

Three Ways to Capsize a Boat

An Optimist Afloat

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Extract

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TEACH YOURSELF SAILING

It was Julie Miller who sent me to sea, one wet autumn afternoon on the Wandsworth Road. Now of course you haven't a clue who Julie Miller is – why should you? – but her relevance to this episode is that she had a great aunt called Jane Joyce.

'Chris!' yelled Julie, who was more than a match for the thundering of London traffic, 'What a fantastic coincidence. I've been longing to see you and there is something I particularly wanted to ask you... what was it now? Ah yes, how would you like a job looking after a yacht in the Greek Islands this summer?'

'I'd like that very much,' I replied, quick as a flash. 'As it happens I'm not too busy this summer.' Which was the long and the short of it, for at the tender age of twenty-nine my career as a sheepfarmer had just hit the skids. The bank had refused any further loans to nurture the flock that my girlfriend Ana and I were tending on rented land in Sussex, and my 'prospects', as my mother insisted on calling them, were not looking overly bright.

'Terrific,' said Julie. 'That's a very great relief. My Great

Three Ways to Capsize a Boat

Aunt Jane has been on at me for weeks to find a skipper, and I thought of you straightaway.'

Which, it must be said, was a peculiar thing to think. For I had never been on a boat before in my life, and didn't know the first thing about sailing. But I desperately wanted a job, so it struck me that it might be best to keep such minor details to myself.



Clearly, the first thing to do was to bone up on boating in order to conduct myself satisfactorily at the interview. So I bought Teach Yourself Sailing or some such guide and immersed myself in it. It was not, I thought, quite as gripping as a book on such an interesting subject ought to be, and I emerged from it with only the haziest notions. If I had the pictures in front of me I could tell the difference between a sloop (gaff-rigged or Bermuda), a schooner, a ketch and a yawl; I had a very vague idea what beating and tacking and running were; I had learnt the undesirability of gybing when running; and I could tell you more or less when to reef, or if things cut up really rough, to scandalise.

I did a little work on the vocabulary, too. I discovered that ropes were not actually ropes, but sheets, lines, halyards, warps, painters, stays or ratlines. The toilet was not the dunny but the heads. Of course the front wasn't the front and the back wasn't the back.... then there was a fid and the bitts and take-alls, there were peaks, luffs and clews, and if you didn't feel too good you could always heave to.

Teach Yourself Sailing

Friends and family were concerned about my cavalier attitude and horribly obvious ignorance. 'What if you tip the old bird into the drink?' they asked. 'How would you live with yourself if you (1) drowned the lot of them, (2) wrecked the boat, and (3) killed yourself in the process?'

I pointed out the tautology, reassured them that things would turn out for the best, and dialled the number of my patron-to-be. A pleasingly patrician American voice answered.

'But my dear, I have been simply longing for you to ring. Dear Julie has told me all about you and I simply cannot wait to meet you in the flesh, so to speak. However, things being what they are I shall have to, so perhaps Tuesday evening at eight-o'clock would suit you?'

I returned my nose to the sailing book and tested myself one more time on vocabulary – full and by, gybing, reaching, tacking... goose wing, veering, backing. Then, got up like a dog's dinner – I think I even wore a tie – rang the bell at two minutes to eight at a very opulent brick apartment block in Cadogan Square. A tall, slightly stooped octogenarian opened the door. He had thick white hair, a bulbous nose, and spoke quietly in a voice that was full of slowness and gentleness.

'Why, you must be Chris,' he offered me his hand which I shook as firmly as I thought proper for one so frail. 'Welcome. Come in. I'm Bob Joyce, but please call me Bob. Jane will be down shortly, in the meantime perhaps you'd care for a drink.'

'I'll have a whisky and soda...' I replied. It seemed the right drink for a captain, though I can't remember ordering

Three Ways to Capsize a Boat

the drink from choice on any other occasion.

‘Very sensible too. Ice?’

‘Er, yes please.’

