

The Boat Trip

By Lucie Brownlee

It seemed appropriate to bring a mascot given that it was my birthday and we were all finding our sea-legs, and what better, Fran said, than a teddy in a sailor's hat and galoshes, whom we propped next to the wheel and named 'Francis Drake'.

I said, "Won't he roll overboard?"

Fran looked at me. "What, at four miles an hour on a stagnant river?"

Vivienne called to say she was going to be late; the fault of 'Bloody Stephen' and his inability to look after their five kids without an instruction manual, which meant she'd got snagged in rush hour traffic on the M62. "I wouldn't care," she railed down the phone, "He'll have taken them straight over to his mother's as soon as I left..."

The young man from the boat company (when do they start looking young, we pondered later) showed Fran and me what was what. The mechanism for disposing of waste was of particular concern to us both – a lever on the side of the john which, when pumped at length, sent the shit and its offensive effluvia sloshing into a container in the bowels of the vessel. Terrifying signage testified to the perils of a blocked piston (which was, it seemed, an inevitability) and we vowed to try to hold it in for the next three days.

Operating the craft was a matter of precision helm-work, a complex dance of throttle-shifting, button-resetting and infinitesimal movements of the wheel. The young man demonstrated again and again, but none of us would get it except Fran who always got everything first time except, of course, her driving license, which was an ongoing source of mirth for us all. We both took a turn, causing the boat to unleash flatulent grumbles from beneath the water, but the young man kept her tethered so she couldn't back straight into the opposite dock.

Safety features included a selection of deflated life jackets which should, the young man told us, be worn at all times under clothing.

"How would you find the inflation toggle in an emergency?" I asked no-one in particular, and Fran put a consolatory hand on my arm.

The canister containing gas for the stove was simple enough to open and close, but it was imperative that we didn't attempt to cook while moving and the valve must remain shut when we slept and whenever we had the roof on. We weren't to sit on the bow beyond the windshield, traffic must be navigated on the starboard side of the river and finally, we

were to remember that power gives way to sail. All of these instructions were detailed in the red ring-bound file should we require them.

“Can we hire you to drive it?” I asked the young man, and he laughed and went purple, apparently mistaking my genuine appeal for the come-on.

A vessel manoeuvred in alongside us: a deft reverse park, colourful buoys rebounding softly against the side of the dock. A young woman was at the helm, hair stacked atop her head like a newly risen loaf, teak-coloured skin, and teeth so white they reflected the sunlight. It occurred to me, and I’m sure, simultaneously, to Fran, that the young woman was probably half our age, which seemed impossible. How could we have reached a point in life where we were twice the age of a grown, independently-functioning human? Especially one which looked like that. Behind the young woman – three other young women, all with the same loaf-shaped hairstyles, the same shade of teak and the same fluorescent teeth. We nodded at them and they nodded back.

Vivienne called again. It would be after six now before she arrived. Bloody, Bloody Stephen. We informed the maroon-faced woman behind the boatyard counter who went further maroon and stated we would be unlikely to find a mooring if we set off at that time of night and that we would be advised to stay put.

“What, here, in among all these cars and vans?” said I, but not loud enough for her to hear.

Resigned to a first night in the boatyard, Fran and I began unpacking supplies. It didn’t take long for us to notice that tortilla chips were in abundance, but then it was all vodka and its associated mixers, red wine (boxed), white wine (boxed), fizz, gin, and a bottle of amaretto from the back of a cupboard, embalmed in a layer of greasy dust.

“Viv will be here shortly,” I said, “She’ll have brought food. She’s got five kids after all.”

Fran said, “What difference does that make?”

I looked at the tortilla chips. “Well, she’s used to...providing.”

“You do know this is Viv you’re talking about?” Fran said, at which point a silver 1996 Mercedes c180 rolled into the boatyard, performed a complex 10-point parking manoeuvre before coming to an awkward halt bonnet to bow with the boat.

Vivienne got out, lit a cigarette and exhaled with a lusty ‘pew’ before realizing she had forgotten to engage the handbrake and the Merc was edging slowly towards the drink. She lurched back into the car, pulled on the brake and re-emerged, the cigarette still hanging from her lip but bent upward at a 90 degree angle. She threw it on the ground in disgust and looked at us looking at her from the window of the boat. Fran held up the

bottle of vodka and Vivienne nodded.

