



CONFESSIONS OF A HOUSEBOAT ROOKIE

She can't swim and he's never driven a boat before

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Chapter 1: You do know that I can't swim, right?

CALL ME Ishmael, Stupid, or just plain Adventurous, but this year we wanted to do something completely different for the holidays. Not the Pyramids of Egypt, not the Great Wall of China, not the Grand Canyon, but something reasonably local and something neither of us had done before.

When I floated the idea of renting a boat and piloting it through the Kawartha Lakes of Central Ontario, however, the response was emphatic. “No. No way. You *do* know that I can't swim, right?”

“Ah yes, but *I* can swim,” I said proudly. “In fact, I can swim like a fish. It's my preferred choice of exercise and keeps me in that wonderful shape you like so much.”

“Fat lot of good you would be in the water with that bung shoulder of yours. You'd jump off the boat to save me, and the boat would drift away, and we'd both drown.”

She had a point. I had recently torn a muscle in my left shoulder in a golf tournament. It was still painful to the touch, limited my movement, and required the occasional ice-pack treatment while it healed. “But *you* would be wearing a life jacket all the time,” I offered somewhat defensively.

The truth was that piloting a houseboat through the Trent-Severn Waterway had been on my bucket list for years, ever since I had seen them chugging through the Gloucester Pool from a log cabin I had rented to get a break from the concrete jungle of work in Toronto. Yes,

I was a strong swimmer, but I had never piloted a boat before. It was something I really wanted to do.

Sensing that my dream was fading fast, I changed tack. “You know, let me do some more research and get back to you. How it works, what it costs, how isolated the area is, what training is required and so on.”

Then I added a little inducement. “Maybe at the end of the trip we could stay at a decent hotel out of town, get cleaned up after a week in the wilderness, take in a show or something? I’ll treat you.”

Aha! I detected a flicker of interest. And then perhaps because she felt sorry for me, or because she wanted to be there when I screwed up, she offered the small opening I was desperately seeking. “You know, all I want is a holiday, to relax, no cooking for a week. That’s all.”

I pounced, quickly offering to find a hotel, a show, and to do all the cooking. Now, there are a few, sadly misinformed family members who might well regard my offer to cook as more of a threat than a treat, but combined with the suggestion of a hotel and entertainment, it did the trick. And I knew I could deliver. The boat had a BBQ on the back deck, and every lock or small town we would be visiting boasted a wide selection of restaurants. We could make this work! Captain Courageous, the non-swimmer who had not even mentioned the pills she had to pop to alleviate motion sickness, had finally, if somewhat reluctantly, come aboard.

Chapter 2: We hit the water and dock for the first time

IGNORING THE many kind and caring remarks of friends and family (Are you looking for a new wife? What's the state of your life insurance policies?), I threw myself into preparing for *le Grand Voyage*. The rental company sent a list of the items provided on the boat and what we would need to supply ourselves, plus a video on docking and mooring. We watched this once and it all seemed pretty straightforward. A flashlight, bottled water, BBQ utensils, some bedding, first aid kit, and far too many clothes, were all packed and ready. One item that would really have helped, binoculars, we forgot to bring.

Suddenly, Day Number One was upon us. We drove two hours northeast of Toronto to the southern end of Pigeon Lake and loaded our new home with the provisions we had assembled. The boat looked good, a 32-footer with front and rear tables that could be converted into beds, a stove, fridge-freezer, ice- cooler, deck chairs, life jackets, small shower, tub and toilet, and the BBQ set.

We were shuffled into a dusty classroom-type area and together with five or six other mostly rookies shown a 10-minute video. I remembered only the quirky bits.

Like "Do not swim unless the boat is securely anchored. " *Duh?* Or "If you are anchoring in a bay, put your anchor around a tree. You'll be there in the morning." And my favourite: "Be sure the anchor is tied at both ends before throwing it overboard." *Oops!*

Chart instruction followed. The basics of marine navigation were briefly explained, and a large wall map used to illustrate the routes we would

be taking (east or west) before returning the boat “in good shape” to the base at Pigeon Lake. We had chosen to head west so would be traversing five lakes in total over a 7-day period. It was up to us where we moored at night, and at what pace we moved.

