

Upside Down - Literary Club Paper 2020

I first learned to sail while summering with my grandparents on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Learned the basics of sailing on 19 and 23 foot boats called Stars and Lightnings, taught by the neighboring teens as their crew. two kids per boat, one at the tiller, one managing the sails. Racing around sets of buoys, and learning about tacking and rights of ways and starboard and port - the left side of a boat, not the wine. Fun stuff for a 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 year old.

My experiences progressed to crewing on one of the great lake racing sailboats, something called an E Scow, while at Camp Hayo Went Ha on Torch Lake. This is a 28 foot high performance racing boat with a crew of four where everyone but the skipper put their feet into straps to hang out over the windward side to prevent tipping over - something to be avoided on a sailboat, or any other boat for that matter. Also something the full importance of which i didn't fully internalize until years later, as i shall disclose.

Anyway, after camp and with the death of my grandparents, my sailing days ended. That is, ended until 1975, when my then newly married wife and I received a most intriguing postcard. This is a postcard I shall remember forever. On the front was the picture a gorgeous 30-something woman standing on the deck of a most impressive sailboat in some idyllic looking harbor, and wearing a T-shirt bearing the inscription "No Frigging in the Rigging". On the back was the very simple message - Come Join Us - with a name and telephone number.

I had zero idea who had sent this note, but my bride thought she did. Turns out these were long term friends of her parents, Lois and Bud, who had apparently done SOMETHING right, had recently bought the sailboat shown on the postcard and were looking for friends to come to Tortola in the British Virgin Islands

and go sailing with them. Being childless and young, our answer was an immediate yes as you might suspect and thus began a delightful series of sailing adventures.

That first boat was a 47 foot sloop-rigged ocean racer designed and built in Britain by Miller and Whitworth. For reference, a sloop is a sailing boat having a single mast with one mainsail aft or behind the mast and one headsail fore or in front of the mast. As you might suspect this is called a fore and aft rig, and with triangular sails both for and aft, is called a Bermuda rig.

In any event, we were soon to discover that our inviting owner was a highly competitive and recently retired entrepreneur named Bud, who was now spending his retirement time, and money, learning to sail and working to develop improvements to his new water toy. We would become his test crew.

On our initial trip, we flew into the island of Tortola and sailed around the US and British Virgin Islands, worked our tails off raising and lowering sails, pulling in and letting out mainsails, jibs and spinnakers, always trying to out-sail and out-race every other boat in the area, most of whom had no knowledge of and undoubtedly no interest in racing the boat captained by our super competitive skipper. The one we quickly named Captain Bligh, the Commander whose over-bearing style resulted in the infamous Mutiny on the Bounty.

While being yelled at all day long might sound negative and raise questions about why we enjoyed this so much, unending sunshine and 70 to 80 degree winds quickly blew away the frost-bitten memories of winter in Cincinnati, and having to live with someone my Army drill sergeants would have been proud to count in their numbers seemed a small price to pay.

Bottom line, we loved it, and over the next several years of repeat trips, we sailed throughout the Virgin Islands and all points South,

stopping for overnights on many of those magical Caribbean paradises: Antigua, Saint Kitts, Montserrat, Martinique, Saint Barts; most of the string of islands which run down a chain towards Venezuela. Each with its own idyllic harbor for easy anchoring and each with its own very friendly beach bar providing regenerative rum refreshments. Many were owned or at least staffed by previously itinerant sailors who had originally stopped by for a night or two, but been captured by the perfect weather and easy lifestyle. Sitting on low canvas beach chairs with your feet in the softly lapping waters while sipping a freshly made pina colada or Pussers painkiller truly makes the problems of the real world evaporate into the evening sunset.

But back to the sailing.

What had been a biennial couples tradition morphed in 1978 into longer trips with an all male crew, from Bud's home port of Annapolis to Tortola to take his Matchless toy south for the winter. Those trips, which took 6 or 7 days, were frankly became a bit boring. We could just set the sail, lock on the self steering autopilot, then sit back for hours upon hours cruising the trade winds and baking in or hiding from the scorching hot Caribbean sun on relatively flat and totally unpopulated seas. After two such trips, I began to question my interest in repeating this non-adventure even if invited.

But in early summer 1985, I received a very excited call from our Captain Bligh. He said had just purchased a new, bigger, more refined sailboat, had it delivered from England over the summer to Annapolis, and was putting together a crew to sail her to the BVI that fall.

