

SHAKEDOWN  
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As I spent time trying to decide on a name for the boat - I'd been waffling between 'Kind Of A Cottage' and 'Severance' - my friends had begun to refer to it by a moniker of their own: *Forever Docked*.

"He's never going to take it out," they'd whisper to each other. "It's going to be in the marina until the end of the season."

That would have been just fine with my mother. She, upon seeing the boat's size, had remarked that she couldn't see a reason why it would ever need to leave the dock.

"It's just like having a cottage on the water," she had said.

Still, after a lifetime of watching powerboats cruise past the dock at our *actual* cottage on the water, I wanted to do more than just stay in the marina.

I won't lie: I was nervous - this was a big boat, and represented the entirety of my recent severance payment, and then some. What if I crashed? I didn't know anything about this thing... how would it handle in the marina?

One full week into ownership my friend Bill had become increasingly discouraged, his urging to take the boat out growing in intensity as the hours went by. All weekend he'd begged me to go out - "the weather is perfect!" was his constant refrain. I kept reminding him that 1). I wouldn't be going out on busy days to start out, and 2). I was going to wait until I could find an experienced captain to come with me.

On Monday, August 8 he was minutes away from getting into his Jeep to head back to Syracuse when he decided to give it one last try. We'd talked to Mike, the owner of a Viking at the other end of our row of boats - nicknamed 'Mahogany Row', we'd been told. Mike had suggested that I just motor in and out of my slip until I was comfortable with the controls, and then try the canal, and later the lake.

"Today's the perfect day," Mike had told me several times, Bill nodding profusely each time.

When we returned to the boat, Bill was insistent.

"Dude, you heard what Mike said - today is perfect. It will never get any better than today. Let's let today be the day that *Forever Docked* leaves the dock!"

"I told you," I repeated for what must have been the thousandth time, "when I can get one of these experienced people to go out with me, I will go."

With that, Bill was on a mission. He began walking up and down the dock, looking for the folks who'd already mentioned their willingness to go out with me. Anyone would do, really.

He finally found Joe.

"My friend wants to go out on his boat," Bill called out. "But he won't go without you, so if you don't go with him it will never leave the dock."

And, with that, my desperate-to-leave-the-dock friend had found us three volunteer passengers for the inaugural cruise.

With us would be John, Janet, and Joe.

John and Janet are a married couple who live aboard during the summer, wintering in North Carolina. John held a Coast Guard captain's certificate until the second of two strokes made him decide to give it up, but still manages to take his place at the helm of his boat, a 38-foot Chris Craft, quite often.

John had told me that Joe once held a tug boat captain rating and is the man to take with you when you're learning to pilot a boat. Joe lives aboard a 1970s-era Harbor Master houseboat. He tells me that he first visited our marina when he purchased his boat seven years before and, although he had originally planned to return home with it, he had fallen in love with the park and the people.

With Joe, John, and Janet as my guides, we'd take my boat out onto Seneca Lake - and, hopefully, I'd learn a thing or two in the process.

Maneuvering a 36 foot cabin cruiser is much different from a 26 foot sailboat.

For starters, the marina is very similar in size, save for a little wider slip width to accommodate a wider beam. That means that the extra ten feet of boat length basically leaves your bow ten feet closer to everything in front of you, adding something of an intimidation factor.

I mentioned this to John when I first met him. He'd offered to take me out anytime I was ready for a cruise, and I told him I wasn't sure I'd *ever* be ready.

"This might just be my cottage on the water this first year," I admitted.

"Nonsense," John had said. "It's easy. You've got twin screws. She'll turn on a dime. Let me know when you want to go out."

Twin screws refers to the fact that my Trojan is a twin-engine craft. One engine means the boat must be steered with the wheel or, in the case of my Chris-Craft Pawnee, the rudder. Two

engines means the boat can be steered with engine thrust – you don't even *touch* the wheel when you're maneuvering in and out at the dock. This, everyone told me, is supposed to be easier.

We would see...

At the beginning of the ride Bill had pledged that he planned to go swimming.

"No, you're not," I told him. This cruise was about learning, and I didn't want to waste my volunteer instructors' time.

