Cloth. Wood. Wind. Sailing is pretty simple. It has existed for thousands of years, and until very recently it was practically humanity’s only way to travel long distances. There is a slow, satisfying calm that comes from slowly travelling long distances with nothing but nature and your own strength to move you. At its most basic level, sailing is just one step up from walking — wind pushes the sail, which pushes the boat.

But how can the wind possibly push you anywhere but downwind? I’ve been sailing and reading about sailing all my life, and still have only the vaguest idea of how upwind sailing works. The ancient Greeks didn’t understand it — Odysseus was within sight of Ithaca when a foul wind sent him on a ten year journey.

Sailing is complicated. There are too many ropes for a beginner to count, much less understand. Each one has its own name. Actually, they’re not even called “ropes”. On a boat, that string of braided fiber is known as a line. I have no idea why. There is some ridiculously confusing terminology you have to know just to talk about sailing. You can’t just say “that rope to the left.” Your crew wouldn’t know which of tens of ropes you were talking about. They wouldn’t even know if you meant your left, their left, or the boat’s left.

Despite its frightening complexity, there is a simplicity to sailing. There is something about the sails, the wind, the waves. On a calm day there is nothing more peaceful than sitting in a sailboat, at speeds that could hardly be considered moving. There is also a kind of bliss in the chaos of wild weather, when things happen faster than you can think them, and you’re always on the edge of a dump into freezing water. Even for the most experienced sailors, it only takes a split second for everything to descend into anarchy.

There is a simplicity in dinghy racing with a large fleet, hidden behind its frantic complexity. Your every move is calculated. At least half of those calculations go wrong, and you desperately try to avoid a collision. All this time there is the added pressure of your attempt to beat twenty other boats around a course. All this is so overwhelming that after a while, instinct and experience take over. The action forces out thought, fills your mind with fast-paced emptiness.

When sailing a bigger boat, especially on long trips, there is more free time than you know what to do with. You think, then read, then think some more. You sail some, but usually only one person is needed to steer. Mostly you’re just relaxing on the water. But as soon as it gets boring the wind springs up and the world is at a forty-five degree angle.

This is what a sailboat’s made for. Everything in this boat was built to control the chaos, or at least ride on its back. Even over on its side, the boat rolls gently on the waves, with a pleasant burbling as it slices through the water. This is what makes it worth all the work, all the hours huddled in the rain, in damp clothes, in your mostly-watertight cabin.

Even though you know this is the normal state of a sailboat, it’s hard to get used to the world at an angle. And while the boat is comfortable on its side, your packing might have been less than perfect. At least once on any extended trip, something stowed on the high side breaks loose in the cabin. If you’re lucky, it might be a few cans of food. If you’re less lucky a five gallon jug of water might come loose, breaking something on the way down. Or maybe a box of tools scatters across the floor. Even while picking up the carnage, the elemental pleasure of riding the wind is always worth it. One of the earliest stories my parents tell about me is the time
I fell asleep standing up in the cabin, the boat far over on its side.

Sailing is an activity of contradictions. It is both ridiculously simple and immensely complex. It is an extreme sport, as well as a way for families and retired people to relax over the summer. Some of the quietest moments on a boat are picking your way through a thick fog, yet this is the most terrifying thing I have ever done. There are times when you could be within thirty feet of shore and not know it. My family has a GPS, which gives us some idea of where we are. Without this, I sincerely believe we would have grounded our boat at least once — or worse, sunk.

Sailing is long periods of lying in the sun, interspersed with moments of life-threatening chaos.

Some of that chaos might rear its head if something breaks while you’re out. There will be a moment of flapping and pandemonium, then you repair and resume your sail. If it’s bad enough, you motor into harbor. If your motor is disabled, you either sail in or call for a tow. If there’s a catastrophic, life-threatening failure, you get on the radio and call the coast guard for a rescue. If you have been very stupid, very unlucky, or just a little of each, you could be dead before anyone but you knows there’s trouble.

Sailing is difficult and complex. But between the wild moments, as well as at their peaks, there is a basic fulfillment to sailing. It doesn’t matter if you’re racing dinghies, cruising in a big, slow boat built for comfort, or even an ancient mariner exploring the edges of the world. There is a simple joy in riding the wind.