

# THE LIMIT

ED GILLET'S SOLO CROSSING FROM CALIFORNIA TO HAWAII REMAINS THE BOLDEST KAYAK VOYAGE EVER SURVIVED, BUT NEVER FULLY TOLD. NOW PADDLING'S MOST ENIGMATIC ICON BREAKS HIS DECADES OF SILENCE.

**BY DAVE SHIVELY / PORTRAITS BY ROBERT ZALESKI**

**T**he paddles are long gone. Thrown out or ruffled off. The kayak sold. The faded pictures and old magazine clippings stuffed into a yellow plastic crate on a garage shelf. The navigation calculator? Who knows.

But there's one item that Ed Gillet has kept all these years in a fireproof safe.

On a cool August evening, exactly 26 years to the day after his unexpected landfall on Maui's Kahului Beach, Gillet finally unlocks his journal and begins to read.

"DAY 30," he reads slowly from the tattered notebook, "*Another fucking calm day on westerly light ... winds,*" he says, pausing to decipher his own cryptic scribbles and then correcting himself: "*Head-winds.*"

He's sitting on his back patio, with a wide-open view south and west, out to the Pacific Ocean. His shepherd-lab mix Lucy is curled at his feet. The three of us are getting comfortable, hanging on every word as the sun goes down. It's a scene from centuries past, from some Joseph Conrad novel, the men gathered to hear Marlow tell the tale of his great battle with the sea. Gillet's wife Katie Kampe looks tentatively on from the sliding door, holding a glass of red wine. They don't normally invite people into their home. They don't talk about this anymore. But she lived through it just as he did. She knows the story, and feels the pain, all too well.

"Do I feel desperate?" Gillet continues reading, pausing to give us some context—"and then I give my position"—before continuing: "*Barometer climbing, so maybe I'm past the trough,*" some sort of low pressure. "*I don't know whether to rest, dry out, conserve energy, or paddle out of the hole ... would consider rescue or ride at this point, but no one in the vicinity.*"

"Feel like I've hung myself and it's going to take another 30 days to die."

He stares into the journal.

"And then you know what I say after that?" Gillet asks.

"At least it's warmer."

He and Katie erupt. The hardest I've heard him laugh since opening up about his 64-day experience paddling solo from Monterey to Maui in a reinforced stock Necky Tofino tandem kayak. I call it an experience for a reason. I know that a man so careful with his words would cringe at me calling it a kayak trip, or a paddle, a crossing, or even a journey. It is an experience, an entirely subjective thing belonging uniquely to Ed Gillet. And only Ed Gillet.

The closest he'll come to a labeling the experience is to call it a "self-imposed selfish quest to do something completely at the edge of human endurance that you may or may not make." Then in the next sentence he points out that one can imagine much more difficult crossings. Gillet himself didn't intend to spend 64 days in his kayak; he planned to ride a 40-

day tradewind express to the islands.

He did not expect to push his body and his mind that far. Sometimes though, as I came to find out that evening, when you cast off, commit and seek out, you find exactly what you're looking for.

What was Ed Gillet hoping to find? What really happened out there?

Johnny Carson got the nuts and bolts in a nine-minute appearance on *The Tonight Show*. Gillet accepted the engagement as NBC offered to fly him, Katie and the 80-pound kayak back from Hawaii. Gillet gave a few slideshows at sea kayaking events, and penned a sensationalized piece for *National Enquirer* (which was subsequently rerun by *Marblehead Magazine*). There were multiple book deals in the works; Paul Theroux was ready to write the foreword.

But then Gillet shut off.

At the first slideshow, when he saw his own photos for the first time, he choked up. The feelings from his experience at the limit were still unbearably fresh. The images put him back there, in the kayak, straddling the edge of his endurance.

Each subsequent question, each interview request, each call, each thought of promoting a book, rubbed that layer of survival trauma raw once again.

"I was just too hostile," Gillet says. "I made sort of a vow to myself that I wouldn't talk about it."

Gillet never spoke of the trip, not even to customers in the San Diego kayak shop he and Katie ran for 14 years.

"One guy went on four kayak trips with Ed and he never told him!" laughs Katie.

"It ever never came up," Ed shrugs.

