

# **Adrift: Seventy-Six Days Lost at Sea Study Guide**

**Adrift: Seventy-Six Days Lost at Sea by Steven  
Callahan**

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# Plot Summary

In *Adrift*, Steven Callahan is returning across the Atlantic in the boat he's designed, the *Napoleon Solo*. His ship is wrecked, and Callahan finds himself alone on the Atlantic Ocean with only a life raft and a limited amount of supplies. He battles hunger and fatigue, fighting his own impulses and stretching out his limited resources, hoping they are enough. After seventy-six days of man against nature, he is rescued.

As the book begins, Steven Callahan has just achieved his lifelong dream of crossing the Atlantic. He plans a return trip by entering his prototype vessel, the *Napoleon Solo*, into the Mini-Transat, a 600-mile transatlantic solos race from Penzance to the Canary Isles. However, *Solo* is damaged in gale-force winds and must stop for repairs. The race is lost. The *Napoleon Solo* is dry docked in Spain for two months. Callahan, growing impatient, lifts anchor in late January. Alone and sailing once more, he is bound for the Canary Isles.

Once again, the tiny *Napoleon Solo* runs afoul of weather. This time it does not survive. Callahan is set adrift in a life raft. After a frantic effort to salvage gear from his rapidly sinking vessel, Callahan bids farewell to his beloved ship and tries to adjust to his new context. Having meager reserves of food and water, Callahan quickly learns to fish for dorado with his spear gun and to desalinate seawater with solar stills.

Despite Callahan's best efforts, his body begins to deteriorate. His limbs atrophy. The saltwater eats away at his flesh. His diet of fish lacks important nutrients. Callahan fails to attract the attention of several passing vessels, but somehow manages to maintain morale, often slipping into daydreams. Callahan's equipment begins to fail, forcing him to jury-rig a repair for his spear gun. As time passes, Callahan becomes weaker and more dejected.

A thrashing fish inflicts near-catastrophic damage on the life raft. On the verge of panic, Callahan tries one temporary solution after another. Finally, after several soggy days of living in a waterlogged raft, Callahan repairs the breach with a spectacular feat of ingenuity. Though covered in crusty sores and exhausted by his ordeal, Callahan is once more optimistic. The waters have grown warm.

The heat has become oppressive. Callahan is continually fighting with unreliable solar stills. Often he is forced to choose between salt-tainted water or rainwater poisoned by contact with the raft's canopy. Callahan believes he is now over the continental shelf, but even as he watches for signs of land, his mind and body continue to degrade. Finally, the last solar still fails, forcing Callahan to rely on rain. Callahan's time is running short.

Late in April, Callahan spots land. The next day, after seventy-six days adrift, he is rescued by three fishermen. After convalescing in Marie Galante, the smallest island of Guadeloupe, he eventually returns to Maine. Many years later, Callahan writes of his ordeal and dedicates his life to helping those who have undergone similarly traumatic

trials. Callahan's experience, lost and alone on the Atlantic, has taught him that a man's life is measured by the extent to which he shares it with others.



# Introduction and Log of Napoleon Solo

## Introduction and Log of Napoleon Solo Summary and Analysis

In *Adrift*, Steven Callahan is returning across the Atlantic in the boat he's designed, the *Napoleon Solo*. His ship is wrecked, and Callahan finds himself alone on the Atlantic Ocean with only a life raft and a limited amount of supplies. He battles hunger and fatigue, fighting his own impulses and stretching out his limited resources, hoping they are enough. After seventy-six days of man against nature, he is rescued.

The book begins with a short introduction. Callahan talks of how a childhood reading of *Tinkerbell* launched his lifelong dream of crossing the Atlantic in a small boat. Driven by this dream, Callahan became a sailor and ship designer, eventually designing his own small, masterwork ship: *The Napoleon Solo*. To prove himself and his design, Callahan enters his ship into a 600-mile transatlantic solo race called the Mini-Transat. Hoping to have his dream understood, Callahan decides to record everything for posterity. In his first entry, he describes sailing as something akin to a religious calling.

The first chapter, "Log of the *Napoleon Solo*," begins with Callahan and friend Chris sailing the *Napoleon Solo* dangerously close to the fog-shrouded Scilly Isles on their way to the port of Penzance. Proud of his boat, Callahan basks in the completion of his life's ambition. Chris and Callahan part ways as Callahan mentally prepares himself for the challenge of the Mini-Transat. Autumn storms rage in the Atlantic. An old sailor, Mr. Willoughby, rattled by the recent death of a sailor, tries to convince Callahan that sailing is "bad business," but Callahan isn't dissuaded from entering the contest.

The race might be delayed. The weather is windy and likely to worsen. There is much argument between racers and their supporters as they debate the wisdom of sailing against gale-force winds. Nevertheless, the race commences and Callahan's apprehension vanishes at the helm. *Napoleon Solo* quickly takes the lead. After a rough night, morning brings calm. Callahan sails by an Italian vessel which appears to be foundering. The boat doesn't respond to hails. Later Callahan would learn that the boat had sunk, the sailor rescued. On the third day a passing freighter informs him that all but four of his competitors are behind him.

Callahan decides that, rather than striking out to sea, he will try to squeak past the Finisterre, risking being pushed into the notorious Bay of Biscay. Unfortunately the weather worsens. The *Napoleon Solo* is soon leaping across ten-foot waves. The pounding and the wind is deafening. Hoping to grab some sleep, Callahan wakes to find the boat taking on water. He quickly takes down the sails and shores up the breach. Callahan slowly makes his way to the coast of Spain, where he discovers that seven other racers are similarly stricken. For Callahan, the race is over.



It is another month before the Napoleon Solo is again seaworthy, and another month still before the weather is clear enough to sail. Through fog and freighter traffic, the small boat sails into Portugal. For a time, Callahan takes on a crew member, a beautiful Frenchwoman named Catherine, but the two part ways in Tenerife. Wherever he sails, the locals are amazed that he's come so far in such a little boat. Callahan considers mooring the ship and spending some time shoreside, but the sea calls to him. On January 29th Callahan sets sail from the Canaries, bound to the Caribbean.