"You don't want to test out your swim ladder?" Bill prodded.

"I mean... if there's time..." I had stammered.

"Oh, there's time. We have all the time in the world," John said calmly, reassuringly.

I would later realize Janet had worn her bathing suit for a reason – it was hot, and she was hoping to take a dip, as well.

We were in the middle of a drought, and the day was especially hot, nearing 90 degrees. Going for a boat ride and *not* getting wet would have been cruel to my passengers. Who knows – I might have faced down my first mutiny! So I relented.

"I'm not going in with the engines running," Bill said.

Hmm – I hadn't thought of that. Did we have time to shut down the engines? Starting them would mean another delay as we waited for the blower motor to clear the boat of gas fumes. Should I leave them running?

"You *have* to shut down the engines," John told me, saying it in a way that didn't even make me feel stupid for not having realized that myself. With that I turned off the starboard engine, followed by the port.

Janet entered the water first. Bill stood on the swim platform, hesitating. Would the swim ladder be strong enough to support his weight, he wondered?

"Will it make you feel better if I get out and get back in?" Janet asked him. It would, so she did, mentioning that the ladder was in excellent condition.

"I always have trouble getting out on these things, and I had no trouble with yours. This is a very good platform setup," she told me. By now Bill was reassured, and he entered the water and exited, concurring – the swim platform was great!

John sat with me, watching his wife swim around the boat, a look of satisfaction on his face. I was glad that, in needing to take some experienced boaters with me to absorb their knowledge and boost my confidence, I was also able to show them a good time out on the water. This was what being a part of a marina community was about, I thought.

“How does it feel to be the captain?” Joe asked me.

“I don’t know if I’d say *captain*,” I answered. “But it feels good to have gotten some experience and - “

“You are most definitely the captain,” John interrupted. “And as captain, you’re responsible for the safety of everyone on this boat. Keep an eye on your passengers in the water, and know where they are at all times. Keep an eye on the shore, on the buoys, and know where your boat is at all times.”

“Situational awareness,” Joe chimed in.

“Technically, if something goes wrong, *this guy* is in charge,” John joked, pointing to Joe. “Mister Tugboat. And then me. And *then* you. So enjoy it today. But when we’re not here, and you take the boat out, you’re responsible for everyone’s safety. Don’t ever forget that.”

Re-starting the engines would be easy. Keeping the “touchy” starboard engine started, however, would be something of a challenge.

The seller had shown me how it’s done during our ‘repositioning cruise’. The problem was, he’d made it look easy. With ten years experience on the boat he knew where each engine should be running. A few taps on the throttle and he had both engines sync’d to the correct RPM. He’d even let me try it, and I’d had very little trouble - *then*. Now, however, my taps were either too much or too little. The starboard engine stalled out twice, and it seemed like they’d never sync up. When they were within 20 of each other Joe and I finally agreed that was as close as we were getting on this cruise. The boat was pulling to the left just a bit, but into the channel we went.

“The worst thing that can happen to you in the marina is an engine stall,” John told me as we motored along. “You lose an engine, and then what? First you’ve got twin screws, and now you’ve got one screw. What if the wind takes you? Now you’re *really* screwed.”

Umm... what?

“These engines are feeling strong,” Joe said reassuringly. “Nothing to worry about.”

I wondered if he meant that, or just meant it to be reassuring to me until we got into the dock.

I steered us into the channel. Fishermen sat on the pier, seemingly oblivious to the fact that a captain with zero boating experience was about to turn left and attempt to dock a whole lot of boat in the marina. I thought back to all of the afternoons I sat in the cockpit of my sailboat trying to hide my amusement at the legion of boaters clearly lacking experience with their crafts. I suddenly felt bad about that, realizing that I could be today's entertainment.

“You’ve got a party barge coming our way,” Joe called out.

Oh, I saw it. And the jet ski behind it. And the boat just behind it.

Shit. It was like a parade of boats had come along just in time to spoil my day.

“Just remember to use your controls,” Joe said calmly. I put the engines into reverse and the boat came to a stop. We were pointed to the left, so I used the engines to point us to the right. And then back to the left a bit.

This was kind of fun!

