

## Capsizing Chronicles

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It was the first summer that Hank and I were on our own. Our three boys, who had always been the center pin of planning summer vacations, were all busy with independent activities that didn't involve us. It was a first introduction to "the empty nest syndrome" and boy was it emancipating. We would leave our family camper behind and just jump into our car with one suitcase and take off up north.

Hank, my husband, had told many stories of the times he had spent in New Hampshire and Maine in the summers of his college years when he had worked on the water in that area canoeing, sailing, and kayaking. "Let's go visit some of those places where I worked. I especially want to get back into a boat, feel a paddle in my hand, and handle a sail with the wind in my face. It will be great." Hank was the eternal optimist, and it was hard not to try to be the voice of reason.

"But, Hank, you haven't been in a boat of any kind since we got married," I said.

"Right and it's about the time we started. When I show you how much fun it can be, you're going to wonder why it took so long to try it."

Our first boating adventure started up in North Fryeburg, Maine. We stopped to spend some time with good friends, Arthur and Estrid, who were spending the summer in an old reconverted school house. They fell right in with our boating plans and suggested that we first take a canoe trip on the Saco River not far from the house.

"It's low and quiet this time of the year," said Arthur, "and would make a good first place for you to start canoeing again."

After the (indignant) Hank spent some time convincing Arthur of his past experience and expertise with the canoe, he finally agreed to this "wimpy" trip.

"Shirley" he said, "At least you'll feel really safe."

We started out early the next morning with a picnic lunch, and life jackets, prepared for any contingency. The term "river is low" was an understatement. When we launched our two canoes into a few inches of river, they were practically scraping bottom.

It was a lovely, gliding ride. Occasionally Hank would have to use the paddle to push us off of a stone, but it was a gentle, bucolic ride. About an hour into the ride, Hank asked if I felt confident enough to want to try to paddle.

"Sure, I think even I can handle this," I said. Hank told me exactly where to stand so I wouldn't lose my balance and tip the boat. As I stood, the boat, again teetered on a rock, Hank reached over with the paddle to dislodge us, and the boat began tipping.

"Sit," Hank yelled, but it was too late. The boat turned completely over and there we were sitting on the stony river bottom in the shallow water.

After a minute of shocked silence, we broke into gales of laughter, stood up in our life vests, the water just about covering our ankles, and climbed back into the boat. We spent the rest of the day canoeing and managed to capsize the canoe two more times as we navigated the "dangerous" Saco.

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The day after the Saco Saga we were ready to get back on the water, this time in our friends' sailboat. I was really looking forward to getting into a sailboat again. Two years before I met Hank, I had spent one summer as a member of the Charles River Basin Sailing Club in Boston. I would go over to the Boat Club after work and spend the hours before sunset learning how to handle a seventeen foot Friendship sloop. I had lovely memories of beautiful sunsets, tacking through gentle breeze driven wavelets. If the wind got too brisk, or the weather began to turn stormy, the boats were called in.

Our friends' sailboat was docked at the lake waiting for us. It looked exactly like the same boat I had learned to sail years before, even the color was the same. I was really excited and delighted at the opportunity to sail it after so many years.

The original plan was that our friends, Art and Estrid, would sail their boat and Hank and I would take turns going along to crew when necessary, but mostly to just enjoy the ride. I was so confident about my ability to sail that boat and so anxious to take the helm, it was decided I would go out on the first trip with Arthur alone to crew.

I got into the boat with Arthur quickly before he changed his mind and helped him hoist the sail. As we pulled away, I realized this wind was a lot brisker than what I was used to with white capped waves slapping against the hull. We really began to cut through the water as Arthur headed into the wind. "You want to take over," Arthur yelled. I shook my head no and huddled at the rudder. We sped along, and I began to enjoy the wind and the spray as we sped along.

"Ready to come about," Arthur yelled. Somewhere in the recesses of my mind I remembered what to do, and even remembered I had to duck. Suddenly, there was a sudden gust and the boat capsized.

I was thrown into the water. I panicked and sank deeper and deeper as I struggled. I remember thinking, "I'm going to die!" At that point I stopped struggling and looked around, then began to swim toward the light. My head hit something soft and I realized I was under the sail. I was rapidly running out of breath. "Is this how I'm going to die, trapped under a sail?" I remember feeling hopeless and helpless, but I heard a voice say to me "Don't be ridiculous, the sail is not so big, just swim till you get to the end of it." I swam less than ten strokes and I was out from under the sail, gasping for breath.

Arthur was beside me in seconds. "Are you OK?"

I nodded "yes" and tread water as Arthur righted the boat and hoisted me back in. It only took minutes to sail back to shore.

There were towels, laughter, and hot coffee waiting for us at the dock. "Not the first time we've capsized, or the last time." Arthur laughed. Want to go out again with Estrid and Hank, Shirley."

"No, you go Arthur, I think I'll stay here, and dry out." I handed Hank the life jacket I had left ashore before my last trip. "Don't forget this," I said. I never told them how shaken up I was or the voice in "my near death experience."