# Nerves Exposed

## Nerves Exposed Summary and Analysis

Alone and sailing once more, Callahan is content. He spends his time leisurely aboard the Napoleon Solo reading, writing, and exercising. Callahan hopes to reach his destination before February 25th, but the fourth brings poor weather, with choppy waves often spraying the deck. Callahan nevertheless remains in high spirits. The waves worsen with nightfall, setting Callahan's mind to thoughts of storm maneuvers. He is confident that the Napoleon Solo will be equal to the challenge. A week into the storm, Callahan worries about the possibility of a "rogue wave" tossing his small ship down a liquid avalanche. The sea, Callahan recalls, is dangerously capricious.

Worried by the worsening storm, Callahan does a quick inspection of Napoleon Solo. Convinced that there is nothing more he can do to prepare, he lies down to sleep. Suddenly he is awoken by a loud bang. He leaps out of bed as water rushes in waist deep. Half-panicked, Callahan fights the water to make his way up to the deck, where he struggles to release the life raft. Shivering with cold and dread, Callahan refuses to panic. Training and instinct take over. Seeing, with considerable pride, that his damaged vessel is reluctant to sink, Callahan resolves to gather supplies before his boat goes down for the last time. He rips off a portion of the ship's main sail.

Braving the icy water, Callahan swims below deck to recover his emergency bag and other supplies. Finally exhausted, having recovered as much as he is able, Callahan returns to the upper deck, where he battles crushing waves to finally enter the life raft. Plagued with guilt and loss, Callahan ponders all the supplies he didn't have a chance to recover. He is 450 miles north of Cape Verde, in some of the emptiest waters of the Atlantic. Listening to the squawk and scream of his life-raft, he wonders how long it will last.

The Napoleon Solo's electrics have fused together. Only the strobe light atop its mast continues to blink. The raft is drifting away from the ship, the rope tying the raft to the boat somehow having come undone. Callahan watches as the Napoleon Solo's strobe light slowly disappears in the gloom. Afflicted with freezing cold and growing depression, Callahan has lost every layer of protection, both mental and physical, his nerves now exposed.



# The Witch and Her Curse: Hunger and Thirst

## The Witch and Her Curse: Hunger and Thirst Summary and Analysis

Callahan surveys his new vessel, a six-man raft made of black Dacron-reinforced rubber tubes, held together with glue. Beneath the tent-like canopy, there is scarcely enough room for Callahan to sit upright, let alone stretch himself out to his full length. As the waves crash against the raft, Callahan busily shifts across the sagging floor, bailing out seawater with a coffee can. Still terrified that the craft will capsize, his efforts soon lead to exhaustion. He drifts in and out of consciousness as night slowly gives way to day.

Though grateful to have survived the night, the morning brings no relief to Callahan. Gale-force winds continue to hammer the raft. Callahan switches on the EPIRB beacon. He recalls stories of survivors stranded at sea. At least one group was rescued thanks to their EPIRB. Most were not. In some cases, survivors spent several months at sea before being rescued. Callahan is grateful that he will benefit from the unfortunate experiences of others, but fears that skill and determination might not be enough. He hopes to be rescued within twenty days.

Unable to see the sky from inside the raft's canopy, Callahan is often convinced that he hears aircraft overhead. He habitually turns on the EPIRB, draining precious hours from the battery. On February 6th, Callahan celebrates his birthday with a can of peanuts. As time passes, the saltwater has taken its toll; Callahan's body is covered with boils and sores. Fearful of the freezing water leaking into the raft, Callahan agonizingly works to seal several small holes in the floor. After several hours of work, his improvised solution gives him time enough to dry out and heal.

Callahan takes inventory, concluding that he is likely better prepared than most sailors. He had the good fortune to pack a speargun as well as Dougal Robertson's book on sea survival. Callahan begins taking notes, tracking both his situation on the raft and his own mental and physical health. While calculating his odds of survival based on varying factors, desperation threatens. Callahan successfully distracts himself with jokes and daydreams, but is mindful to remain focused. He takes comfort in knowing that, even if he does not survive, his writings might still be found.

Callahan ponders the great ocean currents. He follows one of the slowest: the North Equatorial, traveling to the Caribbean. Seeing that his present speed will require an unreasonable twenty-two days to reach the shipping lanes, he raises the raft's underwater "sea anchor," thus increasing his risk of capsize. With the anchor lifted, the raft's speed increases three-fold. Callahan's thoughts turn to his lost boat, and what he might have done better to save it.





The solar stills prove troublesome. One repeatedly deflates and the other is often contaminated by seawater. Finally Callahan thinks to work the stills aboard the raft rather than floating on the ocean. Water production increases dramatically. After several failed attempts to fish with the speargun, and a few close brushes with sharks, Callahan lands a triggerfish. His hunger overwhelming him, Callahan is relieved and emotional. He weeps for the fallen fish. He weeps for himself.



# Dream Keep

## Dream Keep Summary and Analysis

The triggerfish proves difficult to clean and provides little sustenance. Callahan is torn between desires. Stronger wind would mean faster travel, but calmer weather would mean better fishing and water collection. Dorado dolphinfish continually bump and slam the underside of the raft, annoying Callahan and interrupting his rest. Nearly by accident, Callahan spears and lands a large dorado. After killing and cleaning the fish, Callahan discovers that he has earned an enemy: the fish's widowed mate now batters the craft. Callahan is ridden with guilt even as he is thankful for the food.

Things are looking up. Fifteen pounds of dorado meat now hang down from the inside of the canopy and the solar still is producing water in adequate amounts. Callahan's survival momentarily assured, he takes a much needed rest, escaping to imaginary worlds comprised of hope and memory. Harsh reality intrudes, however, when Callahan must fend off a shark attack in the dead of night. Near dawn, he fires several flares to signal a passing ship, but is not seen. Feeling helpless, Callahan is plagued with difficult choices; every choice he makes puts something else at risk. As the dorado continue to batter his craft, Callahan refines his spearing technique, landing two more of the large fish.

