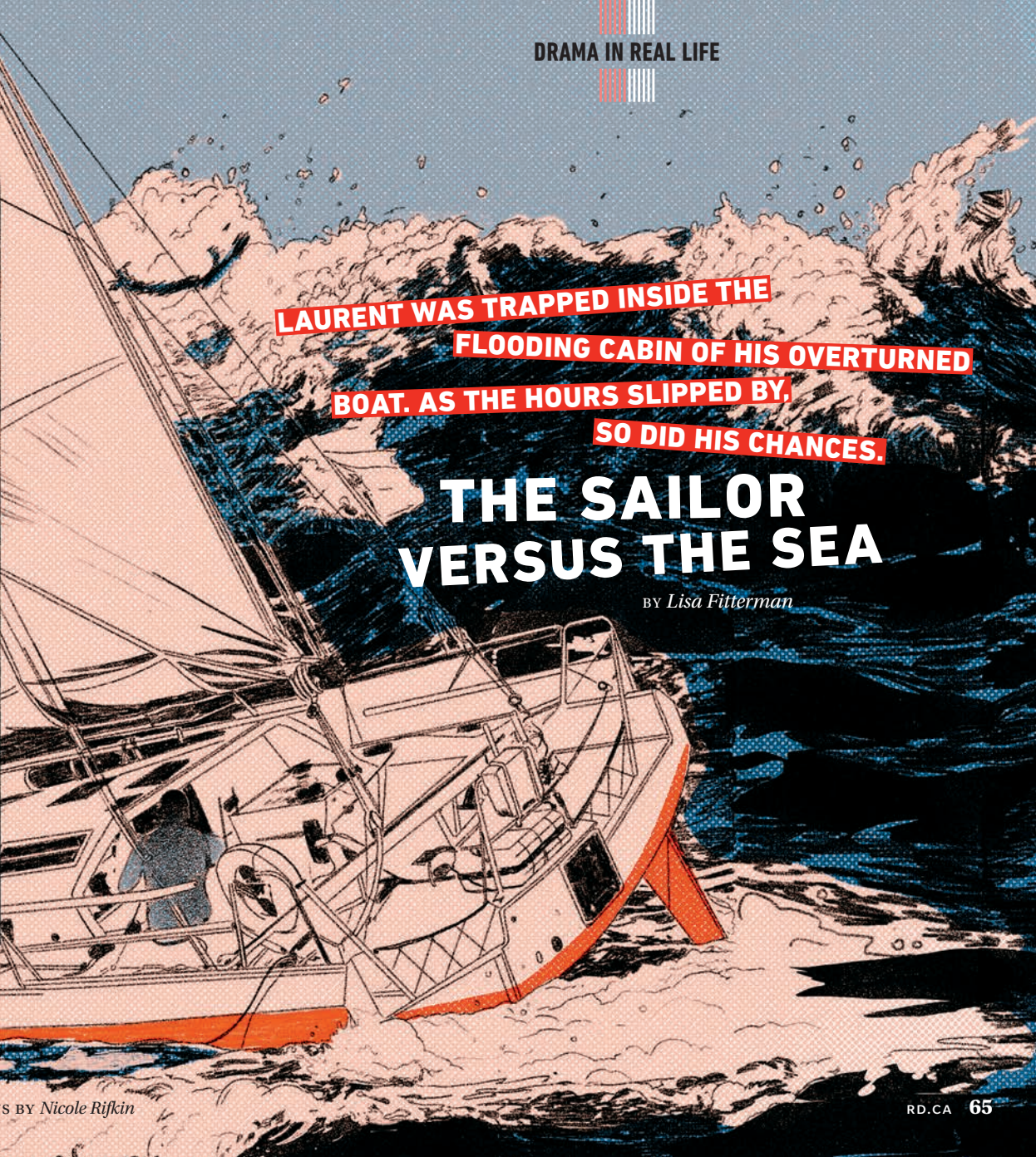


**LAURENT WAS TRAPPED INSIDE THE
FLOODING CABIN OF HIS OVERTURNED
BOAT. AS THE HOURS SLIPPED BY,
SO DID HIS CHANCES.**

THE SAILOR VERSUS THE SEA

BY *Lisa Fitterman*



**IT'S JUST
PAST 8 P.M.
ON AUGUST 1.**

Laurent Camprubi is about 25 kilometres off the coast of northwestern Spain, hoisting the mainsail on the deck of the *Jeanne*, a streamlined 12-metre sailboat. Ever since he left Lisbon, Portugal, the day before, he has been fighting the elements. But he is in his element, too.

