



From Sea Cliff to Larchmont

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It has become a family tradition of sorts to moralize, badger, and generally harass my sister-in-law about her favorite sport; rock-climbing. Granted that rock-climbing is an impassioned avocation of many, but I for one cannot understand why anyone would risk life and limb climbing to such great heights just to come back down again. One might justly say this is nothing but a shallow obfuscation for fear of heights, and it in no uncertain terms is. Call me a coward. Call me a wimp. Just thinking about clinging to a vertical rock surface hundreds of feet above terra firma sends a shudder of unremitting terror through my aging protoplasm.

In sharp contrast to my own acrophobia, my sister-in-law is no pansy. She is muscle and fierce determination. When asked if she has ever been afraid, she says she was once. She was climbing the Gunks in upstate New York about 250 feet up and her leader fell. He fell till the rope that attached him to my sister-in-law snapped taut. He screamed the entire thirty feet of the fall. My sister-in-law says it took her a few moments to compose herself and then they climbed on. Needless to say, if I had been there I would have lost control of more than one bodily function.

My advice to her is always the same: "Sis, sailing is so much safer." Her retort is always the same: "Bro, how about the time you sailed across the Sound in your itty bitty boat?" This usually brings us to the story at hand. Just straight from the outset I confess my misadventure is a result of mostly ignorance and some stupidity. Neither of which should be confused with the raw guts and courage my sister-in-law has when she tackles a rock face. We are not talking about a trip around the Horn or a solo circumnavigation. Nope, my cautionary tale is about a daysail across my own beloved, Long Island Sound.

I had been sailing for less than a year in my Capri-13. I knew even less about sailing than I do now, if that is possible. The depth of my unplumbed inexperience was only matched by my boundless enthusiasm for sailing. I trailered my Capri-13 every weekend to Sea Cliff to sail in Hempstead Bay. I would go weekend mornings while my wife and kids were still asleep and come back in time for lunch. The average sail was maybe two hours with just a little less time spent driving, rigging, derigging, and washing the boat, myself, and sometimes a wetsuit.

Time was also spent doing other unexpected tasks that are too embarrassing to describe in any great detail. For instance, there was the time I gabbed too long with another sailor on shore and turned to see that the tide had come in and freed my boat to sail itself across the bay. Then there was the time I locked my car keys in the car and had to use a mooring buoy to open the car door. Of course, I cannot forget the time I backed down the beach to put the boat back on the trailer and got stuck in the sand. All of these little inconveniences pale in comparison to the sheer stupidity of my sail across the Sound.

My motivation was simple even if ill-conceived. I yearned to go on an adventure with my Capri- 13. I wanted to be on the water the entire day instead of my rather than just a couple of hours. I needed some quality time with my little boat. Crossing the Sound seemed like an acceptable challenge with little apparent danger. I picked a glorious summer day with the wind at 7 to 10 mph from the south with hardly a cloud in the sky. Wave heights were no more than a couple of feet. Sailing north from Sea Cliff was, well, a breeze. We were on a broad reach and could not have asked for better conditions.

My only encounter of any significance was with a freighter. I gave way alternately luffing or doing 360s. After waiting what seemed an eternity, I continued on my way to Larchmont with the mainsheet in one hand and the tiller in the other. Even then I knew that in a centerboard dinghy the sheet should almost always be in hand. You are less likely to capsize if you can trim instantly and if a capsize does occur you do not have to worry about freeing the sheet from a submerged cam cleat.

Having set out on this trip impulsively, I had naively thought I would find a beach or piece of shore to rest on in Larchmont. Instead all I found were signs warning would-be trespassers of private waterfront property or docks. Though I could have used a little break, I quickly inhaled my modest lunch -- a granola bar and boxed drink.

Have you ever noticed that what is downwind in one direction is virtually always upwind in the other? What had been a leisurely broad reach had become a more engaging beat. Beat was indeed the operative word. The bow climbed each wave, hung in the open air for just a moment, and then returned making a resounding 'thunk'. While I still had the energy, I hiked out flat with legs straight. I soon tired and bent my aging knees and fell off a bit. The trip back was a thrill. It was everything I like about sailing: going to weather with the wind in my face, water spraying from the bow, and the feeling that the boat had become an extension of myself.

You may be wondering what went wrong and what dangers I encountered. The answer is nothing, I had a great time, and nothing unlucky happened my way. Nevertheless, Sis was right. It was a lame-brained idea and I never should have gone.

The reasons are many and the most important are not within the sailor's control. The freighter that I had so blithely encountered could have obliterated my Capri-13 and its owner if the wind had suddenly died or a critical piece of rigging had failed. In fact, the week after my trip to Larchmont a split ring to mainsheet block flew into the Sound and I had to return to shore to find a replacement. The view from the bridge of a freighter sees nothing immediately beneath its bow. Even if a wayward sailboat is seen, it can take up to a mile for a freighter to change course. Near misses can be treacherous as well. The freighter's wash can suck your vessel into the freighter itself or into its wake.

Nor is the weather always friendly on the Sound. Squalls and thunderstorms can spring out of nowhere. They are unpleasant enough on a keelboat but can be downright dangerous in a dinghy.

The take home lesson is that going on an extended day trip far from shore alone in a dinghy is not wise. No amount of preparation can guarantee good weather or prevent equipment failure. When either occurs, it is better to be near shore.

After all, the less ammunition I give my sister-in-law the better.