The years passed, they sold the shop, Ed went back for a master's in rhetoric and writing, "moved on psychologically" from paddling, and threw himself into teaching. The subject stopped coming up so often. If a student in his high school AP English class asked about a crazy rumor from his past, Gillet would point him or her to the *Tonight Show* segment he'd posted to YouTube, and then continue the lesson from one his favorite books to teach, *Into the Wild*.

The clip was not enough for me.

In the last year and a half I've written about three men attempting to become the first to retrace Gillet's Hawaii crossing in

**"FEEL LIKE  
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**ON THE  
EDGE:**

With scarred, peeling hands, Gillet set the timer of his Nikonos IV to capture this self-portrait on the Maui beach after his 64-day crossing from California.



**ON THE TONIGHT SHOW.**

Carson: "*That is crazy*"  
Gillet: "*Well, Hawaiians got there by canoes.*"

reinforced versions of stock tandem kayaks. All three returned to California within hours.

After months of delay, Wave Vidmar launched a Kevlar-reinforced Seaward Passat G3 from California's Bodega Bay on Christmas Eve 2012. The Coast Guard rescued him 15 hours later. In June last year, I traveled to the Bay Area to watch Clay Biles and R.W. Hand outfit their 22-foot Necky Nootka-plus tandem kayaks for their attempt.

Biles had become a disciple to the Word of Ed. Though Biles never managed to speak with Gillet directly, he applied every lesson he could glean from Gillet's limited media interaction: He used the same type and brand of boat, and

**END  
TIMES:**

Clouds pile up on the windward shore of Maui, 60 miles southwest, and nearly two days of minty Colgate-fueled paddling from landfall.



launched from the same spot in Monterey. He installed the improved canopy Gillet had wished for after the trip, and even stuffed cans of Spam into extra storage spaces as Gillet—jokingly it turns out—had suggested.

Biles and Hand's plan varied from Gillet's in one key area: They did not go alone. After eight hours paddling offshore in lumpy conditions, the pair damaged their boats when they attempted to raft up to adjust a sea anchor and rest. With Biles's boat taking on water and the integrity of

Hand's craft in question, Biles accepted a Coast Guard tow in as Hand paddled back to Monterey. The result didn't seem to fit the no-failure profile. These were veterans of the U.S. military's most elite units who had endured years of training engineered to test their physical and emotional limits. They had extensive combat experience. They were two of the hardest, baddest dudes I'd ever met.

It made the question burn: Who is Ed Gillet? How does this understated sea kayaker succeed in an undertaking which defeated the others so quickly and decisively? The trio of failures only amplifies Gillet's achievement—one that has now stood untouched for nearly three decades. No modern paddler has done more with less. No one has gone as far in a production kayak and lived to tell. No one has even gotten past Day One.

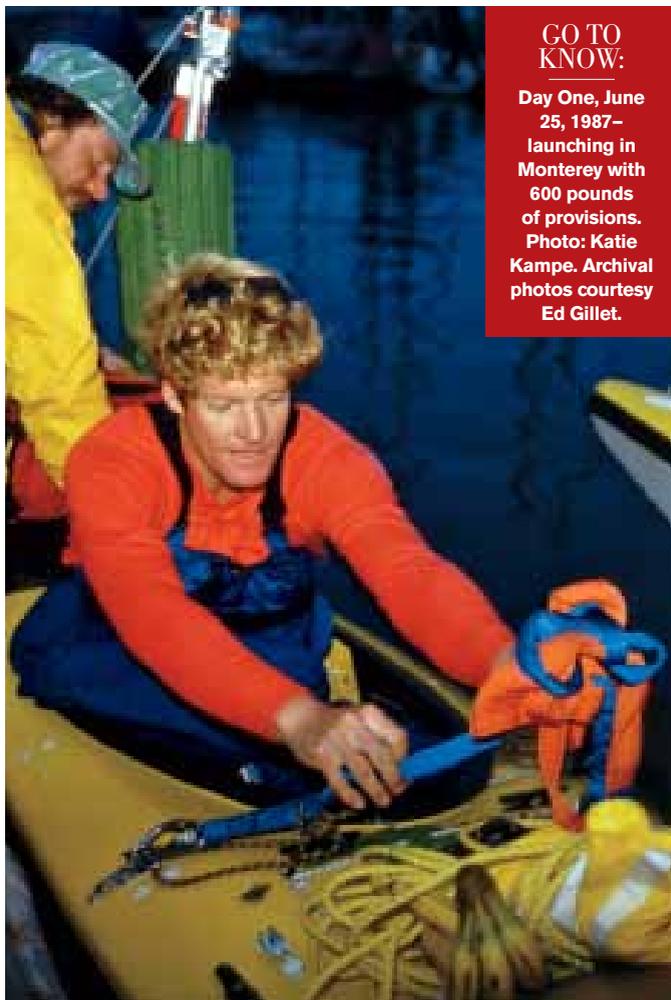
We knew the basics—he ate his toothpaste and landed in Maui—but the story is incomplete. We never know what made Ed Gillet go.

