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HEN Beatrix Potter's Mr. Toad declared there was "nothing... so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats," he could not have had my Sevylor 400GT in mind. Ten feet of gray neoprene with a sporty red side-stripe and reluctance to navigate more than a backyard puddle in a calm, it had a mind all its own and a body that usually disagreed. As with other impulsive unions, it's not clear who was the bigger misfit. But our affair struck great sparks, before infatuation waned. Meanwhile, another mismatch—Soviet Communism—was also waning, though the boat was more important on my world's stage.

I saw my first Sevylor while running on the beach at Martha's Vineyard on August 12, 1990. I was overweight, oversmoked, overstressed from preparing for too many meetings. I prepare even for high-school reunions by reviewing the yearbook, so I won't get caught out. But when I start dreaming about P.S.D. permits or the difference between S.I.P.s and F.I.P.s, it's time to clear the clutter and get away.

The air was soft, the sand hard and cool at the tide line. Then, around the next point, appeared this Thing perched on a dune, flanked by two beauties in string bikinis and the kind of collapsible sand chairs that disappear into flamingo-pink shoulder bags. Those chairs should have been my first warning. But the Thing turned out to be a deflatable boat, sleek and saucy—able to carry four people with ease, the nearer beauty assured me. Moreover, she continued, it folded into a suitcase. I had already decided to get on the water more. So when she added that the Thing was on sale for \$60, the fatal deal was done. I called long-distance that morning to order my own, thinking, "How wrong can you go for 60 bucks?" That should have been my second warning.

The box arrived the same day as my wife's Leningrad cousins, Gene and Elena Libman, whom we'd spent a year helping navigate immigration quotas, Soviet exit procedures, and American refugee rules. That, however, was no more important to me than the fact that they had landed at J.F.K. and, at our instigation, been met by a white stretch limousine, stopped at their first McDonald's, and just made the last ferry to the island for a week's recovery. What *was* important was the package they stumbled over on our darkened front porch. "What is that?" Gene asked in his formal, clipped English. "Your next voy-

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age," I replied grandly: "Tomorrow, we launch our boat."

The instructions for Sevylor Hull Number SEV12435F667 were replete with references to seam leaks, gasket repairs, and the necessity of proper inflation to avoid disaster. But they were glaringly silent on launching, ballast, or appropriate wind conditions. They also commanded registration of this "marine vehicle"—a rather grand name for a large rubber duckie, I thought—and emphasized that "before boating in unfamiliar waters, always ask experienced natives. . . . There is a good reason why no one ever escaped from Al-

TALE OF A TUB

While he fiddled
with his
inflatable boat,
the world
changed.

By Michael H. Levin

catraz by swimming across the Bay of San Francisco." I ignored all this, knowing already what I meant to do. One clause, however, stopped my eye. It mentioned, for the first time, that a special foot pump was required to inflate my prize.

There ensued three hours of huffing in which glasnost's effects on Gene's lung power were tested and we inflated the Thing by mouth. Alternating so as not to turn our diaphragms inside out, attached red-faced by appropriate nipples like calves to a wallowing cow, we blew up the inside safety chamber, the inner floor, the bustle chamber, the outside safety chamber, the

two outer-floor compartments. The Thing reared up, its plasticene odor dissipating in the breeze. We collapsed on the lawn, to the unsympathetic chuckles of our spouses. Then we tied my new mooring rope to the Thing's front stanchion—an act of faith, showing belief we'd reach something to moor to—gingerly secured it atop my Trooper, and drove to Menemsha Bight for the Launch.

Menemsha Bight connects with Menemsha Pond by a narrow channel near the jetty, generating 12-knot sluices when the tide flows. Neither that fact nor the stiff breeze and whitecaps deterred me, however. I did not intend to approach the channel; and didn't the instructions state that, because of its "large carrying capacity, extraordinary stability, and roominess," my boat was especially suited to service yachts like those moored offshore? Gene declined to crew because he was still catching his breath (he said). But my teen-age son, Danny, volunteered.

In a trice, we were in the water. In another trice, the wind rolled up the boat's prow like an oriental carpet, making it fill with air and act as a sail. We began slipping backward, caught in a current running parallel to the beach. I had the oars, which proved useless as coffee spoons. Danny had only his mouth, which he used to shout gleefully, "Row, Dad!"—when he wasn't pretending to fall overboard.

