

ENGINE ANGST

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For
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Yes, I'm a sailor. Guilty, your honor, even though several friends have declared against sailing. One announced that he had conquered his sailing neurosis and no longer gave a damn where the wind lay. He wants a boat that says budda-budda-budda, every time you turn the key. Budda-budda-budda. A blunt, Vise-Grip of a boat you drive way over its hull speed with a steering wheel from a big cushiony chair. And it says "budda-budda-budda" like a Russian operatic bass with a lobotomy.

Perhaps there is hope for the rest of us. We have Zoloft to dispel depression and Viagra to dispel frustration. Surely Pfizer is working double tides on Quixotrin, a psychopharmaceutical effective against romantic illusions. Of course, it's a political hot potato. If it works, the sales of sport utility vehicles and health foods will plummet. The Hair Club, Psychic Friends, Victoria's Secret and the Rainbow Coalition are already preparing a class action suit to ban its use.

I've never had an engine that said "budda-budda-budda." The engines in my six sailboats have most often been mute, like cloistered monks or the guards at Buckingham Palace. Heroic persuasion couldn't beguile them to whine, cough, sputter, wheeze or otherwise contribute to the propulsion of the boat.

I am owned by a double-ended ketch designed by the arch-romantic, L. Francis Herreshoff. He called this class of boats Rozinante, after Don Quixote's spavined steed. It was originally designed to be propelled with a big oar, so my *Groucho* was fitted with the only engine that could wedge into its narrow, deep bilge — a tiny single-cylinder, two-cycle engine manufactured in Finland as revenge for the lack of Allied support in the Russo-Finnish War of 1919. It doesn't "budda-budda-budda." It sounds more like a dying chainsaw, "yadda yadda, bagga ragga, ratta tatta." At the end of last season it had lapsed into silence and *Groucho* was towed into the boatyard.

I asked the boatyard mechanic to commission the engine this year. Yes, I have many expensive tools and a great store of experience but most of it is in the failure line. You pay a marine engine mechanic for an attitude of cool detachment that you can't achieve as you're staring down into the silent pit of your engine space with smoke coming out of your ears and blood oozing out of your nose. My mechanic doesn't have an investment in dreams, romantic illusions, success or failure; he threw in a new spark plug, for the hell of it, and it ran.

On a pleasant afternoon I loaded *Groucho* with all my flares and charts and PFD's for a three mile trip to my friend Abercrombie's. The *Pride of Finland* commenced its stuttering tenor and, with my friend Vicki for company, I motored out of the boatyard and made sail.

What a lovely moment, when the boat you love begins its tango with the wind and you silence the engine, knowing it will start anytime you ask. Toward afternoon's end we tacked into the narrow gut off Galesville, five hundred yards from our destination. I furled the sails and the engine thrashed into life, complaining about its digestion but pushing Groucho right along. I cast my eye about with peaceful satisfaction and noticed the choke was out all the way. I eased it in a trifle. The engine stopped.

Forty minutes later, the batteries were almost dead but the engine had not started. Nor sputtered, nor coughed. *Groucho* had drifted up against a sandbank. I was silent for a time. Vickie asked the inevitable, infuriating question: "What's wrong with it?"

I looked at her hard. "Its juju is frightened. It needs reassured and strengthened. The wise technical procedure would be sacrifice. The Engine Gods particularly favor the sacrifice of red-haired women who ask inane and useless questions at trying times. Reach down into the cabin and hand me that obsidian knife, will you?"

Another silence. At length she mentioned, "You sure know how to show a girl a good time."

I made sail and attempted to manage Abercrombie's channel. Half an hour later we were hard aground. I was thinking about Herreshoff's big oar. A small Whaler haphazardly directed by two country-music fanciers did not possess the horsepower to pivot Groucho off the mud but took Vickie ashore. Abercrombie, no fool, had left his house. Enterprising Vickie simply walked down the road and knocked at all the doors until she found a large, family gathering. Two delightful teenagers, Lee and Kate, were dispatched in one of the family boats. They had local knowledge and an upbeat outlook, better than the Army Corps of Engineers in a case like this.

A powerful Bertram sportfisherman had come to assist me. Its skipper regarded both my boat and his own with a kind of suspicion. He seemed resentful of the floaty nature of water. He would have been more comfortable if these boats had all-weather tires on good pavement. When Vicki and the young engineers arrived, the Bertram had freed *Groucho* for the first time. The little ketch leaped into open water and ploughed directly onto the next sand bar, rather more firmly this time. The Bertram's skipper wanted to attach more lines. He seemed to feel that more lines would pull harder. He pivoted Groucho off the second sandbar but hadn't noted the position of the first. He towed me onto it again, and ran aground, himself.

Lee doffed his shirt and jumped into the shallow water to heave at Groucho. I hate cold water but it was manly challenge time. I took off my shirt and shoes and jumped in beside him. By lifting this way and that with our backs up under the boat, we were able to liberate the little ketch. It was a hundred-yard tow to Abercrombie's dock. Nice kids.

Abercrombie was back home, now that we didn't need him. He sat on a piling stoking his pipe, looking smug and thinking up witty things to say about my predicament. I only pretend to like him. It was dark by the time we had Groucho snugged down, buttoned up, and my pants were in Abercrombie's dryer.

As for the engine, I'm going to sit and look at it a while before I start it again. I may also put it in a new sparkplug; I hear that does wonders. Unlike my healthy friends, I'm not cured of sailboats, yet. Until Pfizer brings out Quixotrin, windmills will still look

uppity to me, my Rozinante will still please my romantic eye as much as Don Quixote's cart nag pleased his, and I am still not free of that dance with the wind.