Callahan considers his dietary requirements, reasoning that herbivore fish would yield more vitamins than the high-protein Dorado. He tries to appreciate the natural beauty around him, but apprehension sours his spirit. Callahan achieves a stoic equilibrium by recalling memories of a conversation with his mother. One day, a shower breaks the afternoon heat and he enjoys a crunchy soup of barnacles and rainwater, finishing off the meal with the last of his raisins. Though sated, Callahan feels the effects of malnutrition.

Callahan is so distracted by memories that he nearly misses a freighter passing improbably close to his raft. Callahan fires a flare, screams and waves frantically, but all to no avail. The freighter has no one on deck. The ship disappears in the distance, leaving Callahan bitterly disappointed. His thoughts turn to matters of romance, agreeing with the idea that he is, as Catherine often proclaimed, a "hard man." His fierce independence coupled with scars of past loves make it difficult for Callahan to soften to a woman. Hungry once more, his attention returns to matters of the stomach. Callahan lands an egg-filled triggerfish and is revived by the nutrients it provides. A third ship passes by, heedless of Callahan's flare.

February 26th, Callahan's 22nd day adrift, finds the sun out and the raft moving at a good pace. Callahan is feeling well enough as he busily cleans a dorado, wasting nothing of the fish. Without warning, Callahan is suddenly overcome by heatstroke, only to be (just as suddenly) revived when a rogue wave nearly capsizes the raft. Callahan returns to his routine as the winds begin to rise. As the weather continues to worsen, he

spies a distant ship pointed northbound, likely headed from South Africa to New York. After nearly a month adrift, Callahan has reached the lanes.



# To Weave a World

## To Weave a World Summary and Analysis

Callahan wakes from a dream of rescue to a night of crashing waves. He recognizes dreams as another reality, but acknowledges that dreams are still dependent on his survival in the physical world. Callahan is starved and desperate. His equipment is deteriorating; the power strap from the harpoon gun falls loose and sinks below the waves. Using ropes and knots, Callahan jury-rigs a fix for the spear gun. It works, but the tool's functionality is impaired. Where once Callahan relied on the elastic power of the muscle strap, he must now depend on raw muscle. He successfully lands a large dorado with this method, but nearly loses the fish after a particularly nasty brawl.

The raft doesn't hold air as well as it did at the beginning of the journey. Sixty pumps have become three-hundred. As Callahan struggles with the problematic solar stills, he can't help but appreciate how much better suited the local birdlife is to life on the sea. Worried about the health of his digestive tract, Callahan begins performing yoga to encourage a bowel movement. Days later, his apprehension is relieved by a small amount of diarrhea. Callahan considers his navigation. He is confident that he has reached the lanes, but fears he may have passed them.

Overheated in the noontime sun, Callahan struggles to remain cool and conscious. With scorching days and freezing nights, only dawn and dusk give him relief. Looking over his calculations, Callahan reasons that his friends and family will soon mark his absence. Each night Callahan dreams of the food that his body lacks. He marvels at the perceived wants and needs of his former life, admiring the simple beauty of the natural world in which he now lives. Callahan nevertheless yearns for rescue.

Callahan is treated to a sudden rainfall, complete with rainbows. He scrambles to collect water. The days that follow bring worsening weather. On March 8th, rough seas cause two more near-capsizes. Each time Callahan battles frustration and despair before again bailing out the raft. Disgusted, he finally declares an absolute hatred for every facet of his lifestyle adrift. The gale persists for several days, but Callahan, though miserable, manages to land some fish.

By March 13th, the winds have died down, but Callahan is in low spirits. He strains to complete his yoga exercises, determined to remain strong. Fishing is slow and agonizing, but Callahan finds the will to catch some food. Before he can even hang his newly won meat, the raft is struck by a large wave, damaging the better functioning solar still. Realizing that his survival depends on fresh water, Callahan puzzles over how to plug the still's leak, but fails to manage an effective solution.

Despite Callahan's best efforts, the bottom of the older solar still rots clean through. He has better luck with the newer still, however, improving both its efficiency and reliability. Callahan also mounts the Tupperware container to the top of the canopy, thus improving



his rainwater catchment. On March 18th, Callahan successfully shoots a large, male dorado with a lucky shot. Unfortunately he isn't able to bring it aboard. The dead fish slips from his spear, sinking down into the black depths.



# Cries and Whispers

## Cries and Whispers Summary and Analysis

Unbeknownst to Callahan, his family has noted his absence and now struggles with an uncooperative coast guard in an attempt to locate him. Callahan wakes on the morning of March 19th, well rested but still mourning the lost dorado from the day before. He sees the tragic waste of life and food as a bad omen. Preparing to fish, Callahan reinforces his now cracked speargun with loops of rope. Despite this precaution, the next dorado snaps off the spear casing and the spearhead along with it. In its thrashings, the fish rips open a gaping, four-inch hole in the lower tube of the raft. Callahan is shocked and dismayed as the lower tube deflates.

The lower half of the raft sinks into the water. Callahan frantically plugs the breach with a piece of foam. Forcibly pulling the tear into a pucker around the foam, he winds rope around the plug. Unfortunately the raft will not stay inflated - the seal isn't tight enough. Fighting panic, Callahan considers the resources at his disposal. He works into the night, flashlight affixed to his head, fending off attacks from marine life. Callahan deflates the lower tube and pulls the rubbery mass into a tighter pucker. It doesn't work. The raft still won't hold air. Callahan falls into an exhausted, soggy sleep.

The next morning, March 20th, Callahan is forced to fend off a loitering shark before resuming his work on the breach. Callahan jury-rigs a patch with the foam plug, several rope anchors, and two tourniquets. The lower tube still loses air, but at a much slower pace. Callahan improvises a new tip for his spear using a butter knife, but doubts it will prove very effective. He tries line-fishing, but catches only poisonous puffer fish. Callahan finally locates food in some passing Sargasso weed, dining on tiny crabs and fish eggs. He notes the presence of new wildlife in his vicinity.

