



ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION
Queensland Branch

PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING & HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH

THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION
2020

Second Prize in the Open Division

Katrina Watson

Circumnavigation

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Circumnavigation

Lainie could still hear the kookaburras on the island, although she was 300 metres off shore now. Probably laughing at her. Nothing funnier than a middle-aged mum teaching herself how to sail.

There was a steady breeze over the port bow, and her sails were set perfectly. She loved the soft brushing sound as the dinghy moved through the water. Just the occasional burble of a little wave.

Ray had told her a thousand times that normal people just knew how to sail — like riding a bike. But in her family no-one had boats or bikes. The boys might have ridden their mates' motor bikes til they pranged them. The girls? Well, they never did anything or went anywhere. Going shoplifting was about as exciting as it got.

She looked at her tell tales to check the wind direction. Ray would have something to say about tell tales. 'That's for the plebs. Can't you feel where the wind's coming from?'

She'd made a reasonable go of setting off even if she did say so herself. She'd got the centreboard down in time to avoid drifting into the jetty, but not so soon that it got stuck in the sand. Pity no-one was around to see. Her boys might have been impressed. Ray would have found something to yell about. 'Tack for God's sake, tack. Watch out for that bloody boat!'

Now she was closer to the point she could see into the main lake. There were a few white caps. A couple of trailer-sailers were out already, and heeling over, but she wasn't planning on doing any heeling. Nope, she wasn't planning on going in the water at all today. After all she was the breadwinner for two kids and a slack husband, and she was needed alive, not drowned. Besides the water that had seeped through her wet suit was very cold.

The boys would be starting to wake up, and she hoped they didn't disturb Sleeping Beauty. He'd been so angry with them last night—roared at them in front of their cousins—sent them all to bed. He'd be pretty cranky if they woke him this morning. The boys knew to get their own cereal. They knew she was going on an early morning sail and she'd be home before nine.

Ray would be angry with her for taking that last banana. No banana for his breakfast. Stuff him. She'd grabbed it at the last minute and chucked it into one of her forward lockers, her water bottle in the other. Mind you, locker was a weird name for a cupboard that didn't even have a door, let alone a lock.

She'd go to the shops and get a kilo of bananas after she got home. Ray would never know. He wouldn't be out of bed 'til ten, and that's if you were lucky.

She executed a perfect tack, and rounded the point. Eat your heart out, Kay Cottee. Come to think of it, Kay Cottee had had marriage problems, hadn't she? Would she have had Lainie's problems—the house falling apart, the kitchen always messy, the garage a disaster—a husband who had plenty of time, like all day, but never did a thing?

And why had he tried to cover up last night, when Tom said, 'Dad, I saw you at Café Max this morning—who was that lady?'

Yes, who was that lady?

And he wasn't even looking for a job. He was just dead wood. Bloody dead wood. Like a sea anchor. What was the other name for it? A drogue? Yes that sounded appropriate. Something that would hold you back, drag the whole family down and still be Mr Successful at Café Max.

And all this anger. Yelling at the kids all the time, especially Tom.

And what did he say when she'd announced her circumnavigation plan? Looked at her as if she was mad. 'Elaine, you've got to be joking. You couldn't sail a boat round a bathtub, let alone round an island.'

Well she wasn't joking, no not at all. And he knows she hates being called Elaine.

He couldn't care less whether she drowned or not, that was clear. He'd change his tune if she drowned and there was no more income. Or maybe he was relying on that life policy he'd taken out on her. Yes. That was probably it. The bastard.

I hate to disappoint you Ray, darling, but I can sail. I've been teaching myself when you haven't been looking. Those summer afternoons when the kids were riding their bikes around and you were out? Out and goodness knows where? Out and coming home smelling like a pub? Well I've been out too—out on the lake. I've read a ton of books on sailing—even 'Heavy Weather Sailing'. Even 'Sailing Alone Around the World'. So Curlew Island is nothing, darling. Piece of cake.

There were a few boats out. That was reassuring. If there were no boats you knew a bit of a blow was coming. But today there were quite a few sails—should be nothing to worry about. Although she could see a hint of cloud on the western

horizon where the weather came from. She'd have to keep an eye on that. A squall on a shallow lake could produce big waves.

No doubt about it, she was making great progress and would soon be able to see Reynolds' Jetty—the half-way point. She thought about beaching the boat and having a bit of a break and her banana, but decided to aim for a non-stop circumnavigation. More impressive. Also there was that bit of cloud. Lainie altered course a few degrees, and headed further offshore.