We never know that Ed Gillet, too, turned around.

After days spent clawing his way offshore into 20-foot swells, cold water breaking over the boat, the stress of ships passing in the black of night, sleep compromised by water pouring in through a faulty cockpit cover, Gillet kept going. He paddled to the mantra of "30-130," that is,

30 degrees north latitude and 130 degrees west, where warm tradewinds should replace the westerlies. On the eve of his 12<sup>th</sup> night at sea, surfing backwards in heavy swell, the nylon line attached to Gillet's sea anchors repeatedly stretched and jerked the boat. One tug was so abrupt it sheered off his 1-inch-thick Lexan rudder blade.

That's when Gillet did what any prudent mariner would do. He turned back to California.



**GO TO KNOW:**

**Day One, June 25, 1987—launching in Monterey with 600 pounds of provisions. Photo: Katie Kampe. Archival photos courtesy Ed Gillet.**

An hour later, taking a break, rocking in the waves, he had a long, hard conversation with himself:

"Am I *really* going to go back and fix this boat, spend the money, and then turn around and do this again?" he asked.

No. He climbed onto the rear deck of his kayak to install his reserve rudder. "It was

bad, I was puking on myself, hanging onto the back of my boat," he says. "It was rough so I was being plunged underwater. It's cold and I'm soaking wet and I put the rudder blade back on, and I thought, 'This is it. All the marbles are in and we'll see what happens.'"

"So I turned around again and paddled out. And I just kept going."

And going. Gillet fell into a rhythm. With his cockpit lid broken, he covered the kayak's rear keyhole with a Mylar space blanket in a feeble attempt to protect his sleeping confines: a synthetic sleeping bag on plywood raised two inches above the bottom of the hull. It left him no room to roll over. When the water inevitably sloshed above the plank, three or four times each night, Gillet would wake and pump it out.

Once "reasonably rested," Gillet would wake at gray dawn and pump again. He'd take a few anti-inflammatories, rub some ointment on his saltwater sores. Leaving the pontoons (two whitewater raft thwarts) in place, he'd change clothes, find his food for the day, hang his sleeping bag to dry on the stern-mounted radar-reflection tube. Gillet would pull freshwater from his hand-pumped five-gallon tank, and with a propane camp stove wedged between his legs, prepare coffee and freeze-dried food.

When the sun showed on the horizon, Gillet would raise his \$100 plastic sextant to take his first of three daily sun-sights. This was before the days of commercially available

GPS. To find his approximate location, Gillet would calculate lines of position by crunching the spherical trigonometry in a small calculator, take note of the exact time on one of his five watches, and then scribble the numbers in his notebook. He'd stow the navigation gear and deflate the thwarts.

"And then I just paddled," Gillet says. "Sat there and paddled."

Gillet had grown accustomed to solo paddling, and never had a problem "getting completely absorbed" in the movement. "It's like the act of hiking where it consumes my consciousness ... even though I'm paddling a heavy and slow double boat, I was surfing waves, picking up swell, making the boat go, thinking about getting to Hawaii and holding my course and navigating."

And paddling, of course. Eight to 10 hours a day, into the night. Heading toward 30-130.

He'd take his sights, run the trig on his calculator and scribble the readings on his hull.

He passed 30-130, roughly 600 miles offshore.

