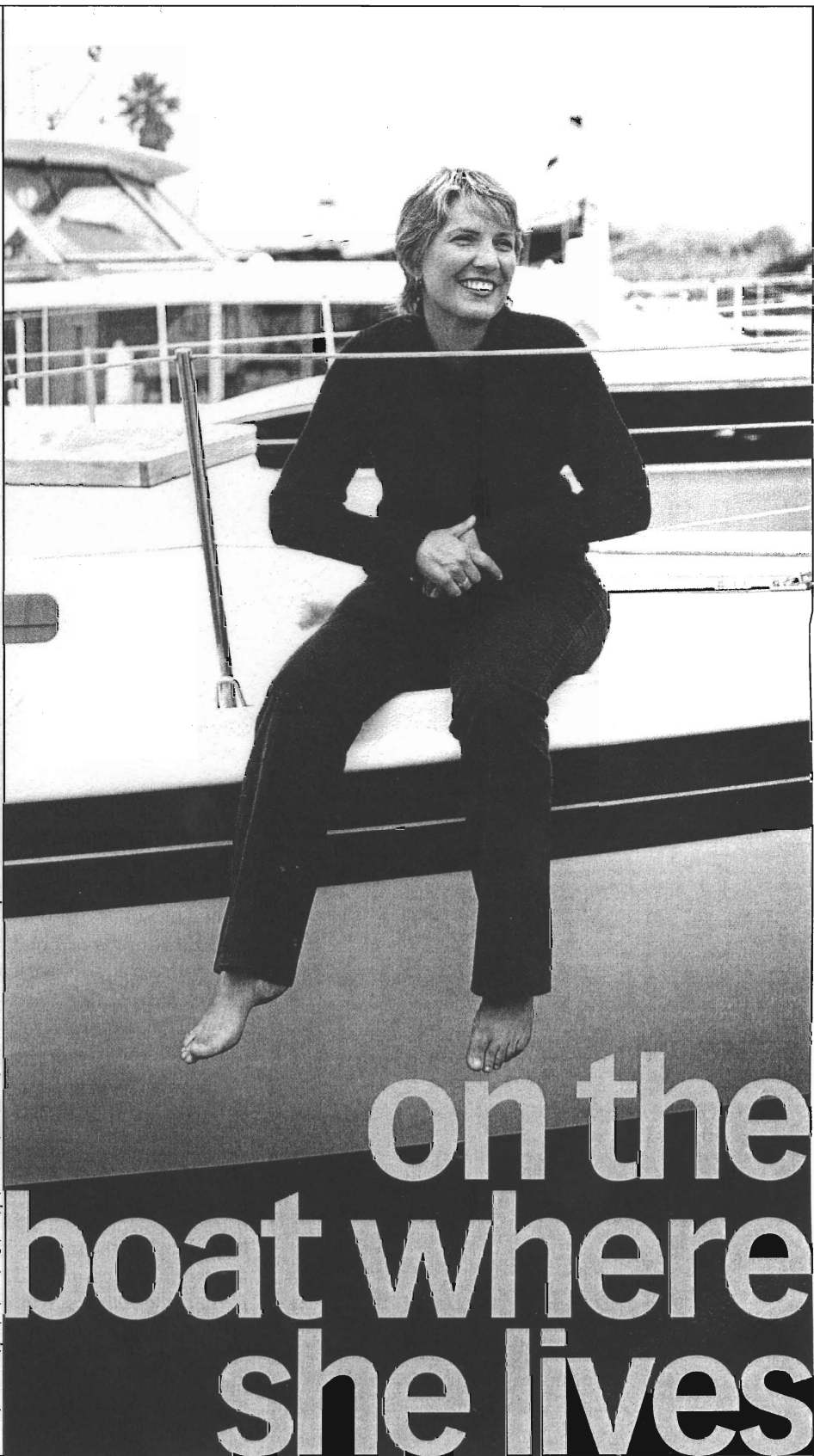


When she had a house on dry land, HILLARY JOHNSON was at sea. Now, ensconced—and in love—on a 35-foot sloop called *Surprise*, a seafaring writer has found her safe harbor.

Photographed by BROWN W. CANNON III

PEOPLE WHO ONCE KNEW ME AS A city dweller come onboard my new home, the sailing vessel *Surprise*, and are either enchanted or horrified. I have no hot water and no closet space. When I need to put on a dress, I drive to my storage space a mile away, then drive home again to change. And then there is the irony of walking 200 yards in the rain to get to the shower. Visitors taller than six feet have a particularly strong reaction to my home, since they can't stand up in it.