Then came the nitty-gritty, the boat itself. After a quick overview of its major features, we actually got to start the engine and were guided (while still moored) on how to move the boat forward and backwards. That was it! We could push off when we liked. The company offered a lifeline of sorts: “If you have any problems, call us between eight and five and someone will be there within an hour.”

Push-off was exciting. The staff untied the ropes connecting us to the dock, told us to slowly put the engine in reverse, and to ease out into the middle of the stream. We were free. Now it was completely up to us!

The first task was to get the boat turned around and headed in the right direction without fouling the propeller in the weeds. This was definitely not as easy to do as it looked in the video. Mission finally accomplished, we slowly followed two other rookies out to the main channel, testing the responsiveness of both wheel and engine while scanning ahead for clumps of weeds growing on rocks, and for a couple of islands we had to navigate between. Our confidence grew as we chugged along and didn't hit anything.

We were just getting comfortable with our newly-acquired skills when the two boats ahead of us suddenly peeled off to the right. Where were *they* going? I hastily checked the charts and realized they were both

taking the eastern route to Buckhorn. Our fellow rookies were deserting us. We were now completely by ourselves headed in the opposite direction towards our overnight destination of Bobcaygeon, roughly two hours away. I checked and re-checked the charts several times. You wouldn't believe how relieved I was when we finally spotted the green marker buoys and outline of Big Island on the right. We were on track! And about to tackle another challenge: docking and entering a lock for the first time.

Docking is a bit like manouvering a shopping cart alongside a grocery store display, the aim being to slide alongside it without bouncing off it too much and damaging the cart (or boat). The only difference is that you are floating on moving water. And there are usually other, more expensive boats already moored waiting to be hit (or not).

At Bobcaygeon, we bounced off the dock a little heavily and were trying to tie the ropes around the mooring posts when a young lad came to our rescue. His boatie parents had obviously been watching us, seen the word rookie emblazoned on our foreheads, and sent him in to help. He was great actually, and stayed on the boat for our entry into the lock, showing us how to secure the houseboat on the wires. We settled back to see how the lock operated.

The lock at Bobcaygeon is one of more than 40 on the Trent-Severn Waterway, which meanders almost 400 kilometres and joins two of the Great Lakes (Ontario and Huron). Originally designed in the early 1900s to boost local trade, the waterway today largely caters to boating and recreational tourism, with the locks raising or lowering boats between higher or lower bodies of water.

At Bobcaygeon, if you are heading west as we were, several boats of different shapes and sizes are tied to the walls of a large metal chamber, and water pumped in to raise them to the level of the next lake. We were lifted almost two metres or five feet from Pigeon Lake to Sturgeon Lake so that we could continue our journey.

But we weren't finished yet. We had to exit the lock and find docking space for the night, next to some of those nice, sleek, expensive boats. Parking space was tight and adrenalin levels high. While our first docking (without the young lad) was admittedly a little wild, with the assistance and patience of the lock staff, we finally managed to tie up against some sturdy trees. *Phew!*

We celebrated by stepping onto *terra firma* and walking the town, stocking up on meat for the BBQ and fruit. Back on the boat, we reflected on the day's events, acknowledging that we really should read the boat's operational manual. *The problem was that we couldn't find it!* It hadn't been handed to us earlier, or left in an obvious place. We searched everywhere, finally giving up and calling the company lifeline. "Oh, it's in the pouch behind the co-captain's seat," said the staff member on the end of the phone, rather unwisely adding: "We try to make a treasure hunt for you."

Captain Courageous quickly scanned the manual, and shared a couple of excerpts: "To start the engine, (first) turn off the stereo." *Huh?* And "If the fridge starts to beep at night, just press the off button." I myself drifted off to sleep at the early hour of 10 o'clock. I'm not sure if I beeped or not, but I'd had enough excitement for one day.