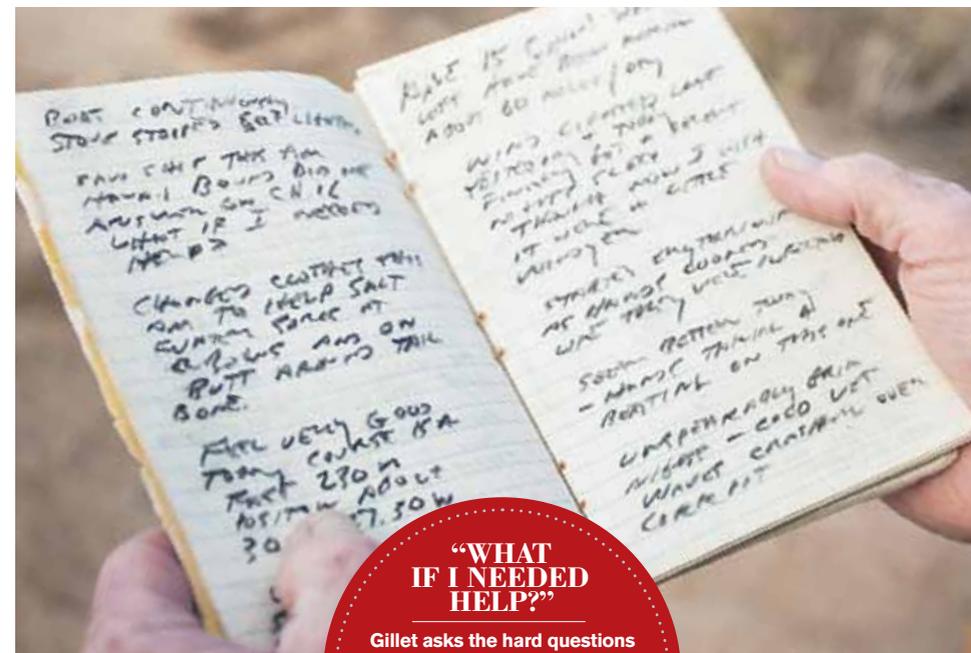
No tradewinds. So he kept paddling.

Growing up in Miami, Gillet's father taught him to sail early. When he turned 16, dad didn't buy him a car. He gave him a 16-foot Luger kit sailboat. "I would just sail south as far as I could, see how far I could get, if I could get to the Keys," Gillet recalls, "spend the night out there and come back in time to be in school on Monday."

Gillet always needed to see how far he could go. The need was also intellectual. He finished college and kept going, moving with his first wife to San Diego where he began a Ph.D. in philosophy. When the marriage went south, so did Gillet. He ran sailboat charters out of Acapulco, and delivered yachts up and down the Pacific coast, and once back from Hawaii. Between trips he worked as a diver, doing salvage work and scrubbing boat hulls to fund his newest obsession, rock climbing.

Gillet became a regular at Yosemite in the late '70s when an innovative generation of climbers was opening new routes on the sheer granite faces of El Capitan and Sentinel Rock.

The best way to grasp how Gillet



**"WHAT IF I NEEDED HELP?"**  
Gillet asks the hard questions as his navigation log becomes a journal of haunting thoughts. Below, Katie pulls the empty refuse from her husband's kayak in Maui. "I'd consumed everything," Gillet says.



processed the seemingly endless void of the Pacific is to understand the mindset of a big-wall climber. He approached the challenge as if he were on a multi-day climb: one direction, and one option to reach the summit. It was "bivouacking on the ocean," only without a tent. Make progress, make camp, do it again.

"There's this other transcendental part of it and climbers recognize this right away. You go climbing thinking, 'I'm going to do this and

do that,' and then the climb takes all of that out of you. You realize you can't do it, and the desire to do the climb comes from a different deeper place: It's not about the climbing, it's about something else."

In 1981, Gillet cleaned the bottom of a sailboat belonging to climbing pioneer Ray Jardine in trade for some big-wall gear. Jardine, who was planning to paddle the Sea of Cortez in one of his 14-foot downriver kayaks, invited Gillet to join the expedition.

“MAYBE I SHOULD WRITE A WILL HERE”

Reading from his journal takes Gillet right back to the moment he wrote the words almost three decades ago.