She kept watching that western horizon. Denied it initially, but eventually had to admit that the cloud bank was real, and that the waves were in fact getting bigger. But at this rate she should get around Point Owen before the wind really picked up. Once you got past that pylon you were in sheltered waters, but rounding the point required a gybe. A true circumnavigator would always gybe. The other option, a big 270 degree tack, would be a cop-out. Only problem was you were much more likely to capsize with a gybe. That boom swinging over with a massive thwack—it could knock you out if you weren't careful. She dreaded a gybe in a big sea. She was the first to admit she wasn't really a heavy weather sailor. If the wind kept picking up she would definitely tack. Discretion the better part of valour and all that.

She was starting to feel tired—all the concentration—and thought she might get her water bottle, and that banana. Was there any way she could reach the lockers without letting go of the tiller? She glanced forward to gauge the distance.

That's when she saw the snake.

Slithering out of the starboard locker, all sliding coils. Dark brown, pale belly. An Eastern Brown. The most venomous. Slick black tongue flickering in and out, tasting the air, catching the smell of Lainie. Head up. Smelling, sampling. Sweeping back and forth, smooth and sinuous.

The coils now out of the locker and gliding directly towards her.

She shot backwards onto the port gunwale, nearly over balancing. Managed to grab onto a stay, but lost hold of the tiller and the main, so the boat rounded up into the wind, sails flapping violently. Lainie felt sick with horror. The boat was tipped up and about to capsize. She was totally vulnerable—there was nothing at all she could use to kill a snake, nor could she sail the boat and fend off a snake at the same time. And if she jumped overboard and lost the boat, well, she was a long way from shore.

The snake was sliding along the starboard gunwale, licking, flicking. Getting closer. The rear was unwinding while the front of it was searching, head up. It was all over the deck, a long shiny rope. It knew exactly where she was; it had judged the striking distance.

There was only one option. She'd have to capsize and force the snake to swim off. Lainie's heart was banging and sweat was pouring down her face. She brought the boat broadside to the wind and pulled on the main—waited for the next gust and the boat to tip. The snake was now at the level of the thwarts, about a metre from her legs. She could see it was going to spill out onto the leeward side. She definitely didn't want to end up under the sail with the snake. So she let go of everything, rocked the leeward side to force the boat over. The gunwale was under water and she prayed the snake would be swept into the lake. She jumped as hard as she could off the stern.

The water was a shock. So cold. Like a blow to the head. Freezing on her scalp. She kicked back to the surface as quickly as possible, gasping, hoping she wouldn't come eye-to-eye with the snake. The boat had completely capsized and turned turtle, centreboard sticking up like a dorsal fin.

The waves were high now and Lainie copped a nauseating mouthful of salt water. She struggled to turn away from the next wave. The boat was drifting—she had to grab it. She couldn't see any snake. God only knew where it might be—on the boat, or in the water. Or caught up in the rigging. Lainie swam to the bow with kicks and slapping arm strokes. The life jacket made it bloody hard, and she felt like a toddler in floaties. Somehow she reached the front of the boat, and, kicking hard, managed to turn it nose to the wind. She prayed that it was true that snakes can't bite in water. She prayed that the snake had pissed off.

She kept the boat head to the wind for a minute trying to avoid more mouthfuls of water. The waves had swell in them now, and she and the boat were riding up the crests and then crashing down in the troughs. It sounded like the marine ply was going to shatter. When she was on the crests she could glimpse the shoreline, so far away. And no boats, none at all. When she was in the troughs all she could see was the next wall of water, grey-green and immense.

Got to get back in the boat. She swam round to the side, and, panting, managed to kick herself onto the hull, grab the centreboard and hang onto it. She leaned back and back, trying to use her weight to right the boat, but she just wasn't heavy enough. The boat showed no inclination to flip. She leaned further and further out. Move you bloody boat, move. When her arms were about worn out, the boat teetered up, and a bit more and a bit more, and then popped over. She had to grab the gunwale and kick herself in over the side—bloody difficult, with the life jacket on. She flopped into the bottom like a jelly fish, utterly exhausted.

There was a lot of water in the boat. The snake might be in that water.

She got up—on her knees, then to her feet—wobbly, shaky, shivery—and looked for the snake—in the lockers, under the thwarts and in the centreboard housing. She pulled one of the oars out and balanced it against the gunwale. It could be useful for beating off a snake if it tried to come aboard.

The dinghy was half full of water and was wallowing around, luffed up, sails flapping wildly. She had to do some bailing straight away. She grabbed the bucket and started scooping.

She was so cold and was shivering, despite the bailing effort. She kept scouring the water around the wallowing boat to see if she could see the snake.