“Nice to see you at last, friend,” I shouted. “Have you brought any food?”

She shook her head. “Sorry. Bloody Stephen...I’ve brought wine? And vodka? ”

“But you’ve got five kids...” I said, as if it made a difference. Vivienne shrugged and adjusted her underwear.

“Come and give me a hand will you?” she shouted. “I’ve unloaded Majestic’s wine warehouse into the back of the car.”

I climbed out of the boat and teetered onto the dock, at which point Vivienne looked down at my feet.

“What are they for god’s sake?”

“I refuse to enter my fifth decade wearing deck shoes,” I replied.

“So you enter it wearing orthopedic footwear instead?” She held out her arm for a hug.

“They’re called wedges, dearest, and are currently on trend, which is something you’d know nothing about.” We embraced and laughed and I smelled Samsara on her long brown hair.

“Happy birthday,” she said.

“Thanks. Now where’s this wine?”

When we returned to the boat Fran was in a tussle with the roof, trying to push it back to let the early evening sun in. Its bolts had rusted fast to the windshield and the runners on which it tracked were dented and worn. Together we pushed it and finally it shot backwards at speed, as if somehow mocking our incompetence.

“My mantra for this trip is ‘Don’t think about what could go wrong, think about what could go right’,” I said, writing the quote on a post-it note and sticking it to the wall. It fluttered in the breeze and blew off, landing in the water.

“Good mantra,” said Fran, and gave me a broad grin.

I looked at the cup of tea on the table. “You’ve used the stove?” I asked.

Fran said, “Yes...?”

I half-smiled but couldn’t help thinking about the instructions administered by the young fellow and whether or not she had followed them. In my mind, a film began unravelling:

Viv stumbles into the kitchen for a drink, takes a cigarette from the packet on the shelf. Places it between her teeth, plucks a match from the box then (and this part is in slow-motion), *strikes* the match against the side of the box, causing the gas which is flowing from the opened valve to combust, instantly turning her face to bacon and the boat to an apocalyptic husk...

Fran was staring at me. "I closed the gas valve."

From the back of the boat, Viv's voice: "Can someone help me here please?"

"What's wrong?" I walked through the galley towards her room to find the door entirely detached from its runner with Viv beneath it, pinned to the bed. "What are you doing?"

"I tried to open it and it just collapsed in on me," came the voice.

At first, I couldn't help for laughing. Then I couldn't lift the weight – I found myself aligned with the door at a forty-five degree angle, which meant gaining any leverage was impossible. Then I remembered a story I'd read about a woman who died of asphyxiation when the fold-out bed she was lying in had flipped up on toughened springs, entombing her in the wall. I rived at the door with renewed fervor and Viv said,

"Calm down and stop thinking about that woman who was entombed in the wall. I'm not going to suffocate. Though I might die of humiliation. Call Fran."

"Fran!"

Fran appeared and looked at the collapsed door. "Two minutes onboard and already you've wrecked the joint. How do you do it? No, really, how?"

"It's a gift," came the muffled response. "Just help me out, will you?"

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"Says here that Rod Stewart is on the Broads this weekend." Fran was demonstrating her covetable multi-tasking skills by maintaining a keen ear on the conversation, drinking, smoking, texting and browsing a celebrity magazine all at the same time.

"Is he sitting in the boatyard too?" Vivienne asked, placing a tortilla chip into her mouth and crunching it loudly.

"According to Twitter, he left Wroxham two hours ago." Fran tapped at the screen of her phone. "Which means he's only a few hundred yards up-river. We could probably run and catch him up."

Vivienne snorted. “How far can we expect to get in a day in this thing? Have we even got a map?”

I threw a crumpled leaflet at her. “That young fellow left us this. I did ask him if he would come with us but he thought I was joking.”

“Young fellow? Ha!” Vivienne flicked her hair back and lit a cigarette. “Since when did we use terminology like that?” Viv had been the first of us to marry and the first to turn forty, and she was still frisky as a cat, her eyes made up into two feline droplets. (Her face bore no whiskers, despite her obsession with tweezers and the magnifying mirror.)