Laurent is aiming to qualify for the Route du Rhum, a 6,562-kilometre race held every four years from Saint-Malo in France to Guadeloupe, a group of islands in the Caribbean. On a night that's anything but calm, the solo athlete is tacking, adjusting, to ensure the vessel gets to its destination of Cherbourg, France, about 1,700 kilometres to the northeast.

After more than 12 hours of sailing, Laurent takes a much-needed break. While a beacon automatically broadcasts his position to Route du Rhum organizers every 15 minutes, the waves batter the *Jeanne* in a language all their own—screams, whistles, crashes, roars.

He knows that in the distance is Cape Finisterre, so named because the craggy peninsula was once thought to be the end of the world, but two- to three-metre waves have turned his surroundings into a uniform dark grey.

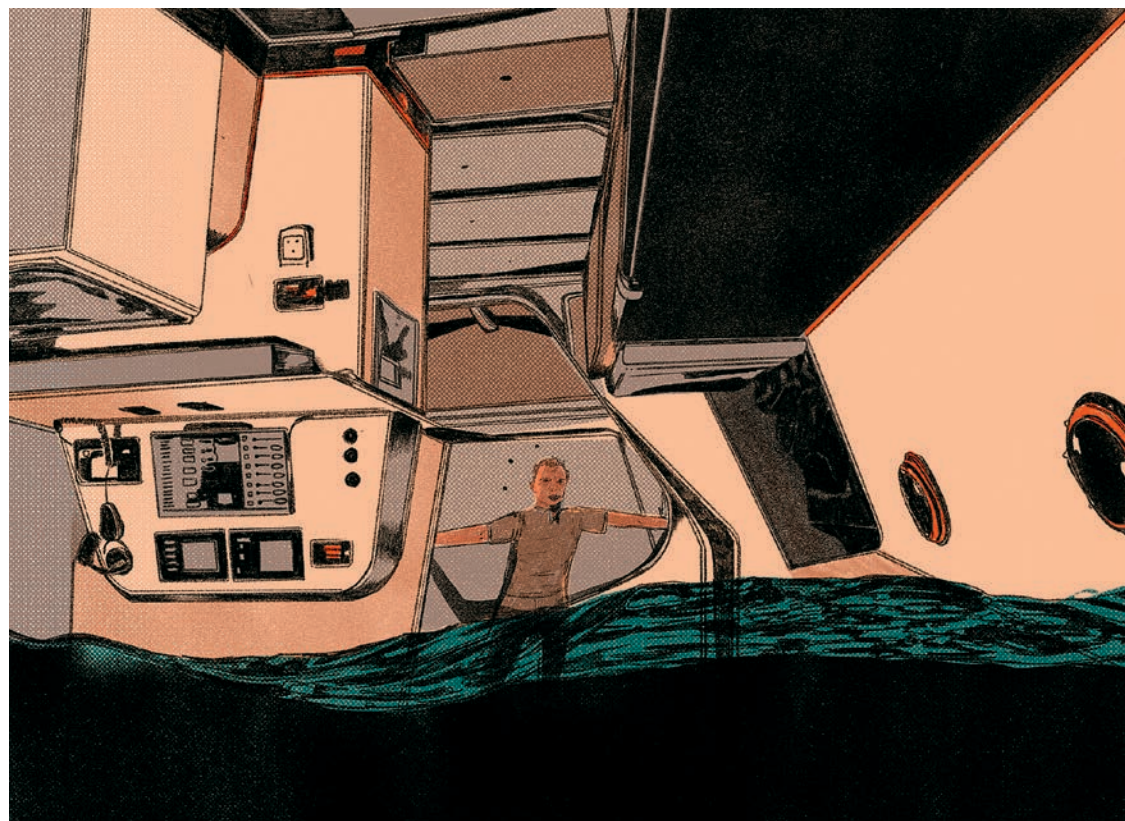
Tall and lanky, the 62-year-old had been sailing since his 20s and was eager to tackle the Route du Rhum, which he considered “the Everest of sailing.” A stylist for a Portugal-based fashion footwear company, Laurent lives with his partner, Virginie Philip, and their two children in Marseilles, where he had been training for this challenge for months. The race would be a test of strength and perseverance, and the lifelong cyclist and runner had also been doing weight training to build his core muscles so that he would be better able to keep his balance in rough seas. And tonight, it is indeed rough.

