

Sailing—or Not

© by Rosemary Mild

I should have known from the start that this was another of my husband's really bad ideas. Marvin wanted a sailboat. He had read every book in existence about he-men like Joshua Slocum, who single-handed a sailboat around the world. Marvin ached to be one of them.

We had just moved from Brooklyn, New York, to Maryland for his new job as a writer with the federal government. We settled into an obscure community near Annapolis called Stillwater Estates. The little suburb was one of many crowded between two rivers, the Severn and the Magothy, both feeding into the Chesapeake Bay. I never liked the name "Magothy"; it sounded too much like "maggots."

Annapolis calls itself the "sailing capital of the world," but in 1968, Stillwater Estates was a place that time forgot. The largest store was Pantry Pride, from which I bought a Boston cream pie, apparently not fresh, and threw up for two hours.

We had moved there to be near the water—to fulfill Marvin's dream. The trouble was, he had never sailed anything except his toy boat in the bathtub. He'd never even set foot on a sailboat. He grew up a Jewish boy in a congested neighborhood in Queens, New York. When I married this blue-eyed, slender guy with curly hair, I was naïve, in denial about his true personality. He was high-strung, a glaring red flag for any sailor's temperament. Still, he had that yearning and frustration.

Adding to his discontent, my husband, Marvin Maurice Goldberg, hated his name. He longed to have one that reflected his macho alter ego. Preferably a herky name like actors Rip Torn or Vin Diesel. He swore that when he did his round-the-world sail he'd write a book about

it and use a pen name worthy of him. I could see it now. Bull Biceps Goldberg.

On weekends we went sightseeing in Washington, D.C. only an hour away. On one particular Saturday, Marvin kept driving—into Virginia, to Mount Vernon. *How thrilling*, I thought, *I've never been there*. After ending our tour at George Washington's slave quarters, Marvin laid it on me that he knew about a large marina nearby on the Potomac River. Now I got it. The sightseeing was just a pretext to check it out. We strolled down to the docks, when a tall, thin man with wire-rimmed glasses confronted us. *David Niven, reincarnated*, I thought, the imperious, elegant British actor. "Yes?" he asked, his clipped mustache bobbing up and down already in disapproval. "May I help you?"

Marvin cleared his throat. "Uh, yeah, we're planning on buying a sailboat and we wondered if we could dock it here."

"What size did you have in mind?"

"Eighteen feet, I guess. Around there."

David Niven's lips curled up at the corners in a forced almost-smile. "I don't think so," he sniffed. "We repair and moor Presidential yachts."

Marvin and I slunk away. A week later he slightly altered his dream. He'd found an ad for a twenty-foot power boat—motor *not* included—that "needs a little work, a great bargain at \$100." Now this was 1968. Today that would translate to \$1,000. Maybe more. The minute Marvin saw it he fell in love. And I fell in love with wishing I hadn't married him. The boat was a behemoth, a huge tub with about a dozen layers of paint, all visible, all chipped, curled up, and faded. You could see its history like rings on a tree. Had Washington crossed the Delaware in it?

We were in an early stage of marriage. When Marvin said "Take your checkbook" I obediently did, thus leaving myself no out like, "Sorry dear, I forgot it. Guess we can't do this."

Timidly, I asked, “Does it leak?”

“Only a little,” the owner mumbled, refusing to look me in the eye. “A few new planks should take care of it.”

Great, I thought. Marvin had never so much as picked up a screwdriver. “Flathead? Phillips? Are those cartoon characters?”

Three days later we took delivery on the tub. I stared out the living room window and gasped. In our driveway, it looked like an obese Noah’s Ark. On its trailer the tub bulged out sideways onto our lawn, casting a giant shadow that would replace any blades of grass trying desperately to grow. We would need to leave our cars on the street until Marvin could get the boat into seaworthy shape. Maybe in ten years. More likely, never.

Marvin visited every marine supply store in Annapolis, making like he fit into the seadog scene, and discovered that marine paint did not exactly cost the same as a gallon of exterior Sear’s paint. He shrugged. “We’ll just eat hot dogs more often.” *Oh, sure*, I thought. *Like we’d been dining on pheasant under glass and beef Wellington every night.*

We were munching on our Sunday bagels when the doorbell rang. Two men in creased chinos and polo shirts stood on the porch. Were they the Bobbsey twins of Stillwater Estates?