The boat was starting to sail by itself. She looked up to check the wind direction, and saw, just a metre and a half above her, the snake coiled around the gaff. Neatly spiraled around, as if it was taking a reef in a sail. Like a lacing. Waiting. Lainie almost fell overboard again. The snake could drop onto her at any moment. My God—she had to sail a tiny dinghy with a snake wound around a piece of timber just above her head.

But what were her choices? She was in the middle of the lake, there were now no boats out, the swell was getting bigger, and she couldn't swim to land against an offshore wind.

Should she capsize the boat again? She was exhausted from the first effort and wouldn't have the strength to right it a second time. And the snake would probably stay on board. It seemed determined to entwine itself around anything it could.

What if she held up the oar? Would the snake crawl onto it, so that she could then heave both snake and oar into the lake? That was worth a try. Lainie stood up, held out the oar with one hand, and gripped onto the mast with the other, and batted at the snake. The dinghy tipped back and forth alarmingly. There was still a lot of water in the bottom.

The snake wasn't tempted by the oar, but started to wind its way down the mast towards Lainie and the deck. She was a dead woman. She shrank back next to the tiller. The tongue was flicking in and out, blue-black, whetted. The eyes were fathomless, keen.

But instead of gliding towards her, the snake slid across the foredeck and headed towards the starboard locker again. It liked the dark. Or maybe there was something in there. Like a rat. Or even the banana. The snake coiled itself up into the locker silently, efficiently. Invisible in the shadow. Lurking, waiting.

Lainie took stock. She had to watch that locker all the time and get home as fast as possible. If the snake came out she'd just have to abandon ship and pray she could somehow get to shore. She pulled in on the main and cleated the jib and set

course for Point Owen, never taking her eyes off the locker. Her hands were trembling, fear more than cold. She just wanted to get home.

She got to the Point Owen pylon. There was no question about it—tack, no bloody gybe. Not taking her eyes off that locker. The coils, the scales, cold in the grey light.

She'd been looking forward to this final leg of her sail. She was in the lee of the island, and it should have been a lazy broad reach, with the boat gently surfing on the calm waves. Lainie had imagined herself leaning back, managing the tiller with her toes, relaxing. A gin and tonic even. Instead all she wanted to do was to get to land and get out of the bloody boat.

Thank God, their own jetty was coming into view. Lainie knew there'd be no welcoming party, no congratulations. She wasn't supposed to sail round islands—that was not a thing frowsy mums did. Ray would have no interest at all. He might not even be awake. Probably dreaming of his new lady. What was the time, she wondered. She felt like she'd been gone hours and hours. She was still shivering. Watch that locker.

'Mum, Mum, where have you been?' It was Tommy and his cousin, on their bikes, shouting to her from the shore.

'Round the island,' she yelled.

'This island?'

'Yes.' She wouldn't tell them about the snake just yet. She couldn't cope with a bunch of excited boys, an aggressive snake and no means of killing it. She'd get them out of the way and ask Ray to deal with it. Fathers had to help some times. In emergencies. Besides, Ray liked killing things.

'Mum. The whole of this island?'

She shouted as loudly as she could. 'Yes, the whole of this island. Curlew Island.'

Pause.

'Mum?'

'What?'

'Can we go and get some bait?'

'Yes, hang on. Go tell your Dad where you're going.'

Their reply got lost in the wind. Something to do with Dad. It would be. She'd been gone a while. He'd be mad, for sure.

'What? I can't hear you.'

'He's angry 'cos there's no bananas.'

'Well, just a minute then.'

She was quite close to shore now, and uncleated the jib ready for her last tack into the beach.

Called to the boys. ‘Go wait up to the house. I’ll come straight away. But tell Dad to come down. I’ve got a banana for him.’

‘OK.’

Lainie tacked for the last time, got the centreboard out, luffed up, jumped out and started to lower sail, still watching the locker.

Ray appeared. Lainie had the rudder up, sails down.

‘Can you help me?’ She began pulling the boat up the beach, from the stern end, away from the lockers. It would take a few big heaves.

‘Did you take the last banana?’ The very cold voice.

‘I did—sorry, I took it with me; but I didn’t end up eating it.’

She gave the boat a last massive pull up onto the beach. It was such an effort to drag it up an incline by yourself. ‘The banana’s in that starboard locker. You don’t have to get your feet wet, just lean over the deck and put your arm right in, you’ll feel it at the back.’

Lainie started to walk up the beach. ‘I’m going to see if the boys are all right.’

She stopped for a moment and turned around.

Ray was lying on the deck, reaching into the locker.