As Laurent lies in the cockpit, resting, a wave crashes into the boat, which suddenly slows down. Opening his eyes, Laurent sees the boat has begun to list to one side and he immediately knows what has happened: He has lost the keel, the weighted fin that runs along the bottom of the boat to keep it upright. The *Jeanne* is capsizing.

You have 15 seconds to get below deck before the boat flips over, he tells himself. Your life depends on it. Move!

Once below, Laurent attempts to close the door, but water keeps rushing in, making the task impossible. The *Jeanne* violently flips upside down, bobbing in the waves. Laurent has been thrown to the ceiling, and is crouched on what is now his floor, surveying the damage. His prescription eyeglasses are smashed, as are the computer and other electronics, and the pieces are floating in seawater.

He decides to venture further into the boat to retrieve his survival kit, then return to what he judges to be the safest spot, by the door. Almost 20 minutes after capsizing, he sets off his SOS signal and turns to his bright red survival suit. Made of waterproof neoprene, it's a bulky, stiff onesie, complete with hood and attached booties. He knows that adrenaline is still keeping him warm, but once it wears off, the suit is his



best defence while waiting for whatever help might come. He's in an air bubble; the water, about 20 C, is now up to his chest. So, on goes the suit, one cramping, chilled leg at a time.

AT 8:23 P.M., MOMENTS AFTER Laurent had activated his emergency beacon—which contained a radio transmitter and global positioning system (GPS)—the Spanish coast guard detected it. An elaborate,

tightly choreographed effort was immediately put into action, complete with two rescue ships, three helicopters and five divers. It was dark outside, and dangerous. The question on everyone's mind: How could the vessel's lone occupant, no matter how experienced, survive in such weather?

At 9:26 p.m., one of the helicopter pilots spotted something white in the angry sea: the bottom of a sailboat. One

option—to secure the vessel with slings and hoist it onto one of the ships with a crane—was dismissed as foolhardy because of the wind and the danger it posed to Laurent. Besides, no one knew what was happening inside.

Tasked with checking for signs of life, a diver was lowered by a cable onto the hull of the boat. He banged on the hull, shouting that help had arrived. But his words blew away in the wind.

LAURENT IS FINISHING putting on the top part of his survival suit when he hears someone banging on the hull. *Thump. Thump. Thump.* He tries to hammer back, but his arms get entangled in the sleeves.

"I'm here!" he shouts. "I'm here!"

Then, nothing. Was he even heard? He curls up into a corner to wait, water sloshing and rising ever higher. His air bubble can't last forever.

Help will come, he silently recites to himself. *Help will come. Help will come.*

And this thought, too: *Maybe I've been abandoned.*

TO THE RESCUERS' SURPRISE, relief and joy, they did eventually hear the sailor shouting back. But for the safety of all, they had to put on hold any attempt to rescue him until the next morning. The question was: Would he still be alive when they did? Time was not their ally. Laurent could die from

exposure, or he could drown. But they had no choice.

That evening, a representative from France's Ministry of Defence phoned Virginie Philip, but she assumed it was a telemarketer and didn't answer. When she checked the message 15 minutes later, she heard a voice telling her that Laurent's emergency beacon had been set off. Her world fell apart.

THE SLOSHING WATER HAS FILLED MORE SPACE, SHRINKING LAURENT'S AIR BUBBLE.