Chapter 3: Drama in downtown Lindsay

WE AWOKE early the next morning, had breakfast, keen to get moving. The plan was to go south on Sturgeon Lake to the town of Lindsay and stay overnight there. But when I turned on the engine, half the key stayed in the lock and the other half came away in my hand! Oh no, we're not going anywhere today.

"Hi, it's your favourite rookies here. We just turned on the engine and half the key stayed in the lock." Try a metal kitchen fork, suggested the boat company rep. See if you can dislodge it that way. When that didn't work we had to wait an hour for a locksmith to arrive and winkle it out.

We'd lost our early start but going south was fine, and the patch of water labeled "rough when windy" on our charts, was no problem at all. And I was reading the charts better. I had figured out that the numbers on the green and red buoys actually meant something. As you passed one you could plot exactly where you were. *Now why hadn't someone pointed that out to us earlier!* I recalled the rental boat company's claim that its training program met all coastguard requirements. The thought of being rescued by someone with my recently acquired and vast nautical experience terrified me!

We followed a long, winding, weed-surrounded channel into downtown Lindsay. As soon as the lock operator saw us, however, he waved us off, yelling that houseboats couldn't go through the lock. OK, that was fine, and we vaguely remembered this from something we'd read or been told.

But what that meant was that we had to turn the boat around in a narrow space in downtown Lindsay, with all the locals and summer

tourists watching. *No pressure*. Nor could we help but note the sleek and expensive boats that seemed to have been moored close by for the express purpose of being sideswiped by the coastguard. When a guy stopped mowing his lawns to watch the unfolding spectacle, we knew we'd hit page one, as it were.

We took this *really* slowly, turning first to the right then throwing the boat into reverse when it became clear the turning circle wasn't wide enough and a collision imminent. Then we inched forward again slowly, allowing the back of the boat to swing around. Eventually, by taking it slowly and probably doing more back and forths than we needed to, we were headed in the right direction. We high-tailed it out of there as fast as we could.

But now we had another problem. The rental company had told us we should top up the gas every eight hours. We were already into our seventh hour, and with the debacle in Lindsay now had to find another place to dock. Our preferred option was to head north on Sturgeon Lake to Fenelon Falls, but for that we would need more gas. Where were we going to get it? The thought of running out of gas in the middle of a large lake was not a pleasant one.

Fortunately, in between admiring some of the properties dotting the lakeshore, I had spotted a fuel sign and pump on our way south to Lindsay. But I couldn't remember exactly where it was. So we hugged the lakeshore on our way north, hoping not to hear the last dying slurp from the tank. Finally, we sighted the pump. I did one of the best docking procedures I had done (no witnesses, of course), found the resort owner, topped up the tank, and we were off again. The rest of

the trip, including going through the lock at Fenelon Falls and docking, was uneventful. We celebrated a beautiful sunset with the BBQ (yes, I cooked), and ice cream.

Chapter 4: We get lost!

DAY THREE was going to be our longest time on the water, almost five hours from Fenelon Falls to the lock at Kirkfield. We could have gone further west than this, to the edges of Lake Simcoe, but had decided to slow down and enjoy our little adventure, rather than rush it just so that we could boast how far we'd gone. We were also mindful that we would have to leave enough time for our return journey back to base at Pigeon Lake. As it turned out, our journey to Kirkfield took *far* longer than we expected.

The day started out well and we made good time across Cameron Lake to the Rosedale lock. Here, however, I made one of the worst dockings I would make in the whole trip, completely misjudging the distance between boat and dock despite the sudden urgent yelling of Captain Courageous in my left ear.

When you don't actually see the imminent danger yourself, even though those around you do, you tend not to react quickly enough, which is exactly what happened. There was a sickening crunch as we hit part of the lock very hard. I imagined a gaping hole below the waterline but fortunately for us the sound was loud but the damage minimal. I apologized profusely to the lock master. "You didn't cause any damage to *us*," he said, laconically. These guys have seen it all!

We left the lock and entered Balsam Lake, following the shoreline around Grand Island before turning right towards Kirkfield. And it was here that Mother Nature called. I needed to go. Until now I had used

the washroom facilities at the locks. But now we were crossing a large lake and there was an element of urgency.