She opened the leaflet out onto the table and I joined her to examine the route of the river. The waterways spread out like a child’s straw-blown painting, each ‘broad’ represented by a kidney-shaped node.

“Wait, what the hell *is* a broad, anyway?” I said, suddenly stricken.

“Did you do any research whatsoever into this trip before you organized it, Alex?” Fran asked in a tone of genuine affront.

I had, in fact, but into the nature of the vessel, not the Broads themselves. And I wasn’t about to tell Fran what I had read: ‘*A boat, my research had told me, is a craft which comprises many parts. Failure of any of these parts, especially those which are automated, can cause fatal accidents such as sinking, capsizing among others...*’

I turned to her. “Who are you texting, anyway?”

“It’s business.” She didn’t lift her eyes from the screen of her phone.

“Monkey business?”

She said nothing but a smile tightened her mouth.

Rain, silver-thin, shot down on us like darts from a blowpipe. The roof we had worked so hard to remove was quickly reinstated, skidding forward on its rusty rails. It would be fine tomorrow, the young fellow had said before he slunk off, but for now cloud spread over us like a deep black bruise and I was relieved to be in the boatyard and not bobbing about in a kidney-shaped node. Through the rain-speckled glass I read *Wroxham – The Gateway to Your Holiday on The Broads!* then saw rows and rows of empty cars. For a second, I thought about Michael, and felt him, missing from me; like one of those cars on the dock, bereft of anything inside. Would I be here, on this boat, if he still were? *Don’t...* I dug newly-painted nails into the fleshy heel of my hand.

“According to this, it takes five hours from Wroxham to Stalham. That seems to be the

route to take,” Vivienne said, tracking a chewed finger-tip along the looping trail of the river.

I said suddenly: “Christ, look at that. The river goes straight into open sea at Yarmouth!”

Vivienne looked at me. “No shit.”

“We probably need to eat,” said Fran, absently. “There’s the Queen’s Head, the Bluebell...the Queen’s has got four stars, but it says here that the service is slow...”

Drained glasses led a trail to the galley, where a bottle of vodka stood open in a pool of lemon juice and melting ice cubes. I topped each one up, three fingers of vodka and a slug of tonic, no ice for Vivienne (she was on a diet, she told us), and carried them through to the table.

“If we set off early tomorrow, we can take a leisurely pace to Ranworth Broad then down anchor for lunch,” Viv was saying.

“But what do we eat?” I said, laying the glasses down and distributing them one by one.

“For lunch or tonight?”

“Both. But pressingly, tonight,” I said. “You know how I need to eat at regular intervals. My stomach doesn’t acknowledge tortillas as sustenance.”

“You’re like an old woman,” Viv said. “Have you brought your Bisodol?”

“I *am* an old woman. I’m forty tomorrow.” I glanced at my reflection in the windshield. Crow’s feet looked even deeper in this light, I thought. I touched with them a pink acrylic fingernail.

“Queen’s Head gets my vote,” said Fran, prodding her phone with a deft thumb.

“Who are you texting?” I asked again. “Is it the married one or the one from the warehouse?”

“I am no longer with the one from the warehouse,” Fran said, too piously for one engaged in multiple affairs.

“So it’s the married one?”

“Yes, but he’s not happy.”

“You do know they never leave their wives, don’t you?” Vivienne said.

“That’s not always true...” Fran began.

“Why would they?” Vivienne continued. “They have all their needs fulfilled, why would they want to change the status quo?”

“Isn’t that the point?” I said. “Therein lies the fun, surely?”

Eyes turned to me. “Are you still sleeping with Oddjob?” Viv asked, lighting up a cigarette and inhaling with a grimace.

“If you mean my mechanic cum painter and decorator friend, no,” I replied. I too lit up a cigarette and grimaced on inhalation. Truth was, smoking made us queasy, but we loved the thought of being smokers, of being Dietrich or Bardot, despite threat of an expedited and painful death.

“Thank god for that,” Viv said, and there was a flutter of tacit agreement.

“But you are seeing someone..?” said Fran.