He said this was one of the greatest ocean sailboats ever built and here was an offer to one more time take the big trip down, but this time in luxury. Being 37 years old and given the chance

to sail without any of the discomforts of the previous Matchless, I could not resist. What could possibly go wrong?

So on Saturday, November 8th of that year, I flew to Washington, DC, and after a bit of a Chinese fire-drill at the airport rounding up other crew members and assorted missing luggage, we drove with our captain to the docks at Annapolis, and had our introduction to the new boat, christened Matchless Two. And what a boat she is. Matchless Two is a Swan 65, 65 feet long at the waterline as her name suggests or about two thirds the length of the Literary Club main room from front to back, with an 80 foot high mast, the height of an 8-story building.

But the differences between Matchless and Matchless Two were much more than the 50% difference in sheer length or mast height. The original Matchless was stripped down to the necessities for racing, everything fiberglass and minimal cushioning with no extra comforts. Matchless Two was luxury itself. Everything below decks was done in beautiful mahogany panelling. There is a big sitting area, four individual cabins for the crew, better heads, a built-in refrigerator and freezer versus an ice chest, running water - except for the pump toilets - great electronics, and much better ventilation including even fans below deck, a luxury not to be discounted when traveling in the Caribbean. We all looked wide-eyed, and decided this was gonna be fun. Little did we know.

There were seven of us. Our Captain Bligh, myself, my friend Bob from Cincinnati; two friends of Bud's from Virginia named Big John and Little John; and two Englishmen named Nick and George who had helped bring the newly purchased boat across the Atlantic. All of us had at least a fair amount of experience sailing big boats, though none was quite prepared for what we were about to encounter.

After a nice going away dinner and a Saturday morning spent on final chores, we topped off the water on board and headed out from Annapolis onto the Chesapeake. This would normally have been a straight run with the wind behind us, but for some reason, the wind was coming directly on our nose so we had to tack all the way out. Kind of a pain, but this gave us some experience with all the lines, jib sheets and sails on our new boat and nobody seemed to care about the bit of work involved. I certainly didn't.

By Sunday we were well into the Atlantic, and it was an absolutely spectacular day, beautiful sunrise and bright blue sky. But that afternoon things began to change. We were under full sun, but heading directly toward what increasingly looked to be a very threatening weather system. Being guys, we exercised both caution and bravado. In caution, we changed from the huge Genoa jib we had been flying to a much smaller jib, and even single reefed the mainsail. But our bravado kept us heading directly toward the rapidly darkening sky. Until, just to port, we first saw and soon heard a huge waterspout, that tornado of the oceans. This thing was several hundred feet across and reaching way up to the clouds, and I had visions of Dorothy and Toto and the Wizard of Oz in Kansas.

We quickly decided discretion was the better part of valor, turned hard South and ended up missing all but a brief shower. But none of the weather forecasts we had received before departing had mentioned incoming storms, so something was clearly amiss.

That evening the air around us suddenly became dramatically warmer, jumping probably 15 to 20 degrees in a half hour or less. This made being on deck and at the helm more comfortable, but now the winds were rising, and the size of the waves were increasing even as we entered the late afternoon, when normally things calm down from the peaks caused by heat of the day. This was again unexpected, and unexpected is not a good thing on a

sailboat in the middle of the ocean approaching the infamous Bermuda Triangle, the not-for-nothing named the graveyard of the Atlantic. .

From this point on, everything began to accelerate. We were in radio communication with the Coast Guard at the beginning of each watch, and after reporting the waterspout, there followed a series of calls that went something like this:

Coast Guard: Our systems show 10 to 15 knot winds, light rain and 6 to 8 foot seas off-shore.

Matchless: We are experiencing 20 to 30 knot winds and rain, and 10 foot seas

Six hours later

Coast Guard: Our systems show 30-40 knot winds, heavy rain and 10 foot seas

Matchless: We are experiencing 40-50 knot winds and 15 to 20 foot seas.

For reference, sea wave height is the distance from the bottom of a wave trough to the top of the wave. The deck of Matchless Two at the helm in the stern stood about 8 feet above the water. So when we were at the bottom of a wave in 15 foot seas, we were actually looking look UP at the next wave coming in.

This was starting to get exciting. And we were beginning to do more than just sailing. We began actually surfing the waves as they passed beneath us.