“We made our rudders in the van driving down,” Gillet remembers, noting his plan to use a “little piece of webbing around my big toes to try and steer.”

Gillet had never been in a kayak.

Though he had logged thousands of miles sailing offshore, Gillet noticed something different that November morning in 1981 when he launched from San Felipe, Mexico and attached his toe straps. There was no noise like that of a typical sailboat, only “the raspy goodbye kiss of the beach on my thin fiberglass hull.” Gillet describes immediately feeling “as comfortable on the water as if I had been born there,” captivated by the silent,

simple, and slender craft, “moving forward as natural as breathing,” as though he could go on paddling forever.

“I half-expected to see him shipwrecked,” Jardine wrote of Gillet’s turbulent maiden launch through the surf. “Finally, about 300 yards out I turned, and with great relief saw Ed coming on strong. I thought: ‘This fellow has potential!’”

“I didn’t know how or where my journey would end and I didn’t care,” Gillet wrote, “as long as I kept moving forward I felt satisfied.”

Gillet and Jardine paddled for three weeks and 680 miles to La Paz.

Gillet was hooked. In 1982, he paddled

solo from Alaska’s Glacier Bay down the Inside Passage to Seattle. That fall, Steve Landick invited Gillet to join him for the Baja California Pacific leg of his 28,000-mile Ultimate Canoe Challenge. Landick had taken a break in Long Beach while his paddling partner Verlen Kruger continued south. None of Gillet’s paddling thus far prepared him for the final 155-mile push he and Landick made to Cabo San Lucas across the crashing surf of Todos Santos. Two and a half days of straight paddling. Sleeping on the water.

“I was always kind of amazed at Ed,” Landick says. “For one thing, I don’t even think

he had a seat in that boat—he was just sitting on a piece of foam, and in order to sleep in that darn thing it was a real act of contortion to get his head down and feet forward to get his head back behind the cockpit. That’s one thing about Ed though, I always thought he had a very high tolerance for being uncomfortable.”

Gillet could tolerate discomfort, but not idleness. After Baja, with his eyes opened to extended offshore possibilities, he needed more—a journey with an open end. He needed a return to the simpler times, “when hungry hunters with a single purpose moved along a dark coast searching for food, and prehistoric explorers endured months of hardship to satisfy their curiosity.”

To satisfy that curiosity, he took out a \$7,000 loan and ended 1983 by flying as far south as he could. He aimed to spend the next six months paddling a 16-foot Seda Viking

from Tierra del Fuego up the entire west coast of South America to the Panama Canal. It took him a year to reach the northern border of Ecuador, where hijackers dragged his kayak back into their town. Though he escaped unscathed, as he began paddling past bales of dope in Colombian waters, he knew the trip was over. He’d already been shot at once and was out of money. He felt physically charged, having paddled 5,000 miles and learning how to handle every conceivable sea kayak challenge, and how to do it alone. What he couldn’t handle was the knowledge that he had fallen short, that he hadn’t reached his goal.

Ed Gillet needed a new goal.

He’d had more than his fill of cultural immersion. He’d done enough challenging coastal landings. He started looking at extended crossings, with a keen eye to Cocos Island, 340 miles off the Pacific shore of Costa Rica.

“I thought, ‘Hell, if you’re going to go to Cocos Island, then why not do Hawaii?’” Gillet said. “I’d sailed it. I knew as a sailing trip what was involved. Well, I could do this. I could pull this off.”

Katie Kampe understood the draw. She met Ed in 1985 on a beach in Sausalito, Calif., after he returned from South America. A competitive rower who later claimed an open-water national title, Kampe also understood the need to be on the ocean, and wasn’t afraid of a risky venture. The couple married in the spring of ‘87 and opened Southwest Kayaks, a small paddling shop in Point Loma. On June 25 that year, Gillet began the experience he would later call “the most difficult trip I could conceive of surviving.” He kept the departure “low-key” to avoid notice of the Coast Guard. Katie paddled alongside in a double kayak to say her goodbye.

“I remember saying, ‘Look, if things aren’t right, I’ll just paddle down the coast and call you from Santa Barbara, and I’ll just see what’s gonna happen,’” Gillet says, “and in some ways the whole concept of one day at a time applied.”