We had both seen the warning description in the manual: “The toilet on the boat is not like your toilet at home .” And the confusing advice that followed: “Do not put anything in (it) that you have not eaten first.”

We were not *exactly* sure what this meant. It was dangerously ambiguous. But being avid recyclers and trusting citizens, we assumed that the company was an early adopter of zero waste or circular economy thinking. We were impressed. Just hoped that no one took their advice literally.

But the real issue with the toilet was its size. Even getting into it was a problem. Captain Courageous had found it easier to get undressed in the cabin before darting for the door. I now did the same.

I am not a big man, but I’m solid (broad-shouldered and a couple inches short of six feet). With some difficulty, I wedged my way in until my buttocks found the seat, or rather straddled it. The toilet bowl was no wider than a small bread or butter plate.

Hard against the bowl, crushed up against my left shoulder, was a small tub and cabinet. Fortunately for me, I am right-handed. There was no way a lefthander could do what I now found myself doing with my right hand. So if there is an organization out there campaigning for the right to be left-handed, and for equal treatment in engineering design, send me your petition, I’ll sign it.

Having survived my first and last encounter with the toilet, we resumed our journey, making sure to keep Ant Island on our left. We chugged

on. In between times, we were constantly in touch with family, sharing updates on our progress. “So how are the seas today, Captain Dipshit?” texted one of my sons, respectfully. “Keep a lookout for Somali pirates.” A sister-in-law chimed in: “Wish I could do the trip, but not on water.”

We chugged on and on, scanning the lake ahead for the next green or red marker buoy that would confirm our position. Absolutely nothing. A compass or binoculars would really have come in handy here. Even the presence of other boats would have helped since they generally used the same route, but it was Monday and the weekend boaties had disappeared.

We decided to focus on a low flat area ahead that seemed similar to the entrances of the canals we had entered before, but as we chugged closer, we saw it was swamp or marshland. *We were lost!* We circled back, hugging the lakeshore and were heading towards some canoeists we could see in the middle distance when we suddenly saw a man emerge onto his front lawn. We hollered out to him (never thought to use the boat horn) and swung around to talk.

“We’re trying to get to Kirkfield,” shouted Captain Courageous across the intervening water. He understood, and rapidly gestured in a direction that I thought in no way corresponded with the navigation charts. But what choice did we have? He lived here, he should know. Some thirty or forty minutes later our new friend was totally vindicated. We finally sighted the green marker we had been looking for that indicated the entrance to the Trent Canal. We had drifted way too far west.

There was no chance that we would get lost in the canal. It cut a long and narrow straight line through Mitchell Lake to the Kirkfield Lock. At one point, I spied what I thought was a giant fish just three feet from the side of the boat. It turned out to be a very smooth brown rock. I gripped the wheel a bit tighter.

We finally entered the lock and docked. We were the only boat there. Being a Monday, the nearby restaurant was closed, so we decided to give our land legs some exercise by walking the supposedly “only three kilometres” to town. But it was so hot, over 30 degrees Celsius, that after about a kilometre, we gave up on that idea, returning to the boat.

Later that night, a large sleek cruiser pulled alongside and we got to chatting with the owners. They were doing the Great American Cruise Loop: from Florida to New York and through the St. Lawrence River to Lake Ontario and the Trent-Severn Waterway. Their journey would take them into Lake Huron, and then into Lake Michigan. “We hope to be in Chicago by September.” Wow! Put our little trip in perspective!

Chapter 5: We encounter a big roller

OUR CRUISER friends were leaving as we drew the cabin curtains in the morning. We both had stinking headaches, not because we had been celebrating or anything but because the boat had seemed to develop a constant twitch during the night. Perhaps we had tied the mooring ropes too tightly, or too loosely, but every 10 seconds or so the whole boat had given a sharp jerk. We didn't experience this anywhere else.

Our bad start continued with a difficult entrance to the lock, but the view from the top made it worthwhile. The Kirkfield Lock works hydraulically, two giant metal drums rising and falling some 15 metres or 49 feet in tandem. It's impressive to watch and even more impressive to be part of the process.