Surfing a wave works something like this. As each new wave lifted our little sailboat from the trough to its peak, we would head the boat down the far side of this receding wall of water and begin to fall forward across the wave face. Just as surfers do when they catch a wave. Aimed and timed just right, we could actually be falling down successive waves for not just seconds

but literally minutes at a time. It required careful steering from the helm, which became only harder as the wave heights increased.

And just as in regular surfing toward a beach, there was the inevitable bottom at the end of each surfing run. In our case, this resulted in burying the bow of our boat ever deeper into the start of the next wave.

Early on, this was just interesting, watching a foot of water come over the bow and quickly run off the sides of the deck as we pitched from pointing down one wave to pointing up the new one. By the time we first began burying the bow we cleared the deck fore and aft of all loose paraphernalia, cushions and such, and secured all the sheets and other lines on deck. We closed both the fore and aft hatches, the only ways from the deck into the main cabin, and these were then opened only when changing the deck crew for the next watch.

We began reefing the main sail, moved to smaller jibs - we has four sizes of jibs and used them all - and began wearing safety harnesses every time we went on watch. But we were having a great time, real men fighting the increasing seas of the growing storm.

After 36 hours of increasing intensity, the Coast Guard reported that our storm now had sustained wind speeds in excess of 75 knots, and the storm we had discovered was now officially designated hurricane Kate. We had by now fully reefed the main sail, and were flying along using only the smallest storm jib. Yet we were still able to routinely hit speeds over 20 knots, well above our boat's theoretical 14 knot hull speed, as we continued surfing our way forward.

Watches were reduced from four hours to two and then to one, as the energy to keep the ship on heading through the driving wind and rain was exhausting. At the peak, it took two of us

standing side by side just to hold the 4 foot steering wheel or helm and keep us on course.

But still we kept sailing. On hindsight, I am reminded of the fable of the boiling frog, the premise being that if a frog is put suddenly into boiling water, it will jump out, but if the frog is put in tepid water which is then brought to a boil slowly, it will not perceive the danger and will be cooked to death. In our case, we were the frogs. We saw and felt the power of the storm, we theoretically knew the danger, but we had absolute faith we could continue to plow through this and be heroes to one and all.

And so it continued, for another 12 hours. And all was well. Until it wasn't.

Sometime during the night of the third day in the storm, while i was lying exhausted in my bunk after my latest shift on deck, a crazy thing happened. A rogue wave hit us perpendicular to those now 30 to 40 foot waves we were then surfing, knocked us over and rolled the boat almost 180 degrees, until the mast was pointing down, not up. As i mentioned at the start of this paper, this is something to be avoided in a sailboat.

Fortunately, the hatch covers were closed and our Swan had a two ton keel that slowly but surely rolled us back to right side up. But our storm sailing was over. The little storm jib, the only sail we had been flying at that point, had been shredded. There had been nothing on deck, except the two helmsmen, who later reported they knew we had a problem when they were looking UP at the water as they held on for dear life. Below decks, I was only thrown against the hammock where i was lying in my bunk. But Big John was thrown from his bunk on the lower port side across to knock out a speaker on the upper starboard side. And for full confirmation of how far we had rolled, one of the knives in a lower drop down drawer in the gallery had fallen and was now

imbedded in the galley ceiling. The fact that we had no major injuries to crew or boat was a minor miracle.

The remainder of the trip, after sitting for half a day just bobbing in winds that was reported to exceed 100 miles per hour, was without incident. On hearing of our misadventure, the Coast Guard actually sent out a helicopter and asked if we wanted to be picked up. Remembering the law of the sea, that any abandoned boat became the property of whomever brings it into harbor, we politely passed.

They also asked if we would like to be patched through to our families, and when we said yes, I only remember the question one wife asked. Why didn't we just drop an anchor and wait out the storm. When we pointed out that the bottom was over 2 miles down making anchoring a bit out of the question, I'm not sure we provided much reassurance.

But hurricane Kate eventually ran off to the north, we re-raised our sails, and blew gently into the harbor on Tortola. To land at the pier, wobble up the dock and again sit for a most appreciated rum beverage on dry land.

Seeing myself as a rational person, I have never sailed again. But i would not give up that memory for any other.

Thank you for your attention.

(Authors Note: I subsequently learned this Wikipedia definition: **Broaching** is when the boat heels too far to one side, or capsizes. The boat falls on its ear, its bow driving into the direction of the wind. The mast tips sideways, forcing its **sails** to sweep the water's surface or submerge. A **broach** can shred **sails** and toss crewmen overboard. We clearly **broached**. including the shredded sail part but thankfully without any lost crew.)