

# BREAKING OUT OF BREST

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For  
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**N**apoleon's fleet was blockaded in Brest by the dogged British Channel Fleet — the formidable wooden walls of England, studded with iron guns, manned by "hearts of oak."

Those Frenchies had it easy. Getting past Admiral Nelson would be easier than avoiding the puckish water-spirits of the Chesapeake.

My breakout from Shady Side and the mudbound West River was delayed by a wickedly uncooperative engine, a single cylinder Finnish Tundra Revenge, Model 1889. It continued to refuse all signs of life despite tearful checks of fuel lines, filters, spark, sacrificed chickens, sand paintings and calls to the Psychic Hotline.

Bad juju. Dismissing MIT as a reliable source of guidance, I approached a southern Maryland shade-tree engineer at the auto parts store. "Vernon, could my sparkplug be bad? It seems fine but my high-tech digital continuity instrument indicates electrical resistance between the stem and firing point. Why is that?"

"Wall, 'course you got resistance, there. See this little old 'R' in the product number, this little guy right here? That stands for 'ree-sister.' She got a ree-sister in'ayre."

"Under the porcelain?"

"Porcelain?"

"Under the white stuff?"

"Must be where they put it. A ree-sister. An you know what 'ats for? Radios. Knocks out hiss and static you get from the igg-nition. See?"

"How?"

Pause. Contemplative look. Sudden bawling, "Buss! Hey Buss! Why'zis ree-sister stomping the static on . . ."

"No, that's okay, Vernon. But how does a spark plug fail? It's so simple."

"Could be the wrong make. You might go Autolite 'stead of a Delco."

"They have the same number?"

"Yup. S'posed to be the same plug but some just work better in this engine or that'n. Could just be gassed up, too."

"Gassed up?"

"Yup. All soaked up with gas."

"This happens to a sparkplug? The porcelain absorbs gasoline?"

"Porcelain?"

"White stuff."

"Yup. Takes 'at gas in, you throw her away, buy 'nother."

"And some spark plugs work better than another?"

"'At's the way it seems to work."

I am like Carlos Castenades discovering the Mexican mystic, Don Juan, disguised as a village layabout. Years of research in scientific matters fly out the window, followed by logic. “O-kay,” I say in the tone a man might use in telling his surgeon to go ahead with the experimental baboon heart transplant, “Give me an Autolite.”

At *Groucho's* dock, I wriggled into the cockpit upside down, hooked my feet in the main sheet, and hung like a bat to install the spark plug without much hope of success in such redneck superstitions.

The engine started on the first spin and ran flawlessly. So much for science and deductive reasoning.

My daughter, Sally, and I off-loaded the jumble of supplies used in commissioning the boat: boxes of screws and bolts, drill, chisels, beaver pelts, abacus, extension ladder and other non-essentials. I kept my toolbox and wrench set aboard. You never know.

After the infamous West River Bar clutched at my keel a few times I handed the helm over to Sally and busied myself with arranging things. Sally had recently seen the film *Titanic* and was apprehensive about icebergs. But why worry? The day was fine and I was *Groucho's* happy master. Sally inquired about the engine's noise; was it always this bad? Oh, sure, I replied, it's a Finnish engine; those Finns love noise. Did it always have that knocking sound? I thought so. But wasn't the knocking coming from the side of the boat, and not from the engine compartment?

I lifted the engine hatch. Nothing unusual. But the knocking was growing. I dropped into the cabin and looked at the engine from that perspective. Something was not quite...right. Something subtle, difficult to identify. Were these alignment wedges always sticking out? Was the engine always pushed back against the step? I put the heel of my hand on a cool part of the engine and pushed. The entire engine glided smoothly forward. It was completely free of its mountings, held in place only by the shaft and shift cable. It was knocking against the side of the bilge.

Unfair! You expect phased array radar or GPS interlock steering to break down, but not spark plugs and iron lag screws. When basic parts conspire against you, should you really sail out beyond wading depth?

My engine had only an informal connection with the boat. “Sally,” I announced, “I think we'll make sail, now.”

I will spare the exasperated reader the frustration of the following two hours as Sal and I worked to thwart the engine's escape attempt. There was a great loss of sweat and spit, the cruel maiming of several knuckles, and many lapses of seemly language. Passing vessels witnessed a handsome Rozinante ketch sailing nimbly past with no apparent helmsperson and two sets of legs upside-down, locked into shrouds and sheets. Expectably, suitable screws were in one of the boxes left at the dock. The lag screws that had held the engine were decorative nubs of rusted steel, as effective as the stick on a melting ice cream bar. Under some Juicy Fruit gum in my toolbox we found two wood screws and one drywall screw. Three of the mounting holes were marginally accessible (to an orangutan) but the fourth required disassembling the starter/generator and several other basic parts of the engine. I hate Finland. It's cold and the people there are curs.

We sailed on with an engine held in place by the mechanical equivalent of paper clips. When the wind died near Tolley Point the sun was low in the sky on the longest day of the year. With much trepidation I started the engine — that new Autolite worked fine. We stole suspicious looks at the mounting screws over the entire distance but we motored for an hour and forty-five minutes up the Severn River to Groucho's new home in a warm and poetic sunset.

It is true that yesterday's sail has compromised my belief in most of life's basic systems. I am inspecting the nails in my stairs and the bolts that hold my drawing table together. I am suspicious of all my shoelaces, and considering a new brand of light bulbs. But it's also true that I have a childlike delight every time my car starts or the refrigerator light comes on. Simple pleasures: that's what sailing is all about.

[1055 words]