From there we entered the long slow chug down the Trent Canal again. We had been following a small jet boat, father and two sons, when they suddenly stopped. We pulled up alongside. "Couple of really big boats coming down the canal," the man said. "We'll have to wait for them to pass."

We don't know how the boatie knew this because as far as we could see there were no boats in sight. Probably he had a marine radio, or had been warned by the lockmaster back at Kirkfield. All we could get on our radio was music. Waiting around for the biggies was not easy either. Both of us had to move off to the side where weeds proliferated. Basically we had to tread water for at least 15 minutes, moving backwards and forwards to maintain our positions and to avoid fouling our propellers.

At last the biggies passed and we continued our slow journey down the canal. The jet boat had disappeared far ahead so we got no warning when another big cruiser suddenly hove into view. We moved over to be in line with a marker buoy where the weeds began, and slowed almost to a stop. I estimated that there would be at least 25 feet between the boats as they passed.

But that was not good enough for the woman on the front deck of the biggie. She was waving urgently for me to move further off to the right. I edged deeper into weed country. I heard her yelling as the cruiser approached, but couldn't make out what language it was, probably Profane. She crossed her arms. Was this a prayer or some nautical sign? We passed within at least 25 feet of each other. Maybe I did something wrong, I don't know, but there was *never* going to be a collision.

Not long after this, out of the canal and in the wide open space of Balsam Lake, we experienced our first big roller. We had got used to surfing the wakes churned up by skidoos and smaller speedboats, and even some of the bigger boats that had passed close by. You could see the rolling waves approaching and turn slightly into them to reduce serious rocking.

But occasionally we were caught completely by surprise. There are no rear-vision mirrors on these houseboats so you are not aware of a boat coming up from behind. And when it's a big boat, and when it's travelling at ten times your speed, and it decides to pass you between two marker buoys that are only 60 to 80 feet apart, then you have a major problem, while The Jerk that caused it cruises off nonchalantly into the distance.

I wasn't sure exactly where Captain Courageous was on the boat at the time, but I yelled out an urgent warning to hold on tight. I saw and then felt the first big wave strike. The boat shuddered and then pitched violently. I heard a cry from the rear and a loud metallic clang as the loose table studs hit something. I couldn't look to see what was happening in the rear because the waves were coming thick and fast now and I needed all my attention focused on keeping the boat as even as possible. I really didn't know how sinkable these tin cans were.

Then I heard a yell from the rear. Well, at least she's still on board I thought, much relieved. As the frequency and size of the waves slowly diminished, we met in the middle of the boat for a close hug. "How are you finding this bonding exercise so far?" I asked.

Far above us, the sky was darkening with ominous black clouds, and we picked up speed. After pulling into the Rosedale Lock and stopping for gas (one of my best docks, by the way), the sun was shining again, and we decided to push on to Fenelon Falls an hour away.

We arrived safely and went to a Timmy's for a bite to eat. We weren't the only customer. Captain Courageous had noticed a fly lounging on one of the sugary display trays and had pointed this out to the young man serving us. He simply shook the tray and put it back in place. The fly moved on to another sugary feast. We didn't stay long. A few hours later, those dark black clouds arrived and released a heavy thunderstorm, the only time during our entire 7-day trip that it rained.

Chapter 6: Almost crushed them

WE HAD got into the habit of going to bed early (between 9.30 and 10) mainly because it was dark then and because we didn't want to run the generator down. So we were well rested when I gave what was probably my very worst performance in a lock the next morning. I had sidled up to the lines OK but for some reason (probably the front rope not being secured properly), the bow of the houseboat suddenly veered out towards two already parked boats on the other side of the lock.

They were watching (*everybody watches rookies*) and fended me off. But of course, the family history of this event now has it that I almost *crushed* two expensive speedboats. After this level of excitement, the rest of our short trip back to Bobcaygeon was pretty dull.

As we neared the town, Captain Courageous decided to freshen up before going ashore. For her, this meant a warm-to-hot shower since the generator only delivered hot water when the boat was in motion. Since I was doing most of the steering (98%), the only option for me was a very quick cold shower when we were docked. Funny how that worked out.

