

Author: Jack Northrup

Date Published: 7/08/2004

Article URL: http://www.sailnet.com/collections/articles/prt_article.cfm?artID=northr0006

[Print Article](#)

The Horrible Guests

It seems that the amount of fun you have on your sailboat makes it natural to want to invite friends and acquaintances on board in order to share in the fun. Still, I'm sure that every individual that owns a sailboat must have at least one horror story about guests on board. For some of us, every guest coming aboard invariably ends up as a nightmare. Allow me to preface the telling of this event by saying flat out that I am an anti-social skipper.

It is not so much that we are all different. I know that I am frighteningly different than most people I meet. I assume most of them feel like I do, so we develop behaviors to keep personality disorders in check. If you come on my boat for a daysail, I would expect that you would behave yourself; that the beauty of the day and the peace we find in sailing would encourage you to behave yourself for those few brief moments when we might be forced to socialize.



Wanting to share your pride and joy with others is a common feeling, but are you really the sociable type?

In my world, there are two types of people who get invited on board. The first type is close friends, couples and children whom you invite when out for the sunny day sail. No matter how bad the social interactions get, you can always jump overboard and swim to shore, or at least know that your little slice of hell will soon end. The second group of guests is everyone else. The social setting and intimacy of a sailboat, combined with motion and weather, can be the primary ingredients of a disaster. Add in the vague or specific nature of the relationship you have with the guests, mix in your relationship with your spouse, and the decaying relationship of the other couple and you are truly ready for some adventure. That was the scenario I was facing when my wife, Ronnie, invited Jay and Judy for a daysail on Lake Champlain aboard *Surprise*, our 1977 Pearson 323.

It was a sunny Saturday in mid-July. We were taking our first vacation on board our newly purchased boat and this daysail was to act as a prelude to our three grown children joining us at various times in the coming week.

Let me give you a brief (albeit some would have biased) description of my wife's friends: Jay is a Marxist who lives very comfortably off his wife's dwindling trust fund. Judy is a self-described politically aware wealthy person who has a low-paying job in order to get state health benefits intended for the indigent. Oh yes, I should also add that they have been married for 20 years and do not like each other.

In the years I have known Jay and Judy, Jay has developed a habit of criticizing everyone's commitment, or lack of, to all things political. Sometimes the criticism would cross over to critiques on lifestyle. During countless land-based gatherings, Jay has hurled insults at me, my wife, or my children. His criticisms were usually so far out or so demonstrative of a pathology, 99 times out of 100, that I, and most people, would let them pass. An example would be his accusing Ronnie, who is a poor-person's attorney, of "selling out" because she chose to use her legal skills to assist the disabled with Social Security Disability appeals to the government. This type of activity was far too bourgeoisie.



The dinghy trip to the boat is usually a pretty good indicator of what kind of guests you'll be entertaining—it certainly should have been a warning sign for the author.

Act One Jay and Judy arrived (late) to the dock. I motored over to them in our leaky dinghy. Jay weighs 300 pounds. Judy's fighting weight comes in at 225. They have brought 50 pounds of stuff, including two or three picnic baskets, a library of reading material, and enough clothes to stock a tall-and-large store. As Jay came up the dock to meet the dinghy, he approached the edge, tripped on a mooring cleat, and plunged headfirst into the dinghy. We took the hit and stayed afloat. Jay called out to say that he had injured his knee. Judy stepped in. She is a bit more dainty and sure-footed, or so I tried to tell myself as we went gunwales up to the waterline.

Slowly, we returned to the *Surprise* with me bailing all the way. Ronnie grabbed the baggage and Judy ascended the boarding ladder. I stepped over Jay, who had not moved since he had fallen in, and climbed on board. I left the dinghy tied to the back of our boat with Jay in it. Twenty minutes later he crawled on board.



Stop! There is still time to reconsider. Personalities that are incompatible beforehand become exponentially so within this confined space.

Act Two We soon realized that the cockpit of *Surprise* was far undersized for this job. Since our three sons would be making an appearance at various times during the week, Ronnie had spent the prior week cooking, cooking, and cooking some more. We were a floating Italian restaurant, with pans of eggplant parmesan, lasagna, bags of pasta, calamari salad, olives, cheeses, and breadsticks stowed into every available space. Wherever you turned, there was a bag of flour or a jar of olive oil to run into.

The prize piece in this provisioning collection was an enormous bag of chocolate chip cookies that weighed at least five pounds. There was at least 150 of these death-bars tucked under the navigation table in a clear plastic bag. They could feed an army for a week.

It was a beautiful day, with the wind blowing. There were dozens of boats out, enjoying the rare Vermont combination of warm, sunny, and weekend. The fleet was lazily tacking back and

forth while they headed out to the broad lake. Soon, we got jammed up with many expensive boats around us in the narrow channels.

I turned to Jay and asked him to take the helm. He and Judy had opened up the first picnic basket and were going at the lobster salad, fighting with each other as to who would get the last piece. It was a feeding frenzy. He looked startled, interrupting his snack and wiping his hands on the sail cover. Limping over to the helm, he admitted that he had never piloted a boat. I assured him that any trained chimp can grab a wheel and turn. Several sailboats closed in.

Jay grabbed the wheel and Judy went below. More boats attempted to shoot the narrow gap to where we were heading. Jay panicked. He turned the wheel in the direction of the wind and we accidentally giped. The boom cracked and the mainsail ripped. The jib was backed and we started to go in circles, mainsail flogging in the breeze. I heard several skippers of the nearby boats swear. I stood up and moved toward Jay whose fingers were frozen on the wheel. He would not let go and there was no room to maneuver around him. The swearing got louder, and was then directed at me, who by virtue of my efforts at trying to displace Jay, had identified myself as the true skipper.

Ronnie, who had become accustomed to near-death incidents every time she has trusted her life with me on board, went below. Judy was sitting at the nav station with her hands in a near-empty bag of chocolate chip cookies. Ronnie wondered whether this was enough for the plan she had in mind.

The motion of the boat was such that Ronnie had the leverage. As we rolled to port, she ripped the bag of remaining cookies out of Judy's hands. Quickly, she stepped up the companionway ladder and screamed "Jay! Jay!" while waving the bag of remaining cookies. As if a trance had been broken, Jay loosened his grip on the wheel and in one ballet-like motion, leaped over me and landed with both hands on the bag of cookies. Meanwhile, I stood up, grabbed the wheel, and set the boat on a course that got us out of the main channel and out of earshot of the angry sailors.

Epilogue The cookies were gone. The lobster salad had disappeared. What remained was a trashcan full of napkins, empty soda cans, and water bottles. Jay was snoozing down below. Judy had locked herself in the head. The *Surprise* has returned to her mooring and I prepared for our



This is the fun and harmony that we're all hoping to attain when we have guests on board—alas, this was not the case for the owner of one 1977 Pearson 323.



The interaction on board becomes even trickier when you have to contend with external factors, such as other vessels maneuvering in the same space.

guests' departure. With all the food gone, far fewer pounds of their equipment remained, which were placed in the bottom of the dinghy. Jay and Judy deposited themselves and I headed for the dock. As I hopped on the dock, I grabbed Jay's arm to help him. We said our goodbyes and as I turned back toward the dinghy I overheard the happy couple talking. "I think we left the cole slaw on their boat," Judy said. Jay grunted "I doubt they'll return it. Damn capitalists."