

ALL AT SEA

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The boatman cheerily calls everyone buddy and, as they step off the stoic wooden Victorian pier, his revving boat dips under foot: “Been on the cream cakes buddy? No, don’t worry you’ll find your sea legs.” Donna smiles at her daughter Maria and friend Mitchell, both wobbling like tall penguins. Donna remembers a small Maria rowing across the harbour with great purpose, all heaving limbs and grunts, like a mini-Viking. Maria calls to Mitchell over the noise of the engine: “Don’t get excited or anything, mum’s boat is not exactly an... erm... superyacht. We’re not talking the Kardashians here.” Mitchell dazzles a smile at Donna: “It is still a boat; it is sunny, and we are going sailing. How often do you get to even see all this space and distance?” as he points at the horizon.

Not yet noon, the sun is still rising in the East and the steady wind holds promise of a good day’s sailing. Donna, after all those lonely hours hunched over the laptop in her flat, loves the light, being able to breathe. The freedom. Sorley is moored in the outer harbour, the deepest part where the big boys, the expensive yachts, sit low in the water, waiting to launch sleekly at speed, like sharks. As they turn into the outer harbour Donna sees her old wooden folkboat bobbing about behind the sweetie-pink mooring buoy, like a circus seal with a ball. Donna won an eBay bid for it, £300 for a very old wooden boat with no engine. “You were robbed, buddy” but Donna did not care. Sorley meant adventure, escape and freedom. With sails full of wind and no noisy engine, sailing Sorley felt like flying. Another generous smile from Mitchell: “I think it is just perfect. I love it already.”

Once aboard there are many jobs to be done before they can set sail and slip off the mooring. These were rituals Donna loved, rites of passage to make passage across the open sea. As her tanned hands dart about, she says all the ancient names for the boat parts: “the tell-tales, stanchions, lifelines, boom vang and turnbuckles. The fairleads, forward pulpit, pushpit, halyard, chainplate, upper shroud, lower shroud and batten down the hatches. Thwarts, gudgeons, grommets, clews, sheaves and leeches.” Coined to sound clear and distinct in a storm or to know what is being thrown at you in the bible black of a moonless night.

Unforgettable words called out to men who signed X as their name. Donna struggles to pull up the mainsail and attach the corner (the tack), to the gooseneck which sticks out from the mast. “Guys, this is heavy with rain, maybe I could get a...,”. Donna watches Maria and Mitchell pop a prosecco bottle and pose for photos for Instagram. ‘Oh, this generation’ she thinks. ‘If they haven’t snapped it, it didn’t happen.’

Next Donna feeds the foot of the sail through the boom, the heavy pole which swings from side to side across the cabin: “Hey snowflakes, this thing is called the BOOM because that is the noise it makes when it swings and no one ducks!” Donna ties knots to the corners of the sail. Her Dad, a ship’s Captain, taught the young Donna her knots: “the right knot will save, and the wrong knot will kill”. He would seriously inspect her messy knots, or an uncoiled rope with a circumspect: “I see, a snake’s holiday is it?” Donna’s wistful smile was for the sweet honey of memory and the seasalt sting of the absence.

“Catch the mainsail sheet” and Donna throws the perfectly coiled rope at Maria. “Eeeeuuugh I am NOT catching that rope, it is all smelly-green and WET” calls out Maria, her hands lifting up guiltily high, like a fouling footballer. Uncaught, the rope splashes into the water and the untethered mainsail, cracks loudly like a whip. Mitchell adds: “Well, it is wet now - I’ll get it Donna. No problem” and they all laugh as Donna throws the boat hook for him to use: “Thanks, sorry about Princess Margaret. You’ll be a great shipmate though.”

The sails curve as they fill with wind and the bittersweet excitement and dread thuds Donna’s heart. The worst bit of sailing is the casting off, leaving the safe harbour for the unknown.

The call of adventure pulls her but the fear of the sea pushes her back, to safety. Glancing at the waves out of the harbour, the ‘wild horses’ with cresting white manes mean the tide and the wind were going in the opposite directions. “Read the sea” whispers her dad’s voice in her head. He could look at a perfectly calm sea and sky on a still summer’s day yet purse his lips: “there is ‘carry’ in the clouds, look at how fast those are” then, an hour or so later the heavy slate grey fog would rush in with its thundering chaos and change the day.