Gathering my half-wits, I rowed, faster and faster. Sweat burned my eyes; I could not understand how it had gotten so hot with what seemed to be a gale-force headwind behind me. Danny's grin widened. "Neat," he called out, "a boat and Nautilus machine in one." Still, I rowed, bending the oars so the locks dimpled as though about to pop off, my mood not improved by muffled laughter onshore. We were holding our own—no, we were gaining! Soon, we'd be out among the ketches that were our target.

I rowed on, unaware for some time that the beach going past was unreeling in reverse. After an hour, the breeze brought us gently back to shore, 400 yards below where we'd embarked. The Thing had not only become a balloon in that light wind but required us to carry it barefoot over rocks back to our starting point.

"This freedom," Gene remarked that evening, after drinks and four Advils had unlocked my shoulder blades: "This freedom, we have in Russia—to make an idiot of oneself in public if one should choose."

To my family's relief, high winds and storms precluded further adventures that year. The Thing went into hibernation, quiescent except for two floods it called down into our storage room as though struggling, like the One Ring, to return



ILLUSTRATION BY ARNOLD ROTH

to its element. Gorbachev abandoned economic reform; Black Berets occupied the Baltics; Shevardnadze resigned, warning of dictatorship. The gulf war ended, snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. I logged about 40,000 miles attending to client crises, meetings, speeches on environmental compliance. All this was as nothing compared to the boat slumbering in my basement, ready to rouse itself come spring. More muscle, I'd said when I trundled it to its resting place. Next year, that's what it needs—more muscle.

Until then, our relationship was experimental: we were living together, not married. But when summer loomed, I began to perform compulsive rites of commitment. I secured real oars rather than toy ones, with scoops twice as large as their predecessors. I acquired a Sevylor DeLuxe Foot Pump with a hose that fit every nipple. I became the proud owner of a Sevylor 12-volt electric engine that, when properly attached, its warranty promised, would make my craft a motor boat "ideally suited for fishing in ponds, lakes, and protected bays." I sequestered a screw-top gallon milk jug to fill with sand as an anchor, bought anchor rope sufficient to reach the bottom of the Mindanao Trench, and began practicing reef knots.

No matter that these purchases tripled the cost of a craft still folded away, once-used. Or that the motor resembled a Norelco razor, came sans battery, and warned that "in a fast-flowing river, ocean current, or windstorm, you may not have enough power to get back to shore." How else could I have a yacht for under four figures? Besides, hadn't I resisted the Sevylor Sail Kit and the Sevylor Optional Canopy? With my new gear, and the rip-stop duffel to hold it, I could do anything.

Indeed, these nautical preparations so impressed me that I described them to a group of sailing fanatics at my law firm. They, however, had just finished planning the Leningrad-to-Estonia leg of an open-sea Gulf of Finland sail. That was the first of many strange looks I received this year.

But when August arrived, I had my new world order ready. I also had an ally: my 10-year-old nephew, Josh, up for a visit.

Oh, the pleasure of having a boy companion again—eager, wide-eyed, anxious to please—after yours have grown hulking and cynical! All nature seemed on display for him—deer in our windows, ospreys diving, horseshoe crabs mating on the beach. We fished from the jetty, ran together in a road race, read aloud (complete with accents) *The Phantom Tollbooth* and *Narnia Tales*. I taught him to use bike gears and pedal despite side stitches; he taught me bait lore. But our chief agenda was what Josh called the "slop," meaning sloop.

As with many Washingtonians, my first concern was power—the missing battery. Did I get a "deep charge" or a shallow one? A dry rechargeable battery with short running time, or a 90-pound wet one that might spill acid? My problem, I realized, was Admiral Rickover's: finding an energy source that would not destroy the bottom of our boat. So though Josh had never been to the beach and could not wait to get there, the moment he emerged from the ferry, we embarked on that Quest.

The first chandler's we approached had just closed, doubtless because they saw me coming. The second responded to my request for "a marine battery for inflatables" as though I'd asked for a nuclear reactor.

*We launched
intrepidly
into the bath-
tub-like current,
my wife chant-
ing 'Anchors
Aweigh.'*



Radio Shack sent us packing. But the parts man at N.A.P.A. chewed his plug and eventually produced a half-sized, wet 12-volt meant for garden tractors. "It's all yours when you walk out that door," he drawled comfortingly, explaining the warranty as I lugged the 30-pound oblong away. After a mere three hours, I had a \$50 battery guaranteed to provide at least 30 minutes of power, though we could hook four together to quadruple its running time—if we didn't go bankrupt, explode, or sink to China first.

