BY GREGORY JAYNES

Citizens of the World

With a 20-knot wind coming straight up their nose, Michel and Janis Couvreux and their boys, Sean, 10, and Brendan, seven, were on their 40-foot ketch tacking out of Cuba. They were eastbound for Martinique, but it was miserable sailing. In such conditions everything gets wet and you have to batten down. You start, you stop, start, stop—that's tacking. One day you make 100 miles, the next day 20. Three days of this and Michel lashed the steering to the wind vane. It was no good trying to sail due east, so he set his vessel to stay fixed at the same angle to the wind, in this case keeping the wind blowing at them at a three-quarter angle off the port bow. That sent them southerly. As Michel recollects it: "I said, 'O.K., boat, go where you want,' and in three days we were here."

He told me this in a leafy plaza in the town of Willemstad on the island of Curaçao in the Netherlands Antilles, where we were drinking Dutch beer and listening to Julio Iglesias, who is more ubiquitous in the world than McDonald's, I think. The last time we had been together was three years ago, and a couple of months after that Michel had dropped dead. He was working at an architectural firm in Florida, and he was on his way from his desk to the office library to fetch a book, and that was all he ever knew. He just collapsed and died, no time even to clutch himself and look stricken. Then a colleague who knew CPR fell upon his chest and kept the blood coursing through his veins—and his brain—for the six minutes it took the ambulance people to get there and jump-start his heart.

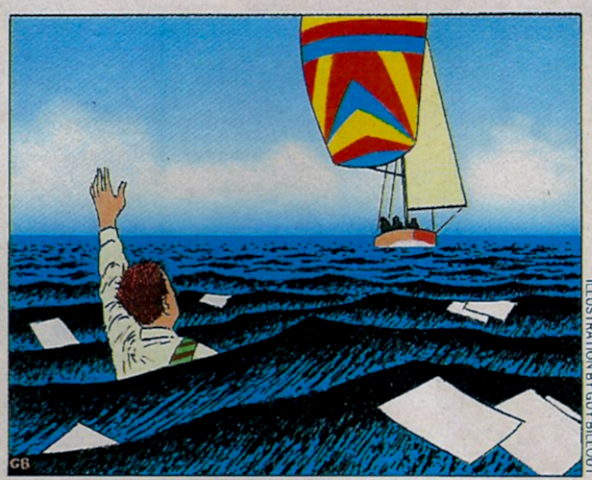

ILLUSTRATION BY GUY BILLOUT

People ask him now whether he saw or heard anything during his layover in the hereafter, and he says no, nothing. "If I could say God told me to go back on land and build a church, I could be a rich man, but no," says Michel, absently touching the top of the angry red scar that runs down his breastplate.

We sat there near the ramparts, catching the trade winds. At times my 40-year-old companion, the sailor, tramp, vagabond, scamp, can look more like a man at peace than anyone I know, and this was one of those times. Out on the horizon open boats from Venezuela sliced the sea. Curaçao can manage enough moisture to nurture frangipani, bougainvillea, flame trees, oleander and two-story high scheffleras, but it's never wet enough to raise an edible crop. The fruits and vegetables have to come from Venezuela, whence came these old workboats to anchor by the seawall and offer oranges, bananas, avocados, onions, peppers—the lot.

In a while Michel said, "The day you have to die you should do it my way. No pain. It's a wonderful way to die. But it is terrible for your family."

The Couvreux family and ketch were moored near the Florida town of Melbourne when Michel's chest blew up. Janis got the word when she placed a routine call to her husband's office from a pay phone in a K mart parking lot. It was three months before he was adjudged recovered from what even the physicians called "sudden death." Now there's a defibrillator riding silently in his chest against the day his heart's electrical system decides to go blooey again. "I think my body was telling me to stay on my boat and sail around the world," Michel says.

It is not an ambition that is new to these people. They have been under sail more or less since 1982. They bought the boat in France in 1979. That was the year Sean was born and also the year Michel decided he was a contented architect but a bitter businessman. Till then their lives had been led normally. He had met Janis at the Université de Bordeaux in 1974, her junior year away from her home in California. Five years later they were married parents living in a conventional French house and Michel had his own architectural firm. The boat seemed a good way to salve the chafing Michel was suffering from work. Instead it led to the notion of chucking it all and sailing away. They saved for three years and set off from France with $20,000, their sons and the biggest case of wanderlust ever visited upon humankind. They went to Spain and Portugal, and then Africa seemed the ticket, and then it seemed nothing to cross the Atlantic to Rio. Then slowly up the eastern coast of South America and through the Caribbean to Florida where, out of funds, it was time to return to work. That was the summer of 1986.

The heart attack felled Michel seven months later. Last November, with $25,000 in savings and an even stronger seize-the-day resolve than they had possessed before, the family Couvreux once more slipped the surly bonds of employment and sailed away. How typical of them to have given the boat its head, so to speak, in the face of a nasty wind off Martinique and to have let serendipity chart the course to Curaçao. They had intended to stay a week. When I looked in on them, they had been there four months.

They are anchored in an emerald bay near an establishment called Sarifundy's Marina. Mornings are spent schooling the boys; they take correspondence courses from a Baltimore concern. After lunch the young ones have the run of the bay; a dinghy with an outboard makes a wonderful toy. Sean doesn't remember living on land, though he did, in France. When I drove the family into Willemstad for lunch one day, I asked Janis if I could give the boys some money and send them off to the ice cream parlor while the adults lolled behind. "Uh, they're not too hot on land," she said. "They're O.K. in the dinghy, looking out for other boats, but they're not too good with cars." We held their hands to the store.

Other than academe, and maintenance on the boat, the days slide away pretty much unplanned for this family. They read and play and cook and explore. I know enough not to press them on the future, but I discreetly inquire nonetheless. They may be in Costa Rica by Christmas. By Christmas 1990, they had better look at the purse and think about work. The boys probably will go to high school in California, near Janis's parents. Michel thinks thinking too much about tomorrow destroys today. No, he is not depressed by the bad turn in his health. He is a happy man. He will die a happy man. Hell, he already did, once. ▭

Seven years before the mast and still the family sails on