Oh, but the pleasures of living *on* the water—and I do mean on the water—far outweigh its petty inconveniences. I will never forget the first night I spent aboard my own boat. I turned in scandalously early, nuzzling into my cozy berth in the forepeak and drifting off to the amniotic sloshing of water against the hull and the tinkling sound the wind makes as it plays the sailboat rigs like so many harps. I awoke to a stillness so great that I sat up and poked my head out of the hatch, only to find myself eyeball-to-eyeball with a great blue heron. The foghorn at the harbor entrance >



on the
boat where
she lives

Now that Hillary Johnson lives on a boat, the dock is her front porch, blue herons and ducks are her neighbors, and shoes are a distant memory.

broke the silence with a sonorous, velvety bass note. The heron stared at me for a long time, then stalked off down the dock, disappearing into the mist.

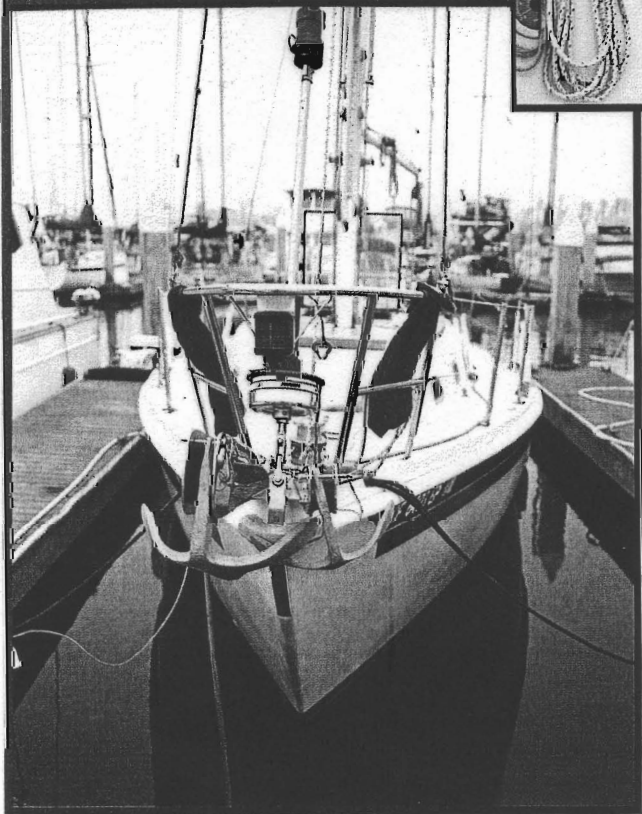
I knew then that I had found my true home. It was, in fact, a rediscovery. My connection with the water goes back to my earliest memories as a child, which are of living on a decommissioned tugboat on the Columbia River Gorge with my artist parents. The boat was moored on a remote island, far from any neighbors, so my first friends were a pair of ducks that visited us every day, and I learned to fish long before I learned to read. Life on the tugboat was a splendid idyll, interrupted by divorce when I was 5.

For the next 30 years, with my mother and later on my own, I lived in various rented accommodations, all of them on land. While other people have nightmares about monsters chasing them or going to work in their underwear, mine were always about housing crises. It is

certainly easy in retrospect to say that my soul was homeless; but my closest brush with self-awareness was probably the time I signed a lease on an absolutely hideous cracker-box apartment, just because it overlooked a swimming pool.

In my 30s, as a single mother of a little boy, I focused a great deal of energy on creating a home life, and I succeeded so well that I sometimes felt our apartment to be a tiny, self-con-

All hands on deck: Hillary and her son, Tyrone. Below: The once neglected Surprise in her slip.



tained biosphere unto itself. I'll admit that I had more in common with Imelda Marcos than with Magellan. I haunted thrift stores for shoes, vintage ball gowns, and midcentury modern castoffs. I doggedly maintained a social life, venturing out to cocktail parties and hosting my share of brunches, but the truth is, I often felt disconnected from the outside world, and lonely.

For years I made an on-again, off-again hobby out of boat shopping. Mind you, I considered

this hobby to be highly dysfunctional. Every emotional crossroads, from divorce to a bad case of PMS, sent me out on a compulsive expedition to look at some impossibly decrepit Chris-Craft or rudderless wooden sailboat. I would chastise myself afterward: *You are trying to escape from your problems, when what you need to do is confront them!* Buying a boat seemed a frivolous, irresponsible thing to do, and I counted myself as frivolous and irresponsible enough already, thank you. Every time I'd settle instead for a new pair of shoes.

Then, three years ago, on my 36th birthday, my whole life began to change. I bought *Fred*, a 22-foot sailboat with a personality like a Jack Russell terrier: a lot of get-up-and-go in a tiny package. I've had camping tents with roomier accommodations. I didn't have to live there full-time; I regularly commuted to my "second home" from my apartment in Los Angeles. While my son visited with grandparents, I spent a full two weeks onboard getting to know *Fred*. In the mornings, before sailing lessons, I made coffee and instant oatmeal on a propane stove in the cockpit. For lunch and dinner, I ate a lot of salad and cold cuts. The rest of the time, I scrubbed, buffed, and refurbished.