Next came Pre-Launch. Josh was assigned the milk jug, which he proceeded to fill with a teaspoon on the town beach while proudly informing a hundred of my

acquaintances that he was making the anchor for his Uncle Mike's yacht. Our friend Susan, a bioethicist eminently qualified for the task by her 1960s Girl Scout training, threw a triple half-hitch around the new anchor's handle, declaring, "This will never come off." My foot pump inflated the Object of Desire in minutes rather than hours. Charmed by this precision, we debated an actual name. Josh favored something pacifist, like "Jaws." My wife, Jean, suggested "Michael's Folly." Susan liked "Titanic," because of the safety compartments. Finally (after several faxes asking: *Die? Der? Das?*), we settled on *Das Ding an Sich*, Kant's term for the reality beneath perception (literally "The Thing in and of Itself"). This recognized that my perceptions of the craft had nothing to do with reality. It also fit the tune of a Weimar pop hit, *Der Sonnenschein*, which I sang as we loaded *Das Ding's* growing accessories:

*O, das Ding an sich,
Das Ding an sich—
Auf Wasserwelle
Mit Sicherheit und Willenskraft—
Das Ding an sich!**

We might not make the Met, but we sure looked good. We looked, in fact, like a Polo Outdoors ad.

Alas, even Lobsterville Beach, whose long shallows were used for children's swimming, proved tricky to navigate. We launched intrepidly into the bathtub-like current, Jean chanting "Anchors Aweigh" as she pushed us off, Josh at the miniature tiller. I shipped my oars while our 3" screw propelled us waterward. "Hey," Josh exclaimed, clicking the accelerator switch, "This is easy! *Fast* means *slow*, and *slow* is *slower*." Almost immediately, there was a problem, however. *Das Ding* might be a four-person boat, but not while carrying battery, protective tub, connector wires, anchor, line, and fishing gear. Without imitating the *Kama Sutra*, where would we put four people? The oars? Our lunch? Memories of *Run Silent, Run Deep* surfaced. We left the women and our tackle on shore for this man's task, promising, like MacArthur, to return.

My anchor worked beautifully. Rocking gently in three fathoms, fixed 40 yards off the beach, Josh and I gazed recumbent at clouds wafting by, chatting of Captain Hook, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and minnows versus worms. But as soon as we raised anchor and started to circle back, we began to slip sideways. I realized, to my horror, that a breeze had come up. Josh leapt to the tiller, shading his eyes like

*Oh, the thing in and of itself,
The thing in and of itself—
On the cresting wave
With certainty and strength of will—
The thing in and of itself! j

Spencer Tracy in *Captains Courageous*; I unshipped the oars. But despite our joint efforts and the engine's 12 amperes, *Das Ding* slipped faster, ending tangled in the floats of the infants' wading pool. Sure, I could have stepped out and pushed us clear in those shallows. But that would have admitted we were not a power launch. Instead, I sat fuming, until Jean and Susan hauled us ashore.

Launch Two was an improvement. The venue was Edgartown Great Pond, a freshwater sea sheltered by pine stands; my crew was Danny, whose only goal was to "catch a big fish." I had solved the main problem, I believed: sitting on the gunwales not only kept *Das Ding* from ballooning but made it possible to bear down with power instead of pulling the oars around my ears. The landing was broad and gradual, the pond glassy, the day clear and breezeless. Despite these obstacles, we put in flawlessly, let the motor take us cross-pond, dropped anchor near an overhung pool.

Unfortunately, our fishing rods also sat on the gunwales, and their Boon DeLuxe lures had conspired to sneak triple hooks through the seat of my bathing trunks, endangering *Das Ding's* skin as well as my own. Fortunately, no witnesses saw me spend the next half-hour with my rump in the air, precariously balanced while Danny, straddling tackle box and battery, struggled to cut me loose. No fish dinners appeared. But we passed a peaceful afternoon beneath redwing flights, cruising from point to wooded point as sweet waters flowed by. I began to think *Das Ding* a faithful steed. That should have been my ultimate warning.