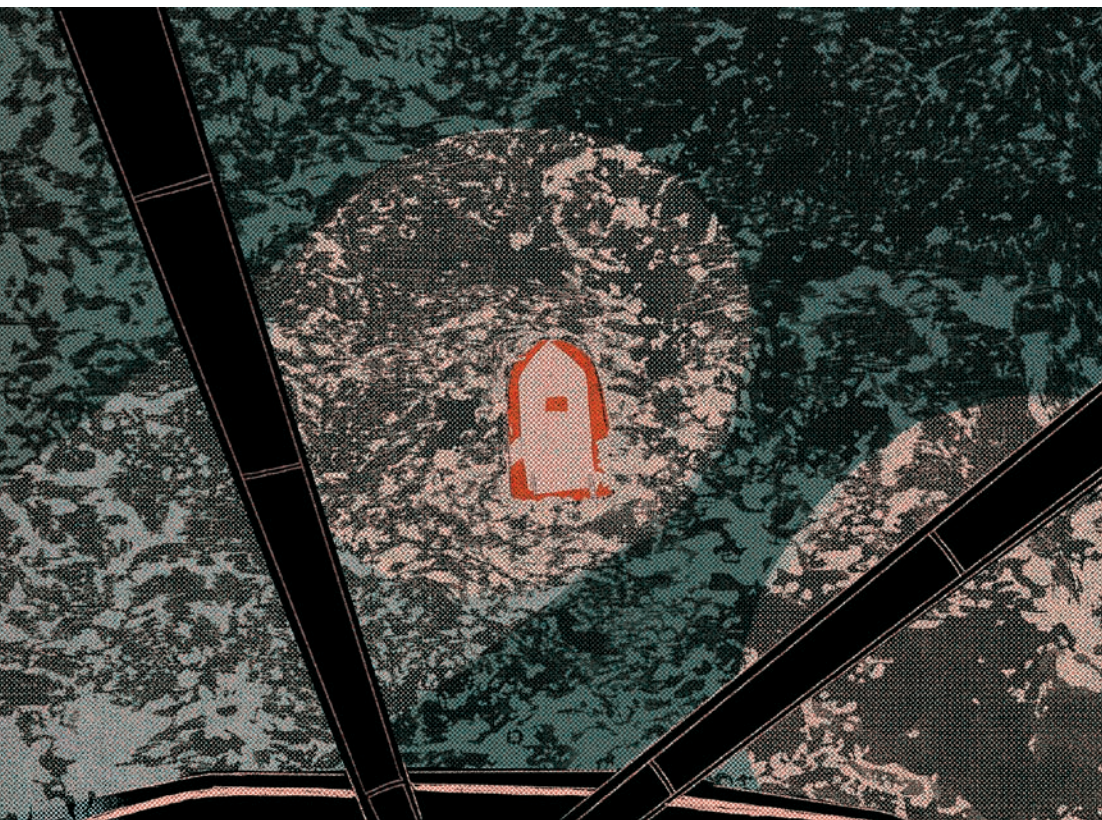
"Is Laurent okay?" she asked, when she called back.