Life on a boat, I found, is far from lonely. When your domestic space is confined, you tend to do a lot of your living outside of it, and the dock becomes your front porch. Within those first two weeks, I had met every one of my neighbors. There was Bruce, a roofing contractor from South Africa; Liann, a young woman with a trawler named *La Bobeme*; Eric, a merchant marine; and "the Two Larrys," best friends who came every weekend with their wives and kids and whose side-by-side powerboats never left their slips. All docks, I soon learned, have a garrulous old guy who wears a captain's hat, and ours was known as Crazy Bob.

Every day I found myself engaged in several long, lazy conversations about

boats and boat maintenance. A walk up the dock to take out the trash could turn into a two-hour expedition if you weren't careful—and sometimes even if you were. I had always lived in cities, in relative isolation with my son. This was my first community. Lo and behold, I found the added human contact incredibly sustaining. It also seemed natural and right. I began to wonder about all of those apartment buildings I'd lived in: Who were those people above, below, and on either side of me? It began to strike me as exceedingly strange that I didn't know.

That first summer, several of my girlfriends made the hour-long drive up the coast from L.A. to visit me in the harbor (it always took them four hours, since they invariably stopped at the outlet mall). They would step onboard in their all-black outfits and sit in the cockpit with wide, bewildered eyes. "You paid how much for this?" my friend Laurie asked, and when I told her, she said, "Oh my God, that's, like, only ten pairs of shoes!"

My social life gradually shifted focus. Sailing lessons led to evenings at the Rudder Room with classmates, and invitations to crew on other boats. Which is how, while helping deliver a 60-foot wooden schooner up the California coast, I met Rick, my boyfriend-to-be. Our first date was a ten-day sailing trip to Catalina, and we've been together ever since.

On my next birthday, I bought myself a 30-footer and moved aboard, donating all my funky furniture from the apartment and most of my ball gowns to an AIDS charity. Everyone around me objected to this decision.

"You're making a huge mistake," my ex said.

"If you want to buy something, why don't you buy a condo?" my uncle said.

I named my new boat *Puss Killian*, after a character in John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee novels. *Puss* was a game, adventurous gal with a touch of mystery to her. From the day I bought her, she and I clicked. She was the first boat that I

learned to sail single-handedly, and there were many days after writing when I'd unplug my shore power and my phone line and take her out for a couple hours of random sailing. Once in a while I'd punch up Hawaii on the GPS (global positioning system), just for fun: Only 2,000 nautical miles on a heading of 191 degrees. If I'd brought more food and water, I could just keep going and be there in a couple of weeks—and the most wonderful thing about it was, I'd still be at home when I arrived. In fact, I would be at home anywhere I went from now on. It was that realization that made it all come together for me, and I knew then that the only condo I will ever buy is the kind with a lid and a pink satin lining.

When Rick and I decided to move in together, we knew that *Puss Killian* would be too small for a family of three. We

Finding a home, I've learned, is like finding a calling. It's there if you look for it, but you do need to look.

spent a long time shopping for the right boat and found lots of candidates, but none that we could afford. Finally, by word of mouth, we heard of a 35-foot Ericson that had been sitting neglected in its slip for upward of ten years. We contacted the owner and talked him into selling. It all happened very fast. On the day we bought the boat, we stood in the cockpit and pinched each other to see if it was real. It was, so we named her *Surprise*.

My daily life now consists of relatively little sailing as we work to bring *Surprise* back from the brink. I am very good with a pot of varnish, and I'm learning plumbing and wiring, skills I never dreamed of trying before. But when your home floats, it suddenly seems important to know

everything about it, and to be constantly alert to your surroundings. The bonus is you not only get a feeling of mastery, you achieve a state of awareness that probably comes only to those who live close to nature. It's not a state that was natural to me until fairly recently, but I like it.

My mother, when she calls, still makes incredulous noises at the idea of her sophisticated daughter handling power tools. And I'll admit that I'm a bit incredulous myself at the fact that one of my closest friends now is a diesel mechanic.

I have my friends in the city, but now I'm an occasional visitor to their strange, dry planet, and they to my wet one. I often wonder how it was that I lived there for so long. I think that, while I put a lot of thought and energy into what I wanted to be when I grew up—a writer—I never thought about where I wanted to be, or whom I wanted to be there with. I simply assumed that being a good writer would come from accumulating the trappings of urban culture, and that the city was where I belonged. Funny—we worry so much about stereotyping others, but it's all too easy to stereotype oneself.

FINDING A HOME, I'VE LEARNED, is like finding a calling. It's there if you look for it, but you do need to look. In finding the right place to live, I also found the right person to live with, someone who shares my seemingly impossible set of contradictions: a restless homebody who craves stability and adventure in equal proportions.

I still have about 50 pairs of really good shoes, but they're packed away in a box buried deep in our storage space, and I couldn't possibly find them even if I wanted to. But it doesn't matter, because these days my feet are hardly ever on the ground. ●

Hillary Johnson lives on her boat in Ventura, California, and is the author of the essay collection Super Vixens' Dymaxion Lounge (St. Martin's Press).

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