It was fish that did it. I knew where they were—Menemsha Channel, from which landlubbers pulled five-pound bonito. I also knew about the currents. But *Das Ding* had obeyed so well that I thought my plan would work. So Danny and I re-tied the anchor to allow for 30-foot depths, reviewed the tide tables, and synchronized our watches. Launch Three would occur at 3:09 p.m., allowing more than an hour of slack water for fishing.

At first, all was clockwork, if your clock is not Swiss. We launched in minutes, hauling boat, motor, battery, rods, tackle box, anchor, anchor line, and refreshments through banks of poison ivy because the public slip was locked. Moments later, we were past mid-channel, the engine once more sufficing without oars. Danny readied the tackle. I dropped anchor—to feel with shock my new knot unravel, leaving loose coils in my hand. Fifteen feet down, a smudge of white wavered: our milk jug, escaped from servitude. "Well, Daddy," Dan remarked, "guess we can't fish without an anchor. Wanna dive for it?"

But already we were drifting. Choosing discretion over valor for the first time in my captaincy, I put us about, heading for land and a replacement. As soon as we touched, Danny raced to the Menemsha store for a plastic gallon of milk, dumped its contents into the harbor, and came panting back with the jug. No matter that it was a lift-off rather than a screw top, or that I'd forgotten the store's recycling bin (which surely held empties), or that scrap metal by our landing could have served as well. I had my new anchor, which we hurriedly weighted with muck from the lagoon.

Within 30 minutes, we were back on station, rods out. But now the current was running, tilting buoys as it rippled in. My

*'Das Ding' played
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dufflezipped,
as a weight prop-
ping storm shutters
against
Hurricane Bob.*



first clue was our fishing lines, which swung suddenly upstream. Then the shoreline began moving past. We were dragging our anchor! Cursing, I retrieved it and made for the lee shore. But the current, pressing buoys almost flat now, flung us back. Then we lost the motor, whose battery picked that moment to expire. Spinning along, we attempted to moor to three separate channel-markers but could neither come about nor hold position long enough. Too late, I remembered the instructions' warning that "Avid fishermen have been known to go after the big one, exhaust the battery," and end miles from safety. After much frantic rowing, we fetched up in a Sargasso Sea between aban-

doned hulks. There, in a gallant effort to land Danny's fish, I lost my new lure. "Dad," rumbled Dan as the sky turned an eerie yellow, "let's get out of here, before waterspouts come, too."

That was *Das Ding's* last betrayal. I had the battery recharged and chose the aquatic equivalent of a nursing home for my next expedition. Then August 19 arrived and Hurricane Bob closed our season, showing what wind could really do. Beyond destroying water, power, and most of the foliage on the island, it left half the town beach in the parking lot and a penetrating odor of chlorophyll from millions of pulverized leaves. *Das Ding* played its final role dufflezipped, as a weight propping storm shutters against that blast.

Meanwhile, a political hurricane swept Russia. Gene's cousin, after 30 years as a Party member, took to the streets with thousands of other Leningraders in response to a radio message from the Russian Navy when the coup shut TV down. Five days later, he renewed his own emigration efforts, deciding that the republics had barely forestalled a Yeltsin dictatorship and that published calls by reform leaders for liquidation of their opponents boded ill.

Maybe it's not *Das Ding's* fault that I no longer see milk jugs as dairy items, or that it wound up costing me charter rates per actual hour of sail time. Maybe I should have named it "Ferdinand," because I really wanted to smell the flowers not circumnavigate the world. Or "Rosinante" (after Don Quixote's horse), because I tried to make it into a silk purse but some obsessions with sows' ears are healing. Indeed, it let me lose myself entirely—whether in trivia or a tangerine sunset scarcely matters.

I'm still not sure why the front lobe of my brain took over, ditching preparation and practicalities in a rush of desire. Perhaps *Das Ding* was a chance to kick the traces, shed the millstone of being an expert, of always having to have an answer. Perhaps that boat was myself—outwardly dashing but pudgy and somewhat rubbery, advertised as capable of everything, more fragile than appeared. At bottom, our bond was like my Russians' decisions: a passionate course for which logic was only the housing, not the compass. I was, I see now, a middle-aged man, using a craft suited for old age to seek a New Age experience. *Das Ding* taught me the wisdom of smaller expectations, the luxury of more modest goals. It will be my perfect boat when I'm ready for limits, when I'm 70.

But as Rodgers and Hart wrote: "With no love to hold my love/ Why is my heart so frail?/ Life is a loveless tale/ For a ship without a sail." And next year . . . END