt would just make me more thirsty.

Every time a big wave would hit us and we had to bail, we would reward ourselves with a sip of 7 Up, and after that

ran out, Coke. The big storm lasted three days, then the sun broke through. Even though we were rubbed raw from the salt-water and chafing against the rubber bottom and sides, we felt playful. Then a rogue wave knocked the raft right over, capsized us. I dove underneath, and we somehow righted it and climbed back in. We lost everything that wasn't tied to the sides—nothing that vital, except a half-filled Coke bottle. The swim was refreshing. We thought we were in the Gulf Stream since the water was so warm. In the coming days before our strength went, we stripped and skinny-dipped a few more times.

From the start, Nick blamed himself for getting us into this predicament. At one point he said, "Maybe I can use the oars to row us west into a shipping lane,"

and he was serious. He thought a lane was about 60 miles west of us. Those first days, he also went on about how the Coast Guard would soon start a search operation. "One way or another," he said, "we'll be found." I told him those were false, unrealistic hopes, that we shouldn't count on anything but ourselves.

As the hot, sunny days drifted past, Nick started complaining about his sores. Up until then it was mostly sunburn we worried about—mainly our faces and arms. It could have been worse, but we had those cloudy days, which must have cut down the burn. However, Nick's

**Abbot stripped, then leapt overboard, saying, "I don't know if I'm coming back." Minutes later, his body sank.**





sores from sitting constantly in saltwater were pretty awful. With all that saltwater and our feet and rear ends always wet, healing was impossible. Just touching anything was painful. I hated getting near that sextant box because it had sharp edges, and in that little space it was so easy to bump against it. In more ways than one, the box was a sore point between us. I remember we were always moving around, day and night, trying to find a comfortable position. "We're trapped," he said. "That's the horrible part. There's no comfortable spot."

I did my share of complaining, but not like Nick. The relationship was shifting. "On the boat, you were always intimidating me," I told him. "But no more. This is a life-and-death matter—and I'm not letting you do that to me. I didn't want you to start the motor and you did. I wanted to collect water in the sextant box, and you talked me out of it."

"Maybe I should have listened to you," he said. "Looks like your instincts are better than mine."

I could see Nick was changing his attitude. "I always wondered what it would be like stuck in a raft with another person," he said. "Well, if I had to choose someone to be here with, I'd pick you. You're really a strong woman."

I think he learned to respect me. On the boat I was a wimp, but in the raft I was this strong woman. Eventually he even said, "Janet, you'd make a great sailor."

We ran low on food, but there were fish all around us, including sharks, dolphins and a whale who swam near us for a couple of days. Nick made a spear gun. Using a heavy nylon line, he fastened a straightened fishing hook to half an oar. The first time he tried it he got us a fish about the size of a flounder. That was the first food I'd eaten in five or six days. Then he tried making a harpoon, but that didn't work so well. He stuck a dorado, but it got away.

After more failed attempts at spearing fish, Nick grew weaker and disillusioned with his efforts. He was deteriorating fast. His hands were bloody from the harpoon, and we couldn't even sit next to each other because we were so tender and sore. We cut the Space Blanket in half to cover ourselves at night. I felt sorry for Nick,

tried to cheer him up and nurture him without touching.

After about eight or nine days on the raft, we ran out of water and were forced to drink our own urine. It sounds awful now, but in those circumstances you do what's necessary to stay alive. The one thing we didn't do was drink seawater because I had read somewhere

my life," he said. "I'm going to fall asleep and just die in a peaceful sleep."

I told him to be more aggressive, to endure the suffering a while longer. But he must have known he was going to take his life because we did a housecleaning in the afternoon, throwing into the water mostly useless things like ruined batteries and the radio that didn't work. When he



"He was gone," Culver says, "and I was all alone."

that was worse for the body than urine.

On the 10th day, Nick started acting peculiar. All day he looked preoccupied, kept putting his head in the water, looking at the fish under the raft. He told me to try it, to keep my eyes open. He was very enthusiastic, and I was glad to see he was happy about something. Then he complained about his sores and about how no one was going to pick us up. We'd already seen a few faraway tankers and one sailboat, and nothing had happened. So I scolded him a few times, telling him to stick it out. We talked about suicide, and I didn't dismiss it as a possibility, even for myself. But I thought I'd have to be more desperate to do that. He looked delirious, maybe even slightly deranged. I wasn't much better, though I still had my senses.

"I'm just going to let the elements take

tossed his sextant and wristwatch overboard, I knew he was really discouraged. Then about 6, Nick took off all his clothes, as if he were going for a nighttime swim. "Life isn't worth living like this," he said. "I'm so sore and thirsty that I can't go on. There's no point." Then he just slipped over the side and swam around the raft. I thought of giving him the same old logic about fighting on, but I'd said it all before. He swam far away, and I heard him choke a few times. Then he slumped over, and I saw his shoulders and the back of his head. After a while I couldn't see him anymore.

I didn't feel anything then, and I don't feel anything now. I remember at the beginning when we first got into the raft, I told him, "Please, I don't want you to leave me alone. Stay with me, always tie





After all she had been through, when the crew of *Geronimo* plucked her from the sea, Culver's first request was for an orange.

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yourself to the raft with a lifeline." But as the days went by, it just didn't matter as much anymore. I guess I was just concerned with my own survival, even though we took care of each other till the end. I'm sure when I get back to a normal life, when I see his things in my apartment, I'll start crying plenty. I'll miss him. I know I'll miss him.

I think he lost his resolve, almost as if he didn't want to face the responsibility of losing the boat, though I never blamed him for that. It's all so sad. I loved him on and off. It wasn't easy, because I don't think he returned my love as much as I would have liked. Love is a two-way street, and with us love just wasn't mutual. I told him this, and he said he wasn't capable of giving any more. Maybe he tried, but it really wasn't working. At least he

taught me to not be intimidated when I think I'm right and to trust my instincts.

That evening a tanker passed close to me, but I had no way of signaling in the dark. I waited out the night and the next day, thinking it might rain, which it did on the second day without Nick. Before the shower passed over, I collected rainwater in the Space Blanket and funneled it into the jug. I drank a lot and saved the rest. My sores were really getting bad, all open and swollen and very painful. I used to be strong, 5'5" and 130-some pounds. Now I was this puny, bony creature slumped at one end of the raft, wishing a fish would jump in.

Amazingly, on the fourth day by myself, a fish did jump in. I grabbed it, picked up the knife and cut off the dorsal fin and tail. I was so involved scraping the scales off that I almost missed seeing a big sailboat passing by about a quarter of a mile away. I stuck the fish in my pocket,

then started waving the orange life jacket above my head. They saw me and headed straight for the raft.

Here in the hospital, where my skin has fallen off in big patches and where I've had skin grafts on my feet and buttocks, I've relived those days in the dinghy many times. I've often thought of something Nick and I talked about before he died. We weren't religious, but we did discuss near-death experiences. Some people who've gone through this say they've been bathed in a warm, white light, like a spirit world. I told Nick, "Maybe we should make a bargain with the warm, white light—that if we were saved, if we ever come back from the other side, we would devote part of our life on this earth to helping others." Well, I think I've returned from something near the other side, and as soon as I'm well I'll try to keep that bargain. If Nick Abbot were alive, he would have done it too. □