Our docking in Bobcaygeon was one of the best we'd accomplished so far, marred only when a couple of errant twigs on an encroaching tree jumped out in front of us at the very last second and were shaken loose.

Chapter 7: On the sixth day we rested

ON THE sixth day we rested. We had been on the water every day and had not really had time to see much of the little towns along the route. We visited several gift shops and were amused by some of the signs they had for sale. The only one we remember (and I say we deliberately) was a man claiming that he hadn't spoken to his wife for six months because he didn't like to interrupt her.

We had hoped to dine on New Zealand lamb that night (we had seen it advertised on a restaurant billboard) but when we got there we were told that "we don't have that." We settled for something else and ice cream sandwiches, and caught up on some reading and texting.

Chapter 8: Wrong channel!

OUR FINAL day had arrived! We set off in good time, intending to slowly meander the almost four hours back to the rental company's base on Pigeon Lake. And everything went very well until I took an early turn down the wrong channel. There were no green or red marker buoys around to confirm our position at the time, and I thought we were much closer to the base than we actually were.

The result was that we chugged down a minor channel until a vast expanse of waving green lake weed completely blocked any further progress. We circled back, hugging the shoreline, hoping to sight someone who could help us out. Seeing no one, we decided to call the lifeline again. Hey, what were they there for?

Our navigational catch 22 soon became apparent. We couldn't describe exactly, or even approximately, where we were because there were no significant landmarks and no green or red marker buoys. And the company rep couldn't guide us because he didn't know where to guide us from!

We decided to retrace our steps. In fact, we didn't have any other choice, edging out further from the shoreline, trying to get back to the main channel. Then in the far distance we spotted what looked like a fellow houseboat rookie headed in our direction. Presumably he was also returning his boat. If he saw us, he probably wondered what we were doing way off in the weeds, but we simply fell in behind him, hoping that at least *he* knew where he was going.

When he stopped for lunch and a spot of fishing, we pulled alongside and casually asked how much further it was to base. He hauled out his GPS system and rattled off some latitude and longitude numbers, but this was no good to us because they didn't correspond to the company charts we had. So then he hauled out his own copy of the company charts. "About three kilometres from here down the main channel," he said. "You can't miss it."

We had missed it so far, and it was quite a bit further than three kilometres, but finally we got there. We made a perfect dock. And it began to drizzle slightly. Our houseboat journey was over.

Chapter 9: Would we do it again?

SO WHAT did we learn and would we do it again? First, there is nothing like getting closer to the natural world than being on the water (or on a mountain or in a forest, for that matter). It is so peaceful and invigorating, and you actually have time to both marvel at it, and to ponder the big issues of creation and evolution, personal relationships, and the impact we humans are having on this, the only planet we inhabit.

It was so refreshing not to be bombarded by a constant stream of messages urging consumption of some item or service; to not actually read a newspaper (mostly carrying bad news); to make do with what we had. And yet, like Huck Finn, we could feel the powerful pull “back to civilization.” Freshly showered (hot water this time), I quickly devoured a week’s worth of newspapers and social media to make sure I hadn’t “*missed anything*”, and we sat down to watch a slew of our favourite pre-recorded TV programs.

But we had also asserted ourselves as individuals, and grown personally. Captain Courageous hadn’t overcome her fear of water, but she had adapted and become more comfortable with it. She moved from desperately throwing the mooring ropes into the faces of anybody who could help (*please, anybody!*) to nimbly tying knots and casting off like a pro. I had learned to drive a boat for the first time.

The challenges we had set ourselves were not without risk. My biggest fear was Captain Courageous falling or being knocked off the boat. Would I be able to spin the boat around and rescue her, or would I

instinctively dive in to help? Each option had consequences, potentially life-threatening.

Other risks were more manageable. We were never far from land, and in bad weather could always have sought refuge at someone's private dock. We worked around our navigational and boating inexperience.

So what's next? Sky-diving? I'm not sure what Captain Courageous would think about that, or whether it's printable. Let me do some more research ...