Sailing was not about being able to day trip in good weather, it was to expect and then command the tempest.

Donna dismisses her fear and shouts: “okay crew, slip off the mooring”. Mitchell lifts the mooring noose off the boat’s cleat and then, Sorley is free. Maria, with her hand on the tiller and her phone in the other, is taking selfies of a satin captain’s hat askew on her curls. The old outboard engine starts to putt-putt and the boat points towards escape, the large stone-walled exit of Granton harbour.

Just at that very moment, a freak swell surges through the harbour. Sorley rises atop the crest of the swell like a cork, but the wave is so high the propeller blade is spinning in the air, a Spitfire coming into land. Then Sorley lands in the trough of the wave and the engine gutters in the deep water. Donna glances at Maria, who serenely moves both hands onto the tiller and smiles assuredly at her mum. ‘Perhaps the snowflakes are not so bad after all’ thinks Donna. Mitchell sits at the bow of the boat and shouts: “I remember what you said, one hand for me and one hand for the boat. Look I am holding on! I don’t know what is called but I am holding onto it very tightly.”

Donna’s answer “it’s the forestay” is lost in the gusting wind as Sorley pivots left and points towards a very expensive-looking yacht on the next mooring. Donna notices it is called ‘Fenella’ and she really hopes the human Fenella is the forgiving type.

“Turn to starboard Maria!” calls Donna as she crawls up the boat to assist Mitchell. “Stick out your feet Mitch” calls Donna as Sorley tries to collide with the millionaire’s plaything.

“Starboard Maria!” shouts Donna again as Mitchell and Donna, lying back on Sorley, kick off Fenella in synchronised kangaroo jumps.

Yet the swell carries Sorley on, now drifting slowly backwards past Fenella. Donna looks at the next yacht: ‘Monty’s Serenity’. ‘Monty won’t be very serene in a moment’ thinks Donna and she calls out “Maria, move the tiller the other way! Mitch grab the boat hook and hook onto Fenella’s guardrails.” Donna and Mitchell then held onto the boat hook pole with all mustered strength but the gentle power of the swell pulls Sorley backwards and the pole slides quietly through their grips as they lose the tug o’ war with the North Sea. When only Donna’s right hand is on the pole she sighs: “...and this Mitch, is where the phrase ‘the bitter end’ comes from. It means having to let go off something you really don’t want to.” As the boat hook splashes in the brine below, Maria calls out “What are you both DOING? What are you waiting for? I’ll be captain now, let’s get out of the harbour.”

Maria carefully puts her phone into her back pocket, yanks on the mainsail to catch the wind and Sorley surges forward. ‘The mini Viking is now quite a good sailor’ notes Donna. Maria leans over the side of the boat and lifts up a dripping pole: “oh! look what I have found floating by. Someone’s left their boat hook.” They all laugh out loudly: “Maria, that is OUR boat hook. Actually, now I see it, I think that might be a window pole” and the unison of their shrieks rings round the harbour walls.

As they power through the mouth of the harbour, the North Sea again swells underneath Sorley but this time Donna, Maria and Mitch work as one around the boat and, with the wind filling the sails, they dart along the Forth. As Donna peers for sight of Aberdour harbour in the distance, she considers what a steady hand on the tiller Maria is. An unflappable Captain, just like her grandad. Mitchell, who is now photographing and laughing at puffins’ haphazard crash landings is already a resolute, entirely reliable, gentle and surefooted man. Perhaps this young generation are not ‘all at sea’ after all. The light from the waves glints and glistens like darting golden fish through the waves and Donna, with the sun warming her face, once again feels the thrilling pull towards adventure.

At the harbour wall a seal’s head pops up, blinking its salty rheumy eyes in the sun like a night watchman and surveys the old wooden boat tack and turn its way, too carefully and too slowly, across the Firth of Forth. Many people in Scotland believe the seal-folk include the souls of old deadmariners who keep lookout over wanderers.

Edinburgh writer Dr Kate Smith loves biscuits, hillwalking, jokes, stories, talking about politics and learning new words and ideas, and spends too much of her time working out how to squeeze more of these things into her life.