Since Michael’s death they’d all been waiting for ‘good news’ on the dating front. It would free them, in a sense, from the burden of my widowhood. The mechanic cum painter and decorator did not constitute ‘good news’. For a start he had a tattooed neck, the thought of which sent Viv doolally, plus he was sleeping with the majority of his female clientele. ‘An occupational hazard’, as he called it. (“A health hazard more like,” Viv had said, “The man is a walking herpes sore. I hope you’re using protection at least.”)

“So, who is it?” Fran said. “Do tell.”

I took a drag on the cigarette and stubbed it out. “Someone inappropriate...”

“Where did you meet him?”

Thip, thip, thip went the rain against the windshield. I said, “I really think we ought to eat...” and stood up, stooping under the low roof of the boat, (onto which someone had pinned a jaunty plastic pineapple decoration) then headed down a set of steps into space in the bow which would be my room for three nights, shared, of course, with Fran as I felt too afraid to sleep alone.

I knew they would be exchanging glances, those wary looks of concern of which I had become the subject over the last four years. At first they angered me, those looks, but I had gradually become impervious to them, in the same way that I had become impervious to most things. I reached for my vanity mirror and looked at the person reflected in it. This is me after Michael, I thought, a new woman in a new life – like a field ant: strong enough to carry a hundred times my own body weight, yet crushable with the sole of a boot.

I heard Fran say, a touch too loudly:

“The Queen’s Head isn’t far, let’s just go there.”

“OK, sounds good,” Viv said, and the sound of movement, clearing glasses, walking about. Then Viv: “Ow! Whose idea was the fucking pineapple?”

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The Queen’s Head was full of people who had arrived too late and who were moored for the night in the boatyard. But they’d got in early, these people, and had colonized the place. We ended up outside, huddled beneath a wooden gazebo and a gas heater, drinking wine from plastic cups. Food ordered, Viv once again got out the map and spread it on the table before us.

“So we’re...here,” she said, locating Wroxham for the umpteenth time, “And we want to get to...here.”

“What’s at Stalham?” I said.

“There’s a pub icon on the map. I suggest that’s all we need to know.”

Viv said, “Do you think we’ll run into Rod Stewart?” and nudged Fran, but Fran was typing a message into her phone. “Right, can we have a moratorium on mobile phones for the night?” Viv topped up the wines. “I’m looking at you, Francesca Philips.”

Fran looked up. “It’s business.”

“Yeah, monkey, we know.” Viv shook her head.

“Just because you’re craving a bit of excitement in your life doesn’t mean you have to ruin everyone else’s.” Fran put the phone on the table and looked out towards the river. Through the mizzle it didn’t look like a river at all; it was a black runway weaving through the countryside, smooth and unmoving. I looked at Fran. She went through phases like these, with men, where she seemed to unhook herself from the rest of the world and go into a kind of relationship freefall. Any challenge to it was met with a defensive retort.

When we met her all those years ago at university, she had pink hair and was a member of the Women’s Society and had Proust on her bookshelf. Then she started dating a guy called Keith. Keith told her to lose weight and make his dinner, which she did because she was nineteen and thought that’s how relationships worked. They would have blazing rows after which Keith could be seen trudging across campus with his mattress on his shoulder, only for them to make up the next day and for him to be seen trudging back

with it the other way.

Keith had a particular brand of manipulation which involved stroking her arm while she spoke, as if he had proprietary rights. If she said anything he didn't agree with, Keith would gently pinch her skin and say, "What Fran means is..." Her hair went from pink to brown within three weeks of meeting Keith. We never really got her back until he ended it two years later on some toxic pretext in which he blamed her entirely for the break-up.

Looking at her now, I felt deep love and a sense of foreboding converge in my chest. This latest encounter, some married bloke she'd met in a club in Brixton, was the latest in a line of unrequitable love interests. We all suspected she was too afraid of committing to anyone because of Keith and his legacy of self-esteem erosion. But married – she hadn't done this before. For the record, neither had I. Until now, of course. But I couldn't tell them, not yet anyway.

"That's a bit harsh," Viv said, and it took me a moment to return to the conversation. "Why do you surmise that I am in need of excitement?" Viv was eyeing Fran from behind her wine cup.

Fran smiled. "Oh I'm teasing you Viv. I didn't mean anything by it..."