As Callahan works to keep the lower tube inflated, he wonders how close he is to the continental shelf. Should he risk turning on the EPIRB? He woefully decides that he is still several days from the shelf. That night he spears a sleepy triggerfish, bending his spear-tip in the process. Frustrated, Callahan strengthens the head by adding a leather knife alongside the butter knife. Before he can test it, the patch on the lower tube comes loose. Air-pressure is forcing the line to roll off the puckered seal. With the solar still failing as well, Callahan spends a wet and thirsty night in the flooded raft. A loitering shark swims nearby, denying him sleep as well.

Callahan spends days sitting in saltwater. He is covered with boils and sores. Callahan's need for sleep contradicts his need for food, water, and shelter. He is exhausted, functioning entirely on instinct. The latest patch holds well enough to allow for fishing. Laying down sailcloth to protect the raft from further damage, Callahan's successfully lands a dorado with his improvised spear. Eating the fish, he is restored. With nightfall, the weather turns foul.



Waves crash against the raft. The foam plug shoots from the breach. Callahan frantically works to sew the plug back into the hole, but hours later it comes loose again. The drying stores of meat sag down to the flooded floor, turning rancid with moisture. Now on the verge of panic, Callahan works to plug the leak, only to have it repeatedly blow open as he tries to inflate the lower tube. Drowning in despair, Callahan succumbs to delirium.



# Twice to Hell and Back

## Twice to Hell and Back Summary and Analysis

Callahan rallies himself, pulling back from the brink of oblivion. He forces himself to think rationally. Suddenly, the solution occurs to him: the fork! Flush with adrenaline, Callahan waits in the darkness for dawn's approach. With light enough to see, he begins work on a new seal. This time he uses the fork as crossbeam to keep the ropes from rolling off the puckered seal. After a day's worth of refinements, the lower tube effectively holds air. Callahan collapses with exhaustion, but is elated at his success.

Callahan banishes doubt from his mind, determined to survive. Nevertheless, water and food supplies are low and Callahan's health is fragile. His mental health is precarious as well, his identity shattered into three parts: the rational, the emotional, and the physical. When the sun beats down, Callahan drapes his sleeping bag atop the canopy. This dries out the bag as it helps to keep the interior cool. The solar still requires constant attention to function properly. Despite his weariness, Callahan is able to land two dorado and also manages to harvest some food from passing Sargasso weed.

Rainfall replenishes Callahan's water supply. A flying fish jumps into the raft. Callahan tries line-fishing dorados using an improvised lure made from the remnants of a flying fish. This proves futile, leaving him to conclude that he must continue using the spear gun. Now well past the lanes and still eighteen days from Antigua, Callahan tries to compensate for his dwindling resources by carefully planning for every eventuality. That evening he lands yet another dorado and eats by green Lumalight. Callahan accidentally punches a hole in the floor, but repairs it almost as an afterthought.

Callahan is growing confident. The waters have turned warm; the danger of hypothermia has passed. Light showers are now common. No longer fearing the cold, Callahan converts his space blanket into a water catchment cape. New fish and bird species are apparent, reinforcing the notion that Callahan is moving into warmer climes, potentially closer to land. As March draws to a close, Callahan strains to see land on the horizon, taking care not to mistake a static cloud for a distant mountain range.

The still keeps slumping over, forcing Callahan to blow it up every ten or fifteen minutes. The distillate is increasingly polluted with saltwater. A light rain falls, giving Callahan the opportunity to test his water-catchment cape. The results are less than ideal. Water from the cape is polluted with foul-tasting orange particles flaked from the canopy. Desperately thirsty, Callahan creates a disgusting concoction of tainted rainwater and salty distillate. Holding his nose, he drinks it down, the liquid burning his throat. Later that night he wakes with sweat, fever and nausea. Much to Callahan's horror, he has poisoned himself.





# Road of Trash

## Road of Trash Summary and Analysis

Desperate to avoid losing precious fluids by vomiting, Callahan drinks much of his reserve water. The gambit works. The nausea subsides and Callahan sleeps. The next morning, despite his continued weakness, he manages to catch a triggerfish. The meal gives him the strength to carry on. Callahan scrapes some sticky gum from the degrading remnants of his repair tape. He uses the substance to plug the hole in his solar still. The fix works perfectly. The solar still remains inflated. Nevertheless, Callahan prepares for the patch's eventual failure. He reasons that he might eventually have to hydrate himself with a saltwater enema.

Callahan creates a makeshift sextant by lashing together pencils. Navigating by the stars, he plots his likely course. If he drifts 18 degrees latitude, he will have to last another thirty days until he reaches the Bahamas. He aims for 17 degrees latitude, hoping to reach Guadeloupe, the eastern most island in the West Indies group. Lacking the necessary navigation equipment, Callahan must estimate the longitude to the best of his ability. Nature proves uncooperative. Unpredictable winds push the raft in a virtual circle. Callahan loses precious time.

The next day, on the morning of April 3rd, Callahan estimates that the raft is back on course. The patch begins leaking, however, forcing Callahan to pump air into the lower tube every thirty minutes. He tries tightening the tourniquet located just below the breach, but the rope snaps. Undaunted, Callahan loops stronger cord around the pucker and pulls it taught into a new tourniquet. It works. Surprisingly, the lower tube now holds water better than the upper tube.

As Callahan swiftly lands, kills, and cleans a dorado, he can't help but feel saddened at the loss of another companion. He sees the creatures as ennobled by their sheer simplicity. Callahan once thought of his own instincts as being necessary for the survival of his higher functions. Now he realizes that it is the other way around. It is his higher functions, his reason, which allows him to survive. Callahan survives, however, for the sake of his instincts, his desire for companionship, comfort and play. Yearning for the simplicity of his prey, Callahan sees that his spearhead is damaged yet again. The leather knife has snapped off, leaving only the flimsy butter knife to serve.

Hoping to improve his water catchment, Callahan improvises a funnel using a length of tubing, part of the space blanket, and some twine. He sets his "kite", meanwhile, to deflect tainted rainwater drained from the canopy. The result is mostly a success. Water drains down the tube into the Tupperware box. Callahan gathers two and a half pints of mostly-untainted water, greatly improving his morale.