***Gillet decided to cut the wire—his tether to the world, to his life, his signal home.***

*“A night so riotously calm not a breath of air moved to cross the water. The sea mirrors the intense starlight making the sea as deep as the heavens are high. And the phosphorescence so bright even my lightstick is dimmed, easier to steer by the stars than by day.”*

Gillet is reading again from the journal. He reads at a distance, through the eyes of someone who’s graded a lot of writing. He uses choice words to describe his entries: laconic, sketchy, cryptic, quasi-poetic.

But he can still feel the emotion. He can still see his own hands, rubbed raw, scrawling all-capped, slanted letters with the black underwater crayon, shifting uncomfortably from saltwater sores wrapped in wet foul-weather gear.

“It’s so intense because it brings it all back,” he says. “I’m just ... there.”

What started as succinct entries in a navigation log—military time, geographic coordinates—veers closer to a reflection of Gillet’s unraveling inner state. Things were not well.

A physician friend had given Gillet a medical kit stocked with Halcion, which he used as a powerful sedative for “four hours of just perfect rest—bliss.” For 20 nights he took the medicine. Gillet did not know about the severe side-effects of continuous use. All he felt was the bouts of depression punctuated by huge spikes in anxiety.

Day 58. Gillet compiled in the journal a list of things that were going wrong, most notably unfavorable winds from the east-southeast, threatening to push him north of the islands. More panic attacks. *“Hands very cracked and swollen, probably diet-related, maybe should write a will here.”*

Ed looks up from the journal, says, “I’m not gonna make it.” He continues:

*“Everything I have I leave to my wife Katie, whom I love dearly. I’m sorry for causing you so much pain and grief.*

*I got two days food, no fish.”*

Starvation, sleep deprivation, open sores, nerve damage to his legs, uncertainty about living another day, side-effects of the Halcion amplifying his natural fight-or-flight impulses of awareness and alarm.

We’re clearly at the crux of the climb.

If he thought he might fall, Gillet had one last lifeline. He was carrying a prototype Argos radar transponder, designed to transmit environmental and location data one-way to a satellite. The 12-pound device was on loan from the Scripps Institute of Oceanography, where scientists had modified it to transmit a crude distress signal. Like a Hollywood time bomb, the device contained two wires. If Gillet cut the first wire, the Argos would transmit a signal meaning "Emergency: Watch Me." If he cut both wires, the transmission would mean "Emergency: Rescue Me."

Day 59. No sleep. Winds from the southeast continued. *"Feel like condemned man. One day food left. Winds southeast. 30 miles day's run and north by five miles."*

Gillet decided to cut the first wire. He

When Gillet was some 450 miles from California, waiting for the trades that never came, the Argos's signal had died. And then it came right back on. Those watching back home figured it for an electronic fluke. But by Day 60, when Gillet was some 20 days overdue, Ed Gillet, Sr. started hitting very real panic buttons. The Pensacola, Fla.-based air traffic controller wrote the commandant of the Coast Guard, even requesting help from President Reagan to launch a search. He called friends in the Navy, who started a rescue projection of Gillet's possible location. The Navy deemed a full-scale search unrealistic based on Gillet's last confirmed position: more than a month prior when the kayaker had communicated by VHF radio with passing naval vessels. Ironically, it was the warships' radar systems

white Colgate toothpaste—*"BUT"*—and I put a big 'but' with like five lines under it—*'noon sight brought good news. The current is stopped and I dropped 10 miles'*—I was clawing my way south to get back online—*'since yesterday, tied kite to keep angle to wind and it's working perfectly'*."

Gillet continued paddling with the wind. He picked up a Hawaiian VHF broadcast. Still no boats, but he began to see more jet trails, closer together.

Day 63. Gillet's sun-sight was interrupted by a blip on the southern horizon. He looked again. The realization hit him: Mauna Kea. The trades piled up clouds on the windward side of the islands' 13,803-foot summit. He was drifting toward the channel between Maui and Molokai. Gillet paddled through the day and night.