"What, because I'm married to Bloody Stephen with five kids you think I must be bored out of my brain? Think again. I love my life. Believe it or not, I love Bloody Stephen. He's alright, you know? I mean...this year...he grew a beard. And I love beards. I have no cravings whatsoever. Only that I might come away and spend time with my friends for the weekend without the extra guest in the shape of a mobile phone." She flipped the lid on the cigarette packet and removed one indignantly.

I said, "OK, can we move on? Plan for this weekend so that we're not stuck in the boatyard for three nights?" I shook the map purposefully and then shook my head.

"Yes, sorry Alex," Viv said. "Happy birthday."

Our three plastic cups came together over the table. Fran said, "Plastic wine glasses. Why must they anaesthetise every aspect of modern life?"

"Yeah," Viv said. "As if grown adults suddenly become incapable of safely handling glass when they step out of a pub and into a beer garden."

"Do you think Rod is drinking out of a plastic cup in a beer garden up the road?" I asked.

"No way."

"One rule for Rod..."

“But he is Rod though...”

Viv flicked a long tail of ash onto the grass and said; “Rod! Who the hell names their child Rod?”

“It’s short for Roderick...”

“That’s even bloody worse!”

Food arrived, served on black slate tiles (Viv: “*A hobby horse of mine, don’t get me started...*”) and we fed, contemplating the sound of the rain on the parasol above, muted and percussive like light fingertips on the skin of a drum.

Later I said, “Do you think Francis Drake is holding the fort?” to which Viv replied, “Who the fuck is Francis Drake?”

“Francis Drake is our mascot, our Captain; he’s the teddy Fran brought...”

“Can you actually hear yourself?” Viv said, and I could, loud and clear.

“Let’s stumble back and check,” said Fran, tapping on her phone despite the moratorium.

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Lights out on the river. Opposite me, Fran slept, a deep, red wine-induced slumber, her breathing audible through the blackness. I checked my phone for messages – emails, of course, for one can’t text a married man – but there were none. He knew I was coming away, didn’t want to intrude. I wanted him to intrude though. I wanted to know he was thinking about me, missing me; need instead of ambivalence. His name was Paul Jones, “*like the singer,*” he told me, “*you know?*”, but I didn’t because I wasn’t old enough, which made him laugh and say, “*Of course you don’t remember, I forget how much younger you are...*”.

I met him on a train, strangers drawn together in lust; at least, that’s where we said I would say I’d met him (the truth was much more mundane – he was the news editor who commissioned the article I subsequently wrote.) We had to remain secret because of his wife and it’s a small world after all, Alex, writers and editors...it’s such a cliché, and, you know, *my wife isn’t stupid*.

At first I didn’t even feel attracted to him, not physically at least. He had the look of a man who has worked in news journalism for too long, haunted by stories long since told. They seemed to hang about his shoulders, cobwebs which, occasionally, (notably after we’d had sex), he’d visibly dust off, but they’d quickly re-spin themselves and hang there again, dragging the skin on his face and around his eyes down with them.

Why did I love him then? He was thin-haired and perfunctory; but I knew I brought him out of his mechanical existence, even just for the snatched hours we shared, and he...he was so different to Michael and that's what I craved. Something far, far removed from the man I had lost, suddenly, that unseasonably warm day in March two years ago. Beloved Michael, who'd left for work and never returned, recovered from the car – my car, as it happened – looking almost as perfect as when he stepped in it twenty minutes earlier, save for a pool of blood in the foot-well that had seeped into his shoes...

Paul Jones. I refreshed my messages, but still no sign of his name in my inbox. Neediness is just another feature of grief, my counsellor told me, along with acute paranoia about things that could go wrong. And here I was, a textbook example; tucked up in the bow of a watertight vessel, trying for all the world to live a watertight life.

Raindrops had gathered on the tiny window overhead, side-lit by the moon. I put my phone down and pulled the blanket up around my chin. In the crook of my arm, imperceptible to anyone else, was tucked Francis Drake, his eyes wide open despite the lateness of the hour.

“I hope I don't get seasick,” I said into the darkness.

A voice from a far-off bunk: “What? In a bloody carpark?”

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