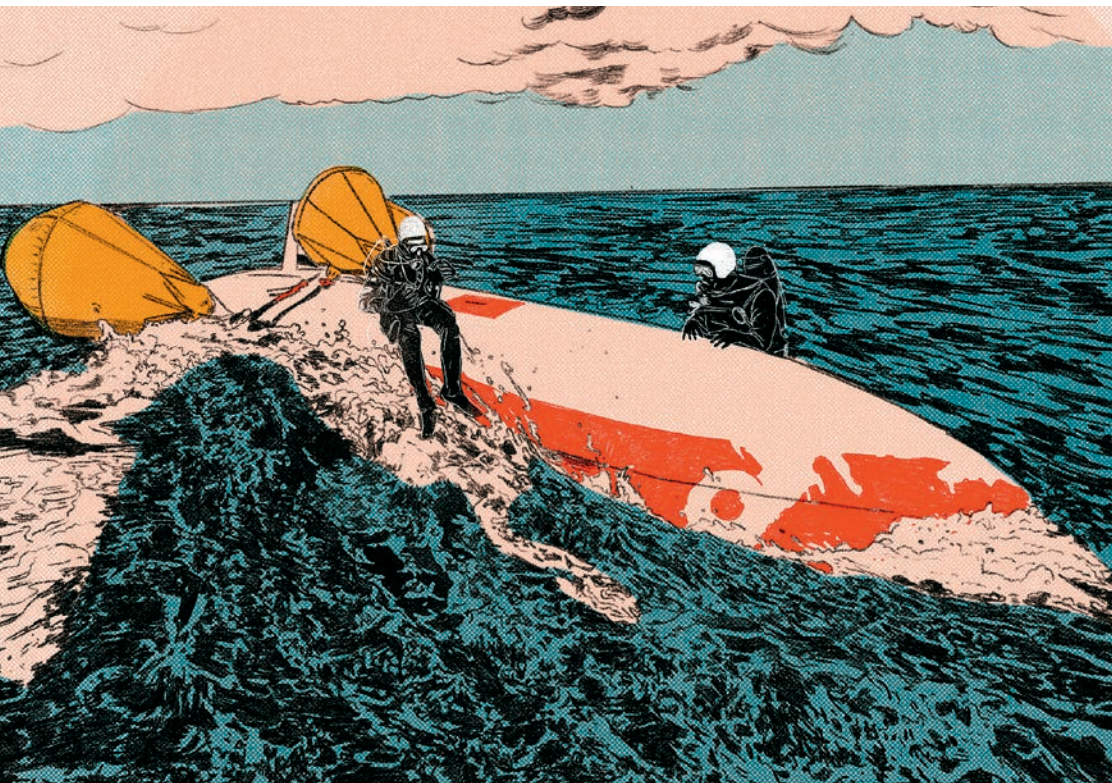
"We don't know," came the reply.

And so, the waiting began.

The couple's daughter, 12-year-old Jeanne, stayed beside her mom while her 3-month-old brother, Paul, slept. Virginie called Richard Sautieux, Laurent's friend and sailing team manager, to see if he could help find out what was happening. At midnight, she received an update from the organizer of the Route du Rhum: All he could tell her was that the boat had capsized, and the Spanish coast guard was involved.

Trying to tamp down her panic, Virginie focused on being calm in front of Jeanne, who eventually fell asleep. The hours seemed like years, as the clock





ticked past 1, 2, 3, 4 a.m. Then, just past 8 a.m., her phone rang again. It was the Ministry of Defence calling back with bad news: The chance of finding Laurent alive was practically zero.

It was time to tell Laurent's family what was happening. On automatic pilot, Virginie started by calling his brother, who told her that Laurent was too stubborn to give up.

"He will fight to the end," he told Virginie. "Trust me, if anyone is going to

survive something like this, it's him." On one level, Virginie agreed. Certainly, the man she had been with for 14 years had lived large and took risks—but he'd never been one to panic when bad things happened. And right now, she had no choice but to have faith.

IN THE CABIN OF THE JEANNE, Laurent is disheartened, and so tired. Water, still seeping and sloshing, has filled more space, shrinking his air bubble. The

water is also mixed with gas from an engine he had on board for emergencies—and, of course, never got a chance to use—and the smell of it is overwhelming. Not only that, his skin now stings and he has to keep his eyes shut tight to protect them.

Time means nothing now. Minutes and hours flow into each other, a jumble. It could be midnight, or later. Maybe it's 2 a.m.? He can't remember when he last ate or slept.

Don't think about that. Focus. Don't fall asleep.

He knows that the air bubble keeping him alive continues to shrink, and the water level has crept higher on his chest. With a grunt, he reaches out to grasp safety handles attached to the sides of the hull. He knows he needs to keep as much of himself out of the water as he can if he's to avoid hypothermia.

From time to time, Laurent tries to concentrate on listening for a sound—anything that signals the coast guard has not given up on him. But there is only quiet.

Images of his life crowd his mind. Not his life flashing before his eyes, but the things he will miss. Things like conversations with his three adult children from his first marriage. And also what he won't get to be there for: baby Paul saying "Papa" for the first time, and taking his first steps. Jeanne.