Callahan spots a ship in the distance, but it is too far away to signal, particularly since the flare gun has become a frozen lump of rust. He expects water traffic to increase as



he approaches the belt between Brazil and Florida. Once Callahan reaches the continental shelf, his rescue is assured. Meanwhile, back home, Callahan's family, themselves experienced sailors, work tirelessly to locate him. One of their prediction models places Callahan just one hundred miles from his current location. The coast guard, however, continues to prove uncooperative. Few people are willing to believe that Callahan still lives.

It is April 4th. Callahan is exhausted, his raft encrusted with salt. The hot sun beats down as he works to reinforce his spear tip. Callahan has the strange impression that he is not alone, that a companion sails beside him. There is no more fresh food, and the seas prove too rough for fishing. The heat is oppressive. A fish bites the distillation bag, draining precious water back into the sea. On April 6th Callahan comes on a miles-wide stretch of trash and pollution. He dines on small crabs and shrimp squirreled away in the oceanic dump.



# The Dutchman

## The Dutchman Summary and Analysis

Haunted by thoughts of food and drink, Callahan spends April 8th carefully scanning the horizon for signs of land. Spotting a ship in the distance, he launches a hand flare. The ship is too far away. Callahan figures that his only hope lay in finding his way to the West Indies. Weary of killing, Callahan lands another dorado, proving himself with fresh food. He yearns for his early days adrift, when he was still strong and could afford some measure of leisure time. Callahan warns himself that matters could become worse, but his sore-covered body is already wracked with agony, his spirit in shambles. Despite his heartbreak, his withered body lacks the moisture even to generate tears.

Callahan touches the passing dorado. He imagines that they are seducing him, tempting him to a watery grave. Callahan refuses their advances. He decides that mankind is his tribe and that he wants to live. Looking at his sextant, Callahan worries that he is too far north. He realizes he'll never last another twenty days. April 10th brings a new type of triggerfish and a smaller, more aggressive species of dorado. For the first time since repairing the breach, Callahan struggles through his yoga exercises. Later, he successfully plucks a bird from the top of the canopy. He dines on its flesh, feeling criminal for transgressing upon its beauty.

The new dorados hit harder and more often, but are easier to catch. The weather worsens, tossing the raft about. Callahan struggles remain dry. On April 12th, Callahan marks the anniversary of his former marriage, admitting that it couldn't have been easy to have him as a husband. He recalls the many months he spent apart from Frisha, his then wife, while he was away at sea. She warned Callahan that he would one day perish in the ocean. He morbidly imagines that his ex-wife may one day eat a fish that fed upon his corpse.

Callahan harbors a ravening appetite that fish can longer sate. He imagines that his physical and emotional selves are his crew. They threaten to mutiny. Callahan struggles to maintain control, to maintain discipline. Finding another hole in the solar still, he is dismayed to discover that he is losing his ability to taste salt in the water. Callahan is now over the continental shelf, but isn't certain of distance and direction. His mind and body are slowly unraveling. Parched with thirst, Callahan drinks canopy-tainted water. Now sickened, he reluctantly avoids breaking into the fresh water reserves.

Seeing a jet overhead, Callahan turns on the beacon. Unbeknown to Callahan, the coast guard has mistaken a derelict vessel for the Napoleon Solo. Until Callahan's family investigates and corrects the matter, the Napoleon Solo is no longer listed as missing. By April 16, Callahan has begun to doubt his position, his morale spiraling ever downward. The last solar still is blown, leaving Callahan only with potential rainwater and remaining reserves. In the days that follow, Callahan subsists on birds and dorado.



He also improvises a crude catchment device that lets him slurp up water from the misty air.

By April 20, Callahan has created a very effective rain catcher from the remnants of a solar still and aluminum tubing from the radar reflector. His attention is split between the sky and the horizon, hoping for either land or rainfall. Callahan looks on as distant storms, far from his raft, throw gallons of fresh water into the ocean.



# Death, Life, A Man Alone, and Epilogue

## Death, Life, A Man Alone, and Epilogue Summary and Analysis

On the night of April 20th, Callahan wakes to see a soft glow on the horizon followed by the unmistakable flash of a lighthouse. Land! Overjoyed, Callahan guzzles water in celebration as he ponders the question of which land mass it is that he has found. Anticipating a trialsome landfall, Callahan gets some sleep. When he wakes on the morning of April 21st, his eyes are met by a color other than blue: green! Nearby, just five miles away, are two islands. Callahan anticipates landfall that afternoon, but is worried that he might be dashed against the coral reef.

Callahan turns on the emergency beacon and pads himself with whatever materials he can find. As he plots his approach, hoping for the raft's cooperation, he hears the sound of an engine. A small fishing boat approaches, carrying three mahogany-colored men. Callahan soon learns that he has made his way to Guadeloupe. They ask if he would like to be taken to the island, but Callahan insists that they first do what they came to do. The fishermen throw their hooks into the water and catch most of Callahan's "doggies."

Callahan's procession of fish attracted the fishermen to his position. The fish now die so that Callahan might live. Beginning the chapter "Life," Callahan bids farewell to the remains of his "doggies," recognizing each of them in turn. He is taken to Marie Galante, the smallest island of the chain. Rescued at last, Callahan is filled with the sights, sounds, and smells of civilization. A crowd gathers at the shore, but Callahan's atrophied legs can scarcely support his weight. The reality of his salvation finally sinks in. Callahan is overcome with emotion.

In the chapter "A Man Alone," Callahan is taken to a hospital. He explains his condition to the resident doctor, and is admitted. Callahan insists on solid food, refusing to be fed intravenously. Comfortable at last, Callahan relaxes in a soft, dry bed. He is given antibiotics and sedatives. After answering a battery of official questions and speaking to the American consul, he falls asleep. Upon waking, Callahan is met by a man named Mathias. The man invites Callahan to stay at his hotel.