"The most intense part was the change in swell pattern," he says. "And once I came in the lee of the island, the wind changed ... the breeze blows from the land over the water and I could smell the land and it was so different from the ocean smell: little bit of car exhaust mixed in with all of the earth. Hawaii's a really verdant place and it just washed over me."

His head-space was changing rapidly as well. "I'd been this sea creature and I'd consumed my entire support system, like traveling through space and I pull up on this island, depleted completely—physically and emotionally."

Sixty-four days after kissing Ed goodbye in Monterey Bay, Katie felt the need to clear her mind. She did what Ed would: headed to sea.

She sculled alone past the jetty. Out to the blue expanse.

"I said, 'Okay, Ed, I've had enough. It's time to get in.'"

She returned to the shop, where Alex Oppedyk was running things for the day.

"Alex comes running down the hall, and says, 'HE'S ALIVE,' and he picks me up, he's this giant Dutch guy, and he's twirling me: 'Aliiiiive!'"

"He's alive?" I ask, and he says, 'ED!' and then the store just filled up with people."

On Day 64—August 27, 1987—Gillet's kayak scrunched the sand, "And that was it. The trip was over."



### LANDFALL:

Noon on Maui, \$22 worth of Häagen-Dazs later, Gillet revels as a simple matter of fact. *"It's the same feeling I've had ever since: It's just something I did!"*

crawled to the bow, pulled up the device. The "big deal" moment stood out. His tether to the world, to his life, this signal home was vital.

*"Switched argos to emergency. Hope to see ship tomorrow or next day. Feel very weak. Attacks diminished."*

The Argos had not been working for six weeks.

*"Definite current setting me north. Weakest day so far. Day's run only 15 miles."*

that had detuned the Argos's transmission frequency.

Coast Guard officials in Hawaii refused to look for Gillet. "They told me, 'We'll never be able to find him, he's an ant,'" Katie says. The local media in San Diego began to call Katie, requesting interviews. 'Kayaker Lost at Sea' stories began to appear in the press.

Day 61. The tradewinds return. *"Although not strong."*

*"Ate last meal this morning,"*—the last meal was some tomato powder and some

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Gillet dug up a cleaner shirt, some flip-flops, the \$30 he'd tucked away, and limped to shore wondering where Katie and the greeting party must be. A woman asked to pray with him, a drunk asked where he came from. The desk clerk at the Maui Beach Hotel was even more confused by the crazed and burnt man who raided the hotel sundry shop for ice cream and pre-packaged, triangular-cut sandwiches.

"The guy looked at me like I was a homeless person. I said, 'I just wanna make a phone call.'"

He called the shop, expecting to get Katie but she was out rowing, "So I talked to Alex, he says, 'Fuck, you're alive!' and I thought, 'What? What do you mean I'm alive? Was there any doubt?'"

Gillet then called his father. Hung up, took his sandwiches and relished them in the shade, "as satisfied as I've ever been in my life. I had absolutely no desire to be anywhere else or do anything different—just sitting there completely at peace." Maybe the Argos malfunction wasn't a bad thing. Arriving under the radar made sense. "I'm just thinking, 'Hey, I'm here. This is good.'"

The pay phone at the Maui Beach Hotel started ringing.

And that phone never stopped.

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So why did he take my call?

He vowed in the journal to never promote or even talk about what transpired.

"I felt it was a vision-quest of sorts," Gillet explains, "It was so personal and so powerful that to talk about it would be to weaken it and to take all the power away."

Now, however, "It's far enough away." The anger and resentment has faded. He understands the fascination, at least the part when the "feat" is considered in and of itself, when you add up more than 2,200 miles.

But that feat of endurance was just a succession of small trips and long days. "When you're in that moment," Gillet says, "you survive for that day and get on to the next day." The deeper feelings in that incredible moment on the edge, however, are never going away.

I caught him this summer with time to kill. He was at a screening appointment for Katie, helping her through a long battle with thyroid cancer, now in remission. Okay, he said. He'd talk about it. As I asked how deep the experience cut, he watched the coffee cart go by. It took him straight to the kayak. As he slept in mid-Pacific, knocked out by exhaustion and Halcion, a rogue wave had ripped a deck-bag overboard with his stove, cooking pans, and the last of his powdered coffee. Two weeks later, he spotted a cup floating on the water.