Bob busied himself at the drinks cabinet. I took stock of my surroundings – immense but rather gloomy opulence.

‘Yes you’re right, it is a little on the tenebrous side, but we’ve only taken it for a few months – and at least it’s warm.’ Funny, I hadn’t said anything. ‘Here, have a seat Chris. I believe you’re to be our skipper this summer?’

‘Yes that’s right, or rather I hope so.’

‘Well I hope so too, Chris. Cheers. It’s no good talking to me about boats though; I hate the damn things. The boat is my wife’s hobby.’

A rustle of expensive materials, a scent of gardenias and Jane was down.

‘Chris, how good of you to come. I am charmed to meet you. Now Bobby have you given our skipper a drink? Yes, good, I see you have. Please sit down.’

Jane was a whirlwind of a woman, getting on for seventy, I supposed, but still quite a beauty, and with an air of ease and power. I fumbled for something nautical to say but hell, we didn’t want to get into all that stuff about heads and bitts just yet. Jane was running the show anyway. Bob sipped his whisky and drummed his fingers on his knee.

Jane poured herself a drink and sat down opposite me, looking at me keenly as she made her assessment.

‘Chris, I feel sure we shall get along wonderfully well; your references are impeccable. I won’t even tell you what Julie said about you – and Julie is a person whose opinions I take very seriously. Now, I imagine you know all there is

Teach Yourself Sailing

to know about sailing, so we needn't bother ourselves with that...'

Idiotically, I failed to take this easy escape route. My brain was still in sailing mode, and I was desperately trying to come up with something which would give Jane the impression that I was a nautical sort of a person.

'Is... is she a gaffer?' I spluttered.

'I beg your pardon, my dear?'

'I mean the boat, the yacht... is she a gaffer?'

'Is she a what?' Her face took on a rather pained expression.

'A gaffer – you know, gaff-rigged...'

'I haven't the faintest idea, Chris. Does it matter?'

'No – no, not at all, just curiosity. I'd sort of like to know what sort of boat I'll be sailing.'

'Well I'll tell you what I'll do; I'll send you the brochure and everything else, all the details before you come.'

This was a piece of cake, like taking candy from a baby. Bob poured me another whisky while Jane filled me in on my duties. My pay would be fifty pounds a week plus a living allowance. I would collect the boat from where it was moored at a marina near Athens, and sail it down to the island of Spetses, and there we would spend the summer. I would start in May, to get the boat ready for the Joyces' arrival. Jane, in spite of the apparent grace of her carriage, was about to undergo a double hip transplant. The summer sailing season would start as soon as she recovered from the operation.

And that was that. I had passed the interview – albeit, as the only applicant. Which, thinking about it, is really my preferred sort of interview. All of a sudden I was a Greek

Three Ways to Capsize a Boat

island yacht skipper, with a bigger pay packet than I'd ever had before, and a long summer of sunshine and sailing before me. My ship, you might say, had come in.

I skipped ecstatically across Battersea Bridge, to where I was staying with my sister. And as I skipped, the first cloud of doubt began to form. From what I had seen of these Joyces, I liked them; and they were family – insofar as godparents are family – to some cherished friends of mine. Perhaps my critical friends and family were right, and it was time I started to take this business a little more seriously.

When I returned to Sussex, I took Ana to our local pub and told her about my amazing good fortune. Now, as luck would have it, there was drinking in the pub at the time a man called Keith, who had for some time been trying to worm his way into the favours of Ana. I remember him as a rather malodorous person with a black beard, a boyish, chubby face, and not the remotest snowball in hell's chance of making it with my woman, because – apart from anything else – he was too damn mean to buy a round of drinks. I was crowing to him about my exciting windfall when he stopped me and said:

'It so happens that I've just bought my first boat. She's moored at Littlehampton and I don't have a car, so if you drive me down to the boat, I'll give you a sailing lesson.'

We cemented the pact with a beer... which I bought.