At the hotel, Callahan calls his parents' house and speaks to his brother. The family has already heard of the rescue, notified by a chain of CB radio contacts. Callahan hopes to delay his parents' visit until he is stronger. A dinner, he gorges himself on Creole food, surprising everyone with his appetite. Later that month, Callahan's parents arrive with a new wardrobe. He gives several interviews to the media.

Callahan is reluctant to rest as he should. His legs swell up, brought on by his high sodium levels. Callahan grows cranky at being disallowed his full freedom. His parents try to convince him to come home with them, but Callahan would rather boat-hitchhike

his way back to Antigua to get his mail, then fly back to Maine. Callahan befriends many of the locals, who often stop by for a visit. He is even seen by a medicine man. After a short bout of stomach cramps brought on by a recent diet of spicy food, Callahan is ready to go on to Guadeloupe, and from there back home.

In the Epilogue, Callahan describes how his experience has changed his life. Where once he was fiercely independent, Callahan now understands man as a social animal. To this end, he hopes to reach out to those in difficulty, to show them the compassion that he himself found in Marie Galante. He at last understands that the worth of a man is measured not in his deeds, but in the quality of the life he leads, and the degree to which he shares that life with others.



# Characters

## Steve Callahan, Rational Self

Callahan characterizes his psyche as existing in three parts: the rational, the emotional, and the physical. He refers to these parts as his "crew." Early in the tale, before the loss of Napoleon Solo, the triumvirate obeys the rational self, the so-called "captain." As matters worsen, the rational Callahan must aggressively manage the crew, enforcing the discipline necessary to ensure survival. As time passes, the risk of "mutiny" increases.

Each facet of Callahan serves its own purpose. The rational self is responsible for planning and problem solving. It measures the speed and direction of travel. It manages the logistics of food and water. The rational self also manages the resources of the "crew." Willpower alone, however, is limited in application. The physical self can't work beyond exhaustion and rational thought proves impossible in the face of abject despair. This demonstrates how tragedy compromises personhood, as the individual attempts to assert itself in the face of contradictory needs.

In the course of his trials, Callahan comes to realize that man does not survive in the manner of other animals. While the dorado are perfectly suited to their environment, swimming with fins and living by instinct, Callahan must subsist on makeshift tools. This suggests that since mankind lacks the perfect ecological niche, man must build its own. This calls to mind the chapter "To Weave a World," as the Rubber Ducky III is indeed a world in miniature, a compromise between man and the natural world.

## Steve Callahan, Emotional Self

The emotional self is that part of Callahan that fears, worries, and panics. Time and again, it threatens to eclipse the efforts of the rational mind. Despite the threat it poses, there is a sense that the emotional self must be treated as a child. Callahan must therefore bargain with this part of himself, promising rewards and warning of punishment. When necessary, Callahan must raise his "voice" and bark orders at the emotional self, demanding its acquiescence. When signs are encouraging, the emotional self is quiet. Otherwise there is a constant struggle against panic.

This is not to say that Callahan's emotional self is entirely negative - quite the contrary. Callahan's emotions are his reason for living. His emotional self is precisely that part of himself that misses his family, as well as the company of his fellow man. Nearly everything that Callahan enjoys in life is a product of his emotional self. It is, ironically, the absence of these enjoyments that provides much of Callahan's anguish even as it provides impetus for their return.

Callahan's emotional self is also the source of his empathy. While intellectually Callahan understands that he is part of a greater whole, emotionally he understands that he is not



the center of the universe. In recognizing the will of others, be it man or animal, Callahan has learned humility. Even as he feeds upon the dorado, he appreciates their life and is grateful for their sacrifice.

## **Steve Callahan, Physical Self**

Caught in a constant struggle between the emotional and the rational, it is the physical self that articulates the will of the mind. It is that part of Callahan which works, needs, and suffers. It is, in effect, the "vessel" of the psychological "crew."

## **Chris**

Chris serves as Napoleon Solo's crew until the Mini-Transat race requires Callahan to go it alone.

## **Dorados**

Though Callahan must feed upon dolphinfish for sustenance, he comes to regard them as individuals and even friends.

## **The Coast Guard**

The American Coast Guard has given up Callahan for dead. They make little effort to cooperate with the search efforts of Callahan's family.

## **Geezer**

Geezer is George Bracy, a friend of Callahan's back in Maine. He is sailor with a penchant for telling tall tales.

## **Mathias**

Mathias runs a hotel and radio station on the island of Marie Galante. He generously plays host to the newly rescued Callahan.

## **Marie**

Marie, who speaks fluent English, is friend to Mathias and also serves as Callahan's host on Marie Galante.





## **Callahan's Family**

As Callahan is lost at sea, his family does its best to find him. They receive little cooperation from the Coast Guard.

## **Frisha Hugessen**

Frisha is Callahan's ex-wife. During his deepest moments of despair, he ponders the blame he shares in his failed marriage.

## **Dr. Latchet**

Dr. Latchet is the physician on Marie Galante who treats Callahan's post-survival health problems.

## **Fishermen**

Three fishermen, natives of Marie Galante, are the first to discover Callahan's raft approaching the tiny island.

## **Catherine**

A beautiful Frenchwoman, Catherine crews for a short time on the Napoleon Solo. Callahan quickly tires of her romantic overtones.

## **Mr. Willoughby**

Mr. Willoughby is the famously ill-tempered old sailor who tries to convince Callahan not to run the race.



## Objects/Places

### The Napoleon Solo

The Napoleon Solo is Callahan's ship, designed and built to his own specifications. When it sinks, Callahan is lost at sea.

### Rubber Ducky III

The Rubber Ducky III is the life raft that he lives in for seventy-six days while lost at sea. Though built for six people, it lacks room enough for Callahan to stand or stretch out. It is covered with a low tent canopy.

### Solar Still

The inflatable, balloon-like solar still desalinates saltwater. Callahan has two such devices. Maintaining them preoccupies much of his time.

### Harpoon Gun

Callahan's harpoon gun, placed in his survival kit on a whim, is his primary means of feeding himself. As time passes, the device becomes increasingly jury-rigged and less functional.