"I guess a cruise ship had gone by and somebody had thrown a Styrofoam cup overboard and it had a dried up,

crusty coffee in it," says Gillet, who snatched the cup and grabbed his backup propane stove inside his cockpit. "I rehydrated it like a heroin addict or something. I drank that down—it was so good."

These are the flashbacks he doesn't mind revisiting—ones that let him appreciate the small things. But though he had no long-term physical injuries or scars, the experience remains "a huge part of my inner consciousness."

He learned his limit. He can only explain the parameters of that edge with a grainy video clip. Gillet recognizes it in the eyes of Andrew McAuley, another driven adventurer who brought a mountaineering mindset to his 2007 quest to paddle a stock kayak from Australia to New Zealand. His tragic disappearance in the Tasman Sea—a day shy from completing the trip after a month of punishing paddling—was well documented, as rescuers recovered his kayak with some of his camera footage intact. It captures McAuley's tortured inner monologue in a

way that Gillet's journal never could.

"You can see it," Gillet says. "He has the camera on him and he films himself and says, 'Fuck this, I'll never do this again,' then the next breath, he says, 'Yeah, this is a great adventure' and he's looking around, not even aware of the camera, and he's got this haunted look in his eyes and I just totally see that: being of two minds."

The constant tug between fight and flight, the fine line between misery and exhilaration: Gillet can only describe the experience as being perpetually stuck in this intense plane of "double consciousness."

"I felt really stupid the whole time, selfish trying to pull this off," he says. "But knowing at the same time that this is also an incredible moment. Like you're in this place no one else had been! You're in the middle of the ocean in a kayak! It's like that: Incredible! This is so stupid ... And even with that feeling in that moment, at the same time: Okay, I have to keep going, I can't turn around."

That act of reckoning, of going when "every fiber in your body says turn around," has a definite appeal. Gillet gets it, he understands the archetypal quest: "People want to go and prove themselves and there's just no way to do that in ordinary life." He can see why men like Vidmar, Biles and Hand are drawn to the concept of "the crossing" as this ultimate test.

Gillet also can see what perhaps the others cannot: This is not an ordinary A-to-B expedition that one can control with the correct packing list, itinerary, the proper gameplan for calories-per-day.

Sure, Gillet has plenty of advice in that regard. Were he to do it again, he'd swim to clean his hull, he'd take a dodger canopy, he'd stuff in that extra pack of bagels left on the Monterey docks. Maybe he'd take a few more books on tape.

But there was, literally, no map for this trip. "You don't need a chart to hit a point," says Gillet, who would simply crunch numbers, scrawling the coordinates like a

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prisoner right on the side of the boat, reflecting in the journal, “*same ocean, different numbers.*”

“I was in the same place, almost like nothing changes—every place on the ocean was really unique—but the experience was the same, like sitting in the center of this universe and paddling this boat, but there was no sense of crossing an ocean, or a destination. My horizon had shrunk to just keep paddling.”

This is not a trip tailored to advice. There are too many variables. Gillet guesses that if he attempted the crossing the same way 10 times, he’d die on five of the attempts.

It’s a game of committing to deal with one’s body, the ocean, the weather. Adapting and surviving. “Space and time change completely and you’re in this moment and when the sea lets you go, that’s when you get up.”

What he’ll never quite get though, is the admiration. A magazine story that claims it as the “boldest kayak voyage ever survived”? Sure, “no gringo has done it,” he quips, taking a long view back at the Pacific’s great ocean voyages, quests from a different time when individuals would answer a calling for the sake of adventure alone. Expeditions without live-Tweets. Journeys without endings.

It was never about the kayak. He was simply seeking.

“Whatever it was I was looking for, I’m still looking for it,” he says. There were no answers there. There’s no answer.”

We still want a glimpse of what he saw on the other side. Like the students in his classroom or on hundreds of his guided trips, regular paddlers seek him out to find something out about themselves—perhaps they might learn something by quietly going and doing, they might go farther than they thought.

There is one last open end. Gillet plans to teach for few more years, then sell the house, cash out, buy a boat, and sail away with Katie. Always moving ahead to the next horizon.

After all, he’s never ventured beyond Hawaii. ■