Smart, with long brown hair pulled back in a ponytail, wide-set eyes and a beautiful smile, graduating from middle school.

By now, Laurent has been gripping the handles for hours, and he's exhausted. He lets go of them. He's floating on his back, finally resting, arms and legs splayed. But when the water laps over his face, he sputters, and is alert again.

And then he hears knocking. *Am I hallucinating? Please, let this be real.*

LAURENT WAS THROUGH THE DOOR LIKE A SHOT, POWERING AGAINST THE RUSHING WATER.

JUST BEFORE 9 A.M., roughly 13 hours after Laurent's boat flipped, two divers made their way to the *Jeanne* in calmer waters to help secure the boat with three enormous yellow buoys. The idea was to keep the boat afloat while the team conducted either a rescue or a salvage operation. When it was secured, the divers knocked on the hull. They didn't expect to get a response, but suddenly they heard shouting. Against all odds, against the mercurial sea and the wind that had flipped him over, Laurent Camprubi was alive. Diving below the surface to peek in the cabin window, they saw his red neoprene booties moving.



Clockwise from top left: Inside the waterlogged cabin; the battered *Jeanne*; Laurent and family; Laurent and the buoys that kept his sailboat afloat.

But here was the problem: There was so much detritus floating underneath the hull, jagged pieces of broken wood and metal, and wires, that divers could not access the door to the cabin. So, they began the painstaking job of diving under, again and again, to clear a path to Laurent.

They had to be very careful not to get injured as they did so. Bit by bit, minute by agonizing minute, one hour flowing into a second hour, then a third, they collected and disposed, rising to the surface when a bag was full, then diving down again.

You have to stay alive, Laurent told

himself. *They have to make it*. But he knew that now was not the time to start doubting his rescuers.

They did have a plan, and as one of the helicopters positioned itself above the *Sar Gavia*, a 40-metre tugboat that shone bright-orange in the summer sun, a diver knelt on top of the hull of the sailboat, explaining in shouts to Laurent what they needed him to do.

Laurent learned there would be no helicopter to lift the *Jeanne* up because the vessel was already in pieces. That no divers would smash through the window to pluck him out because it wasn't big enough; besides, the water

would rush in and then pull him under.

Tired and chilled from so many hours of exposure, his muscles cramping, Laurent understood that surviving this was still up to him. As soon as a diver opened the door, he would have to swim out fast, with everything he had, to avoid the torrent of sea water waiting on the other side to pin him down and drown him. He'd have just one chance.

The actual rescue began a little after noon. Laurent waited by the door, treading water, trying to stay calm but poised to break through when it opened. *You can do it*, he told himself. This was it: life or death.

He forced himself to breathe slowly as he waited—and suddenly, the door opened. *Go*. Acting on instinct, he was through it like a shot, swimming, using adrenaline along with his arms and bicycle-hardened legs to power against the rush of water.

He felt the adrenaline coursing through him, providing oxygen and new-found strength as he swam under the hull—*don't hit your head*—and then made a right turn to go up, up two metres to the surface, his eyes open

and focused above him. When he broke through, gasping for air, a diver—the same one who had knocked on the hull the night before—was waiting and ready to attach a harness so the helicopter above could hoist him aboard.

The men embraced, in tears. “I was so afraid you wouldn't survive the night,” the diver admitted. Laurent answered: “I was so afraid you wouldn't come back for me.”

WHEN LAURENT BOARDED the helicopter that would take him to a hospital in the nearby Spanish coastal town of A Coruña, his legs buckled. It was 12:35 p.m.—more than 16 hours since the *Jeanne* had capsized.

Soon, he'd be treated for exposure and hypothermia, and doctors would flush the gasoline out of his eyes. He would learn that he'd lost seven kilograms during those 16 hours.

But on the helicopter, none of that mattered. All he wanted was to talk to Virginie. When someone on board finally handed him a phone, he could barely speak to his partner—they were both crying so hard. **R**

COURTESY OF LAURENT CAMPRUBI



Next Goal Wins

Develop success from failures. Discouragement and failure are two of the surest stepping stones to success.

DALE CARNEGIE

Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you have imagined.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU