



May 2006



Do not try this unless a) a policeman says it's OK and b) you are wearing a mask. Craig and Sara are in the rear. Barry's the lion, and Meps is the monkey with sunglasses.

### A Most Memorable Opening Day

The haunting, off-key notes of "Taps" floated across the water. Instead of being solemn, though, hundreds of people within earshot were falling over, laughing. It was Opening Day, and *Flagrante Delicto's* engine had died, right in front of the judges, for the second year in a row. Our skipper dived into the cabin, where I thought he was rooting around for a spare part. Instead, he produced the most battered bugle I'd ever seen, then stood at the helm of his drifting boat and played to the incredulous crowd. They ate it up. The judges scowled. It was my first year in the parade, and I counted myself lucky to be there. For years, I'd watched from shore, sitting on the grass with my family and a well-stuffed picnic hamper, rain or shine. I love a parade, and I love boats. A boat parade is the best of both worlds. Watching the decorated boats, true parade "floats," I wondered who

those fun-loving people were. They create amazing illusions out of crepe paper and chicken wire, just like parades on land. I've seen gigantic umbrellas, huge coffee cups, and 30-foot red hats. I wished I could be aboard, looking goofy, grinning and waving at the crowd.

A twist of fate gave me my chance. One Labor Day, I was returning to the lake with my husband, Barry, aboard our 25-foot sailboat. Judging from the number of powerboats zooming past us, Labor Day was the unofficial "closing day" of the season. Our engine died, and we managed to tie up outside the locks. While Barry had his head in the engine, I scanned the empty faces on the passing Tupperware boats, hoping to find someone who could help. Finally, I decided to hail an intelligent-looking fellow on a small, classic Chris Craft. Little did I know what an excellent choice I'd made.

I had the good fortune to choose, as our rescuer, none other than the infamous Captain Craig Nelson, the self-titled Scourge of Lake Union and Environs. Tying alongside for the trip through the locks, he cast a practiced eye on our boat and asked us, "What have you got to drink?" I was embarrassed by the question, because I'd been dieting. "Uh, water," I stammered, "and a little soymilk, I think."

"That simply will not do!" boomed Captain Craig. "Sara, fix these folks a gin and tonic."

By the time we reached our marina, our dead engine seemed hilarious, and we were fast friends with Craig and Sara. We exchanged phone numbers and e-mail addresses, and that spring, I got a call. "Craig here," said the deep voice on the phone. "Would you like to go on my boat for Opening Day?"

The theme was "Jungle Party." When we arrived aboard *Flagrante Delicto*, our hosts produced animal masks, and we produced food and beverages. For about an hour, we milled around Portage bay with hundreds of other boats, waiting. A yacht club boat passed by, and a woman in a blue blazer and white pants called out, with a slight accent, "That's a nice boat! What does the name mean?" We all turned to stare at our skipper, to see how he would respond. Meanwhile, the lady's boat drifted farther away, and Craig had to shout. "IT MEANS 'CAUGHT IN THE ACT!'" She called back, puzzled, "OF WHAT?" We were rolling in laughter. "OF SEX!" he hollered, loudly, because they were quite far now. "OF SEX?" she repeated back, then realized what she'd shouted. She clapped her hands over her mouth, aghast, and quickly disappeared below.

We did not win a prize for our animal act, which consisted of seven people scratching themselves, jumping up and down.

and hooting like monkeys. Nor did we win a prize for musical talent. Craig's version of Taps had more cracked notes than I knew a bugle could produce. We should have won a prize for chutzpah, though.

As we drifted, powerless and off key, we were blocking the parade route. A police boat came out and the officer grabbed our line and towed us out of the way. "Can you fix it?" he asked. "Sure, I can try," said Craig, looking as smart and efficient as that day I'd picked him out of the powerboat lineup for a rescue. To my shock, the police officer took us to a navigational aid, the number 15 green can, and told us to tie up.

The first thing I learned in a Coast Guard Auxiliary class boating class was: Do not ever, ever, ever tie up to a navigation aid. But who could argue with a police officer? I looked nervously over at Craig, expecting him to dive into the engine, fix the problem, and untie the boat. To my surprise, he poured himself a drink. "I, for one, am not going to disturb the food," he said. It was true, the engine compartment was completely covered with salads, chips, and cookies. "Hey, look at that!" He distracted me by pointing at the next boat in the parade. We did have the best seats in the house. We were literally across from the judges' boat, alone on our buoy, not jockeying for space or rafted to a bunch of other boats. Craig knew what he was doing: It didn't get any better than this.

At the end of the day, a friend towed us back across the lake. Just outside his marina, Craig turned the key, saying, "Let's see how this works," and miraculously, the engine started! Was it really a fuel starvation problem, as he claimed, or a ruse to get the best seat in the house for the Opening Day parade? I'll never know, and I don't think I'll ask.

Margaret "Meps Monkey Mask" Schulte

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