



A Short Story

by **Phil Tyzzer**

My name is Sooty...

That's all you need to know for now. I am appealing on behalf of all horizontal, four-legged sailors (mainly cats, because I am one and mainly me because I am most important) on the problems we face down at deck level.

I am desperate to get through to my thick-headed 'foster parents', those vertical people who will, despite all the training I have given them, still sit in the cockpit of our boat talking gibberish to my admirers. "Yes, he can swim"; "About four times"; "No, he's never sick".

Like all superior beings, all horizontal (four-legged) animals are born with the ability to swim. For me it's like answering to my name: I have the ability and I like to choose when to use it. It is true, the number of times I have used my 'aqua-ability' I can count on one paw. Sometimes one has to decide between the devil and the deep blue sea; on four occasions I chose the latter.

No, I am not sick at any time under sail; there is no way I am going to regurgitate any decent meal in a rough sea, knowing that it will not remain where I put it and at some future point I could be wearing it.

I digress. The point I wish to make to my and other vertical 'foster parents' is: stop talking and laughing about the results of your mistakes and pay more attention to those members of your crew who, without an opposing thumb, are somewhat restricted in their 'cling on' capabilities. I, of course, as a genius, am not included in this group.

In Villasimus, Sardegna, are a lot of horizontal people. Four boats along from me in the harbour lived dog Datchen, a kind of Jack Russell, a friend of mine (although I use the term loosely). Every morning the vertical people lifted Datchen off the boat onto the

pontoon and tethered him on a tight leash to the bow roller (that's the front of the boat, the tip of the pointed end where the anchor chain rolls out) of their snazzy MacGregor of 130 paws (that's 26 feet to you). Now there is no tide in the Mediterranean to talk about, but the marineros – those traffic wardens/boat park attendants of the harbour, those sun-tanned energetic young men of the island, who assist the boat owners in manoeuvring their craft into its allotted space in the marina – had a system of mooring boats that could stop the heart of the most seasoned sea dog. I refer, of course, to poor Dutchmen. In the marineros' haste to oblige the incoming vessel, the RIBs (two-man Formula 1 dinghies) used created a wash proportional to the eagerness of the obligation felt by the occupants. Consequently, on a day when the need to please runs full throttle, the wash from the RIBs excite all the moored boats into what can only be described as a Mexican wave. Pick out a ringside seat.

I can sit majestically all day wearing an inscrutable smile and watch my mortal enemy, sorry, friend, being hanged with each wave created by the RIBs. If the vertical people had given Datchen a little more slack when they tied him up, I would never have been so agreeably entertained.

Reg, a retriever, came to Almerimar, Spain, to see Alan and Denise's (his 'foster parents') Hallberg-Rassy. Reg, who had always been a house dog, found it difficult to adjust to life at sea; he was used to asking for the garden when the call of nature came

knocking. No one explained to him (dogs need that) what to do on a boat when sailing. I overheard Alan and Denise telling my 'foster parents' how good he was, how he never made a mess on board. I took one look at Reg's crossed eyes and bitten claws, enjoyed the moment and knew instantly Alan and Denise couldn't tell the difference between efficiency and a bladder complaint. A vertical Good Samaritan put a stop to the show by teaching Reg what to do against the mast. The fun wasn't over – the man led by example.

Closer to home (ie nearer to me) is the stowing and/or lashing down of all 'poltergeistic' objects on a sailing boat. When I was younger and only 99 per cent purrfect, I agreed to 'Catain' a ferro-cement Glen 150-pawer (30-footer) out of Almerimar to Adra, in Spain, about ten miles. She had been moored in the water for almost two years, so I tried explaining that we should clean off the prop and rudder before we leave, but no-one understood (that so often happens), so we set off with no better propulsion than two fists bashing through the water making a boat speed of between zero and one and a half knots.

The wind was almost nothing but the sea state was a mess following four days of a south-easterly force 5. It took the crew (two vertical people, Robert and Penny, plus an aging feline answering to the name of Coco) and me seven hours to make the trip, seven hours of rolling around tumble-drying, during which time the boat took the opportunity to 'feng shui' its interior.

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I can duck and dive flying objects for hours, so they presented little in the way of a hazard. However, I would like to draw your attention to a 2-foot x 3-foot table top, which was slid in between the back of the saloon seats and a bulkhead (that's an interior wall on a boat), and – you guessed it – not secured.

Whilst the boat was listed to port the table top remained snugly in its place, waiting patiently like a wooden conger eel to unleash its terror, AND it did – about every fourth wave. When we heeled to starboard out it would rush, crashing into an upright belonging to the galley (kitchen) sink, then at a roll to port back it would slide into hiding.

I regret it now, but back then at my insistence Penny had put down some food and water in the saloon for Coco and me. A bottle of Ribena was to hand on the fridge nearby for her and Robert.

Without any rhythm to it the boat would lean to one side, wait, then violently throw itself the other way. With so many objects in the saloon changing lodgings it was becoming a dangerous place for me to stay. I sussed out, should it become necessary, I could use my super powers to leap from the saloon, through the doorway and into the forward cabin without injury from the wooden eel, which was now opening and closing like a horizontal guillotine. However, I was not so confident in the abilities of my aging shipmate Coco.

At some point during the journey the following occurred. The Ribena bottle threw itself suicidally from the fridge and into the path of the oncoming wooden guillotine, which severed it in two against the galley sink upright. The contents of the bottle

sprayed around the saloon like a burst from an AK47. Neat Ribena emptied into my food bowl, picked up the contents and floated them off; more of the repulsive stuff entered my drinking water, rendering it a totally unacceptable aperitif.

In this mayhem my co-occupant of the saloon (Coco), already suffering from mal de mer on an industrial scale, lost it. Readers, believe me. I made every effort to hold back the poor old girl from leaping towards the wooden jaw of death, but all was in vain. Short of actually jumping down and using my variation of the Mr Spock technique and rendering her unconscious (I wasn't going to put MY paw into the mess swilling around down there), there was nothing more I could do except stare.

Coco pulled herself away from my glare and ran, and slid, toward the opening.

The last three events took place simultaneously. When the yacht heeled over in sympathy to a starboard swell, Coco was in mid-air. The wooden guillotine was leaving its lair on an intercepting course. The saloon door to the cockpit (opened only moments earlier by Robert for a quick recce) was sliding shut in unison with, but at a slightly faster rate of knots than, the wooden guillotine, thus cutting off a fraction early Robert's view of the unfolding nightmare.

As soon as possible Robert opened the saloon door again, taking in a bit more detail. The saloon was rearranging its interior and amongst the chaos were some sticky-under-foot red stuff and some 'meaty things' floating around. The wooden guillotine was all the way out blocking off the passage to the forward berth but, more importantly, Coco was nowhere to

be seen, not even half of her! The last time Robert had seen her she was making a dash through the opening that was now blocked by the wooden guillotine and the saloon was covered in meat and blood.

Robert feared the worst and for the next two hours nursed his anxiety. Unable to confirm Coco's state of good health when Penny asked, he lied.

At Adra I quickly got a search underway for the unfortunate Coco and we were all relieved to find her nursing a swollen tail in the forward berth amongst blankets that had fallen off the bunk.

Everyone thanked me for my cool under pressure. Coco said she couldn't have made it without my support. A snapshot of the scene that Robert saw remains in his memory to this day.

Please remember us horizontal people; we never forget you.

Catain Sooty

Do you have a story to tell?

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