### Equipment Bags

Callahan is able to salvage two equipment bags from the Napoleon Solo. One is his personal emergency bag. The other was included with the raft.

### Air Pump

Callahan uses a muscle-powered air pump to keep the ever-deflating raft afloat.

### Cushion

One of Callahan's few comforts, the cushion helps soften the blows of dorado and sharks striking the raft from below.



## **Interior Handlines**

The interior of the raft is encircled by a fixed rope, or handline. Callahan uses this rope as an anchor point for his "butcher shop."

## **Butcher Shop**

The "butcher shop" is where Callahan dries strips of dorado meat. They hang from a clothesline extending from the interior handline to the top of the canopy.

## **The Tupperware Container**

One of Callahan's more flexible tools, the Tupperware container alternatively serves as a toilet and as a rainwater collector.

## **Sail Cloth**

Salvaged from the Napoleon Solo, the sail cloth helps protect the floor of Rubber Ducky III against damage.

## **The EPIRB**

The Emergency Position-Indicating Radio Beacon sends a signal on two frequencies monitored by commercial flights. Its range and battery are limited.

## **Painter to the Man Overboard Pole**

Salvaged from Napoleon Solo, the painter to the man overboard pole serves as the tail of Rubber Ducky III. Functionally it helps keep the craft aligned and prevent capsize. It also serves as a speedometer and increases Rubber Ducky III's visibility.

## **The Atlantic Ocean**

The Atlantic is the vast oceanic "desert" in which Callahan is lost.

## **Marie Galante**

Marie Galante is the smallest island of Guadeloupe. This is where Callahan convalesces before returning to Maine.

# Themes

## Survival

The sheer hostility of the environment dominates Callahan's every waking moment, providing him with an endless list of chores. The raft must be continually inflated. Water must be harvested from the solar stills. Fish must be harpooned, cleaned and hung out to dry. Should anything fail, break, or become lost, Callahan must be instantly prepared to improvise. When he sleeps, it is the sleep of exhaustion. Callahan's very existence is focused solely on maintaining his own existence.

Callahan's "survival voyage" is defined by a series of difficult decisions, each with its own cost and risk. To fish, Callahan must burn precious calories and risk damaging his raft. To sleep, he risks waking to a sinking raft. Drinking today means possibly not drinking tomorrow. As Callahan's options dwindle, his best decisions are those that stave off death for another day. There is a sense that, until he is rescued, his situation will continually worsen, until finally he succumbs to the inevitable.

As Callahan battles to maintain the external world, he also fights within. Despair saps him of will. Terror eclipses reason. To survive, Callahan must consciously monitor his own morale, treating himself as a captain might treat a crew. If he lets himself be slowed by pain or exhaustion, or if he hesitates from fear, he risks making a critical error. Callahan must run a tight ship, both inside and out.

## Entropy

Callahan cannot acquire or replace resources. He exists in a closed system, alone. As he consumes resources, whether body fat or signal flares, his ability to perform work is diminished. Callahan grows perpetually thinner and weaker. His equipment wears out, breaks, or is lost, and efforts to replace lost tools require the sacrifice of existing tools. Because Callahan uses his space blanket to fashion a water catchment device, for example, he compromises his ability to survive a theoretical cold snap. As his tools grow fewer, his options dwindle.

Experientially, entropy manifests itself as a sense of doom. Despite his best efforts, Callahan cannot hope to maintain a status quo. Each day comes at a higher price, offering more opportunities for loss and disaster. When the raft's lower tube is breached, Callahan's will is nearly defeated, the craft nearly sunk. Though he perseveres, it is apparent that neither he nor the Rubber Ducky III can endure many more such trials. There is a continual sense that if Callahan doesn't find help soon, he will perish on the open sea.

Callahan is aware of entropy's role in ecology. He understands and appreciates the fact that the dorados, his "doggies," must die so that he might live. The chapter "death" is so named because the dorados, who draw attention to Callahan's craft, are caught as a



result of his rescue. This is followed by the chapter "life," indicating that Callahan understand that one must always follow the other. Life is sustained by life, and thus also by death. To live is to be an agent of entropy.

## **Ingenuity and Perseverance**

Desperation is indeed the mother of invention. With resources limited and diminishing, Callahan must address difficult problems in novel and creative ways. With rope and silverware he repairs his harpoon gun and seals a tremendous breach. With his space blanket he fashions a kite and water catchment device. He even patches his solar still with the gummy residue harvested from soggy duct tape as navigates using a sextant fashioned from pencils. Callahan's creativity seemingly knows no bounds.

Most of Callahan's tools, even those which are not improvised, were never intended to be used in the circumstances he finds himself, forcing Callahan to work harder to achieve even the simplest tasks. The air pump uses a foot pedal design, intended for use on a solid ground. Callahan must therefore squeeze the device between his hands, burning precious calories to keep his raft afloat. The raft's emergency patches inexplicably require the affected area to be dry, compelling Callahan to bail the raft by hand as he crawls about on a rubber, sagging floor.

Nearly all of Callahan's efforts are facilitated by his considerable knowledge. Callahan understands the science behind the solar still's operation, and is therefore able to diagnose its repeated failures. Similar, were it not for Callahan's training as a seaman, he wouldn't know what to do with a sextant, improvised or otherwise.



# Style

## Perspective

Adrift is written in a first person, present tense perspective. This imbues the narrative with a sense of both intimacy and immediacy, as events seem to unfold experientially through the eyes of the protagonist. This device serves to distance the reader from Callahan-as-author even as it encourages sympathy for Callahan-as-castaway. The first person present tense keeps the story focused on the desperate "now," casting the future as perilously uncertain.

Devices aside, the reader knows that Callahan survives; there would be no story otherwise. The author's perspective is therefore one of memory rather than immediacy. The author does not starve or thirst. The author does not live in a world of threat and uncertainty. The protagonist's survival is certain, even when it does not seem so. This suggests that the author's perspective is very different from the former self of which he writes. The author knows how the story ends. The protagonist does not.