“Hi, I’m Dan Fallworth, our community association president, and this here is Hank Seitz, vice president. We know you’re new to the community. Welcome, by the way. But unfortunately there’s a problem that we need to bring to your attention.” His boardroom voice didn’t sound welcoming at all. Without an invitation, they barreled themselves through the door and into our living room, seating themselves as if they were our best friends.

“What seems to be the problem?” Marvin asked.

“It’s your boat,” Dan said. No pleasant sidling into the subject.

Marvin piped up brightly. “Yeah, it’s gonna be great when we get it all fixed up and—”

“That’s just it,” Dan interrupted. “You can’t do repairs to it here.”

Marvin sputtered, “Uh, you mean in the driveway? We can probably get it into the backyard. Of course, we’ll have to take down the chain link fence, but we’ll put it back up as soon as it’s ready to be moved to a marina and—”

Hank stopped him cold. “No, Marvin, you don’t understand. You’re not allowed to do boat repairs or even car repairs here in Stillwater Estates. Not in your own driveway. Not even in your own backyard.”

“Why not?” Marvin asked, pulling a cigarette pack out of his shirt pocket. He lit up his fifth or sixth smoke of the day.

Dan frowned, his bushy, black eyebrows turning into a single-line like a fuzzy caterpillar. “Well, it’s like this, Marvin. Our community covenants and restrictions forbid it. For all of us.”

“Community covenants? Restrictions?” Marvin’s voice squeaked. “Nobody ever told *us* about them.”

Oy vey! A faint memory of those documents hovered in the nether region of my brain. I remembered not reading them, just stuffing them in a folder as if they didn’t apply to us. After all, we’d been New Yorkers renting a fourth-floor walkup. What did we know about such rules?

Hank abruptly stood and crossed his beefy arms over his chest. “Surely,” he began with the soft, understanding voice of a prison guard, “you asked your real estate agent to provide you with a copy of the documents. No self-respecting home buyer would ignore such essential information. You have one week to get rid of that eyesore in your driveway.”

“Or what?” Marvin and I asked in unison.

The neighborhood Gestapo left without another word.

We sold our decrepit Noah's Ark for a buck two-ninety-eight. So much for my husband's fantasy of even motor-boating single-handed around the world. I assumed this costly debacle had convinced him that his obsession was reckless and irresponsible. Boy, was I wrong.

A year later, I was six months pregnant, and Marvin discovered an ad in our hometown newspaper for a sailboat: twenty feet, bargain-priced, docked just a few miles away on the Magothy River. After supper, when I was ready to put my feet up and commune with the miniature baby kicking joyfully in my belly, Marvin announced that Butch, the owner of this craft, would take us out for a sunset sail in half an hour.

The boat was docked at the end of a pier. Butch opened the hatch and pointed to the sleeping quarters down below: two short, pencil-thin bunks that might have been cozy for Tiny Tim. We sailed in a light breeze for a few minutes, close to shore, with Butch shouting instructions to Marvin. His most frequent advice: "If what you're doing doesn't work, do the opposite." Huh?

"Butch," I said, politely "I need to use your bathroom."

"It's called the head," he muttered. "We don't have one. We use a bucket."

"Maybe *you* use a bucket," I snapped. "Marvin! I need to go home. Now!"

Before he could even respond, the sailboat jolted forward, *thunk, thunk, thud*, and lurched to a halt. "I'll be damned," Butch said, "we've run aground."

Our sunset sail had ended. Darkness descended. We now had only a half-moon to guide us. Marvin tried to hide his annoyance. "I thought you knew these waters."

"Well, uh, my wife and I just moved here a month ago."

"Where from?" Marvin asked.

"Kansas. The boat came with the house. I've only had 'er out once."

Wonderful. It was then that I learned a new word: kedging. Butch dug through a storage cabinet in the stern and hauled out a small anchor attached to a long rope. “This’ll do it,” he said. He threw the anchor out about 10 feet. It plopped into the water. “Kedging works great,” he said. “What happens is, the anchor hooks into the mud and sand. I pull on the rope and free the boat. It’ll get us outta here.”

He pulled and grunted. We sat and sat, my bladder near bursting. The kedging didn’t work. But something else did. The tide started coming in. The boat lifted up just a fraction, and floated. Hooray! But then a fresh problem caught us. The wind had decided to take a nap; we were becalmed. “Good thing I installed this outboard motor,” Butch said with strained cheeriness. He yanked on the string, again and again. Finally the engine caught and we putt-putted along. “Is this egg beater ever going to get us there?” I whined.

