

WHITECAPS ON THE RESERVOIR

A spill into icy water can spoil an afternoon sail. BY CLARKE C. JONES | Illustration BY JACK BLACK

It was one of those freaky Februaries in Virginia. A warm front drifted in from the south and lingered for several days. The air temperature hovered around the mid-70s, so I invited a young lady to go sailing. I pictured her picturing me standing on the foredeck of a boat, squinting into the setting sun, scanning the horizon for pirates or my next adventure. Her eyes would glow as the breeze fluttered open my shirt, revealing warm sweat trickling down my impressive chest. In reality, instead of cruising past, say, the Spice Islands in a teak-covered sailing vessel, we glided along on the waters of a local reservoir in a small centerboard sailboat that was little more than a canoe with a broom-handled mast and sail. The “love boat,” as I mentally referred to this dinghy, was anchored on the Swift Creek reservoir at the home of a community leader, who had agreed to let me borrow it.

Everything started out well. Manning the rudder as we sailed along, I began to spout all the nautical terminology I had learned recently from a weekend course at the Annapolis Sailing School. I even made up a few words of my own. I could see that the first mate, whom I was trying so hard to impress, was beginning to enjoy herself as we sailed in t-shirt weather, the boat running with “a bone in her teeth.”

We cut some fine figures—the two of us—sailing in the warm sun through waters that only two days before had been covered with skim ice. I waved to a few people walking on the nearby shore, certain of how envious they were that they were not sharing in this unique and glorious opportunity. My new love caught my glance and smiled sweetly—the type of smile the heroine always gives the captain after he has brought the ship through a dangerous storm. And then her sweetness heated to sultry, her eyes smoldering with seductive promise that said, “I will never forget you or this day that you gave me.” If I had been a prophet, I could have predicted how romantic the night would be. If I had been a prophet, I would have known better.

One of the first rules of sailing is to properly alert your crew and passengers when a turn is imminent. The sail boom is going to whip around to the opposite direction, and it is considered bad form to bean those on board with the boom. On a small centerboard sailboat, it is also important—



no, make that critical—to have your crew and passengers on the proper side of the boat. This allows their weight to prevent the force of the sail, which is catching the wind on the other side, from pulling the boat over onto its side.

As I yelled, “Prepare to come about!” and pushed hard on the rudder, the sail swung around with a menacing whooshing sound. It should be noted that a good captain, after giving a command, must wait for his crew to execute that command before proceeding with further action. Caught up in my *Master and Commander* reverie... I did not. Fortunately, my date kept her head low as the boom rotated the sail swiftly around to leeward (or is it windward?)—but

the shift converted the sailboat into a catapult. My date had full confidence in my manly capabilities right up until the moment when she was launched out of the boat and into the frigid water. There was a thunderous splash followed instantly by an *Apocalypse Now* scream of terror that would have thrown me into action had I not been sliding into the icy cold water myself as the sailboat rolled onto its side.

The transition from heat to polar-plunge cold might be relaxing for some, but this was an unexpected, unwelcome jolt to each of us. My date paused momentarily in the water—her eyes shooting daggers at me through streaking makeup as she assessed her plight. Determined to avoid hypothermia, she turned and quickly swam to shore. I, on the other hand, was warm and red-faced with embarrassment. Then, my adrenaline kicked in. I realized I had an overturned, borrowed boat in the middle of a reservoir, and must deal with it. Standing on the centerboard and pulling on the line attached to the mast, I was able to right the sailboat. Next I grabbed a sail bag that had not sunk to the bottom and with it was able to bail out the ship, er, boat.

I thought that being able to complete these tasks single-handedly was quite impressive. And I felt even better after I talked my date back into the sailboat, so that we could return it to the home port. I kept explaining to the young lady, with a lame chuckle, that she would have quite a story to tell at her office the next day.

I never heard how that went.