As a protagonist, Callahan's perspective undergoes an abrupt shift. Before the loss of Napoleon Solo, he is the commensurate adventurer, welcoming risk and anxious to overcome the challenges they present. Callahan wants to win, to prove himself. Lost at sea, however, Callahan's mind turns from daring to doom. As despair proves a factor, Callahan's erratic morale adds another hue to the narrative. The stakes of survival are much higher than those of adventure.

## Tone

Adrift is a story of minimum necessity. Callahan can take nothing for granted. Everything he has, even common insignificant-seeming objects, is precious. Food and water must be rationed. Work must be balanced against exhaustion. This lends the story an air of desperation, as Callahan strains to husband his meager resources to meet the minimum requirements for continued survival. Should some critical component fail or become lost, Callahan is doomed. The tone is one of anxiety and apprehension.

Just as the protagonist fights to stay afloat, he also fights for his own sanity. Callahan buoys himself with levity, occasionally making light of himself and his situation. When he has time to rest, he retreats to the pages of his journal, where he writes, draws, and otherwise makes sense of his predicament. As he sleeps, he dreams of food and friends. Callahan prefers to the present as just one of many realities in which he exists. This sets a tone of hope and perseverance.

Callahan often refers to the ocean in spiritual terms. The sea is his "chapel." Callahan sees "God" in the waves of the Atlantic. He comes to think of animals, particularly the dorado dolphinfish, which serve as his food, as totemic spirit creatures of Native

American tradition. While Callahan himself professes agnosticism, his engagement with the world is highly spiritual, setting a tone of sublimity throughout.

## Structure

Adrift is broken up into fourteen chapters, beginning with a short introduction and concluding with an epilogue. Chapters are named rather than numbered, identified thematically based on the content of the section. Occasionally a date is inserted to establish the passage of time, but dates do not separate sections. They are instead placed to one side, never bisecting the text. This gives the impression of one day melting into another, as events cannot be cleanly ascribed to one day as opposed to another.

The text is often punctuated with photos, pictures, and diagrams. There is a photograph of the Napoleon Solo. Another photo shows Callahan taking a sighting from the aperture of Rubber Ducky III. The diagrams are hand-drawn, presumably by Callahan himself, and include pictures. They serve to demonstrate the particulars of Callahan's ingenuity over the course of his survival voyage. These diagrams are typically positioned in a full breakout along with accompanying explanatory text. They have the feel of a "how to" book and, while they are quite accessible, appear to be for the benefit of other sailors.

From the sinking of Napoleon Solo to Callahan's eventual rescue, time is continuous rather than discrete. It has the feel of a single long day, broken up into periods of light and dark, cold and warmth. Time is delineated by Callahan's survival routine. When food stocks are low, he must fish. When the sun is out, he must work the solar stills. This repetition creates a purgatorial illusion, where Callahan's human needs force time into an endless loop. It is only in distance that progress is apparent. As waters grow shallow and wildlife changes, the reader (along with the protagonist) passes through stages of ever-increasing hope.



## Quotes

"From the first time I ventured from the shore in a boat, I felt that my spirit was touched. On my first offshore trip to Bermuda, I began to think of the sea as my chapel. It was my soul that called me to this pilgrimage." Introduction, p. xvii

"It is not all fun and games. It is the autumn equinox, when storms rage, and within a week two severe gales rip up the English Channel." Log of Napoleon Solo, p. 4

"I lie down again clothed only in a t-shirt . The watch circles my wrist, and around my neck as a slab of whale tooth on a string. It is the most I will wear the next two and a half months." Nerves Exposed, p. 21.

"If I am thrown into the sea, I will shiver until the earth quakes. My lips will turn blue, my skin white. My grasp will loosen. The sea will fold her blanket over me for one last time, and I will sleep forever." The Witch and Her Curse: Hunger and Thirst, p. 36

"I bury my face in the raw, wet flesh to suck up the brownish-red blood. Intense, revolting bitterness fills my mouth, and I spit it out." Dream Keep, p. 65

"My dreams and daydreams are filled with images of what my body requires and of how to escape from this physical hell." To Weave a World, p. 96

"The dorados have become more than food to me. They are even more than pets. I look upon them as equals - in many ways superiors." Cries and Whispers, p. 126

"At the beginning of my voyage, there was little distinction between my rational mind and the rest of me. My emotions were ruled by nearly instinctive training and my body did not complain about having to work." Twice to Hell and Back, p. 159

"My limbs and eyelids are weighed down by fatigue. Even in the cool of day, when I must command myself to move for any reason, bitter arguments break out among the crew in my skull." Road of Trash, p. 180

"I don't consider suicide—not now, after all I have come through—but I can understand how others might see it as a reasonable option under these circumstances." The Dutchman, p. 188

"Dawn of the seventy-sixth day arrives. I can't believe the rich panorama that meets my eyes. It is full of green. After months of little other than blue sky, blue fish, and blue sea, verdant green is overwhelming." Death, p. 208

"I slip into the bottom of the boat and sit among dozens of dorados and a few kingfish and barracuda. I recognize my doggies." Life, p. 215





"I lay back on the sheets, clean sheets, dry sheets. I can't remember ever feeling this way before, though I imagine that I might have felt this way at birth." A Man Alone, p. 225

"I know that to be well fed, painless, and in the company of friends and loved ones are privileges too few enjoy in this often brutal world." Epilogue, p. 235



## Topics for Discussion

As Napoleon Solo sinks, Callahan is reluctant to release the line tied to the doomed vessel. Why?

If Callahan had been able to salvage Napoleon Solo's reserves of food and water, how might the story be different?

What are the qualities that allow Callahan to survive his ordeal? Are these common qualities?

Why does Callahan come to think of himself as his own crew? What does this say about his state of mind?

How much of Callahan's success or failure is due to simple dumb luck? Is he merely lucky/unlucky or does he create his own luck?

Suppose Callahan were confident that he would soon be rescued - how might that story have been different? What if he had no hope of rescue?

Callahan repeatedly talks about the idea of sailing alone versus sailing with a companion. What if he had been set adrift with a companion? How would this affect his chance of survival?