Our host looked crushed. At the dock, the two men helped me out, but Butch kept Marvin on the boat, still pathetically continuing his sales pitch, followed by instructions on how to lower sails and make the craft shipshape, I silently stole away, ten or fifteen feet along the narrow sandy beach. In the dark, near a shadowed clump of mangroves, I lowered my bulky self onto the sand and stretched my legs out primly in front of me. Carefully, I hiked up my maternity dress, fluffed the skirt out of harm’s way—and peed.

Marvin did not make an offer on the boat. Even he was disillusioned.

My seventh month and I had already ballooned. Marvin seemed not to notice. Still pursuing his dream, he discovered another ad, this one in the *Washington Post*. “Not again,” I wailed. The ad hawked the Klepper Boat, “for the sailor on a budget.” Pregnancy had obviously clouded my judgment and resolve. We drove to D.C. to check it out. When we arrived, I expected a large, inviting showroom with bright lights, pretty boats, and salesmen in navy

blazers with gold buttons. *The* salesman had slicked-back hair, wore a faded windbreaker, and had a nametag: Oliver. His domain was a single room containing two steel desks with swivel chairs, a few file cabinets, and a coffeemaker on the counter. My first thought was, *This furniture is hot, stolen from heaven knows where. It just came off a panel truck heading down I-95.* Where was the showroom? Oliver led us downstairs into the basement. And behold! There on the floor sat a gray rubber canoe. Fitted out in the bow was a vertical stick, “the mast,” Oily Oliver called it. It had a triangular sail attached.

“The advantage to this awesome craft,” he bragged, “is that it’s inflatable! And it comes with paddles if you’re just going canoeing. You can take this baby anywhere, deflated in your trunk, and just pump it up. It’s a breeze,” he laughed, “if you’ll excuse the pun.”

Several hundred dollars poorer, on a chilly Sunday morning, we drove fifteen miles down to the South River. We found a patch of beach that didn’t look private to set up our Klepper. But that was our last shred of good luck that day. Oily Oliver had lied. The little pump proved not to be a breeze. It took forty-five minutes to inflate, with Marvin sweating and swearing. If curses were tornadoes, we’d have been in the eye of the storm. Finally, our Klepper puffed up to its full glory. Marvin propped up the mast with the sail “rigged” to it (in proper lingo) and dragged the canoe to the water’s edge. I lowered myself heavily into the bow, Marvin climbed into the stern and we set sail. Sort of. Our craft sat lower in the water than I’d expected, with my belly higher than the gunwales, making me feel extra vulnerable. I wanted to be home, safe on the couch, reading the Sunday funnies. By now, the South River was populated with sailboats, kayaks, and motor boats. We bobbed and splashed as the wakes of the other boats tossed us about. But for a few minutes our little sail actually propelled us forward.

Suddenly, the light breeze turned brisk, then instantly into aggressive gusts. And the

worst happened. The bow of our rubber canoe folded over, to the left, taking the puny stick of a mast and the sail straight down with it. The mast hit the gunwale and the sail flopped into the South River. Our rig now lay parallel to the water in humiliating defeat. The reason was obvious: the mast was improperly designed. It had never been “seated” in a wooden structure that would have kept it upright. The inventor of this wretched Klepper had never heard of wind!

Experienced boaters passed us slowly, looking curious and baffled. An old salt on his forty-footer snickered. Several kind people called out, “Would you like some help?” Meaning, want a tow? Marvin bravely waved back, “No, thanks.” He began paddling. I paddled, too, but laboriously. Somehow we made it back to the tiny beach. We climbed out, and Marvin stomped around, breathing fire. I expected him to deflate the canoe and stash it in our trunk. Oh, no. He’d had it. He grabbed my hand and trudged through the sand toward our car. “Don’t even look back,” he growled, like Lot telling his wife as they fled from Sodom. “Forget the damned thing.”

I often wonder what happened to it. At first I romantically thought it would float back into the water, sink, and become known to the locals as the Klepper Coral Reef. Then I remembered: coral does not grow on rubber, or any other soft surface. Well, then, maybe kids are playing in it, enjoying the free canoe. That would be the next best thing.

Our baby girl was born, and nine years later, Marvin and I divorced. My loving, sensible second husband is a Navy veteran, who logged a hundred-thousand miles at sea during the Korean War. No way would he own a boat.

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