“Now you’ve got to be concerned with what’s coming up behind you,” John pointed out, “because you’ve stopped dead in the channel. Are the boats behind you going to know you’ve stopped?”

Shit, shit, shit.

I turned around and saw that there weren’t actually any boats behind us – this was just another learning opportunity.

"Make sure they've got room to go around you," Joe continued. I pictured a multiple-boat pileup in the channel on a busy weekend afternoon, and made a mental note to try to avoid taking the boat out on weekends until I got a bit more experience.

The party barge passed us, and then the jet ski.

“You might be able to split the jet ski and the next boat,” John said.

No, I thought – I’m doing well here. I’ve got this boat under my control. I’m going to stay right here and wait for a longer opening. Just to prove to myself that I can.

That last boat came past so slowly at one point Joe wondered aloud if they might just be fucking with us. Once it passed us I was ready to turn in.

“Remember, only go as fast as you want to hit something,” John reminded me.

So slowly - so, *so* slowly - we went.

If you were one of the boaters on 'Mahogany Row' that day, you would have seen my F36 motor past at almost a stalled pace.

Seriously – at one point I think we weren’t moving at all.

“You’re doing great!” John called out.

“Am I going too slow?” I asked.

“Not at all – go the speed *you* want to go,” Joe reminded me.

We passed my slip, and Joe suggested where I should stop the boat. I can’t remember exactly how far we went, and wish I’d made it a point to make a note of our stopping point for future sailing.

“Now you’re going to back into your slip,” Joe prompted me.

“So... back and to the left...”

“Back in how *you* want to back in,” Joe said.

I used the engines to motor backward, going ever-so-slowly. Janet stood on the deck, line in hand, ready to tie off my spring line. Bill stood toward the bow, shouting out reassurances – “wow, you’re doing great!” And John and Joe sat on the bridge with me, watching my hands, ready to step in at any moment should I royally fuck up.

Oddly, nothing went horribly wrong.

“Tap that one forward,” Joe instructed, pointing to the controls. “That’s good – now, tap the other one back.” I tried to follow his directions the best I could, but kept forgetting that a tap is supposed to be quick. Instead of tapping I was putting the engines into forward, then into reverse. Oops! Still, Joe patiently lead me through the steps, not seeming (or pretending not) to notice that I wasn’t quite following them exactly as described.

At one point Joe, who’d stood up to watch what was happening with our lines, called out that I was in the right position while John simultaneously told me to tap the engine forward a bit, suggesting we were getting too close to the marina wall. Fearing a collision with that breakwall you’d better believe I tapped it forward, only to watch Janet look up at me in surprise as the line she was holding very quickly went taught.

“You don’t need to worry about your stern anymore, you’ve got your spring line attached,” Joe pointed out.

“Whoops,” John mouthed to me, not wanting to publically acknowledge giving me instructions that might have resulted in his wife going for a second swim. And then, louder, “you’ll get the hang of it after a few times. You’re doing great!”

We were at the dock, now, securely tied up, and that seemed to be the consensus: that I – or, really, we – had done great.

As we prepared to disembark I thanked my passengers for accompanying me, as well as for the boating lessons.

“I’m up for any boat ride where someone else is paying for the gas,” John quipped.

“Funny, those are words Bill lives by, too,” I told him.

Later Bill reiterated that I had done great.

“You’re a natural!” he said.

I questioned whether his accolades were genuine, or just the words of someone who wanted to go for another boat ride one day, and was hoping to make me feel more comfortable with my captaining via compliments.

Bill also mentioned that he thought it was great that I’d taken Viking Mike’s advice.

“What advice was that?” I asked.

“He said the pile-on is your friend,” Bill reminded me. “You know, to pivot off of it...”

“I hit the pole?” I asked, surprised.

Bill suddenly had a frozen expression on his face, like a deer caught in your headlights.

“Nooooooo,” he finally said, after a long pause. “I was just kidding. You did great. Can’t wait to go again – you’ll get better each time...”

“I can’t wait to go again,” I admitted.

“*Forever Docked* has officially been re-named,” Bill noted. “From now we shall call her *Went Out Once*.”

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