

An Onboard Inferno

OSPREY'S FLIGHT The revelation of their diesel heater's true nature leads the crew into some divine comedy. BY WENDY MITMAN CLARKE

SAILORS TEND TO PERSONIFY THEIR STUFF; WHY, I can't really say, but we do it, too. Johnny, my husband, and I have named our chart plotter E.T., after the famous movie star (boxy and brilliant); the autopilot answers to Raoul, after a fictitious pool boy who also brings us imaginary

umbrella drinks (long story); the Aries self-steering we call Mitty, after my dad (patient and steady).

And then there's Dante, the diesel heater. It's named after the Italian poet who wrote that little verse we all read in Lit class, the *Divine Comedy*, the first part of which is called the "Inferno" (appropriate punishments, lots of flame).

Like many subtle boat demons, the heater seems, on the surface, to be a perfectly harmless inanimate object. It's a top-drawer model, a Danish-made Refleks that came with the boat and commanded admiration on first sight, both for its handsome appearance and its clever installation. Also, it seemed to say something about *Osprey* herself, a whisper of high latitudes and endless snow, calving glaciers, rambling polar bears, and the like. Not that we were going there, but how cool to think that we could. You know, just in case.

It was also utterly inscrutable. How the hell did you light it? The manual was notably vague on this point; perhaps Refleks figured anyone bold enough to buy its product should know this sort of thing, much in the same way that someone who buys a Ducati motorcycle should know how to ride one.

I emailed a friend who has one aboard her boat. The gist of the response was that to light the heater, first one had to create a small, controlled explosion in the box—*un petit poof*, as it were—in order to get the diesel itself hot enough to burn. This seemed a little counterintuitive, or quite possibly insane. But after several tries, Johnny did indeed ignite the diesel. However, the fuel was burning inside *and* outside the firebox, on account of the fact that the floor of said firebox had rusted out, unbeknownst to us at the time. It was

a lively if minor blaze, quickly doused by means of the fire extinguisher at hand, which also succeeded in covering the cabin in a fine white dust. We had dinner guests that night, and they arrived right on time, just as Johnny emerged from the boat amid billowing clouds of diesel smoke. He looked remarkably like Dick Van Dyke playing Bert the chimney sweep in *Mary Poppins*.

So our onboard heater, it would seem, had a sense of humor. But I didn't name it Dante on that occasion, though.

No, the name was bestowed later, after Johnny had replaced the firebox and we'd already spent a month living aboard through a cold autumn with the Refleks peaceably keeping us warm as toast. After, in other words, the sly devil had lulled us into a false sense of security.

We were halfway into an overnight passage from Charleston, South Carolina, to Cumberland Island, Georgia, when a brisk puff of wind came along, heeling *Osprey* a little farther and, as we figured out later, pushing a draft of air right down the No. 2 jib and into the heater's stack. The result was startling. I looked below just in time to see a great gout of flame belch from the heater and shoot into the darkness of the cabin like an eruption from hell itself, then heard a resounding *clang* as the hinged top slammed shut. This was followed by the acrid stench of what clearly was brimstone.

"Did you see that?" I whimpered to Johnny.

He nodded. "I think it's time to turn the heater off." He was whispering so that the living hell beast wouldn't learn of our intentions.

And so Dante was christened. Dormant for the many tropical months that *Osprey* spent in the Caribbean, he burned with a new fervor once we returned to higher latitudes and required his services. Our necessary descent into his nine circles of mischief would, no doubt, keep us both warm and wary.



It looks like a slender, shinier R2-D2, but people, don't be fooled. *Osprey*'s diesel heater, a Danish-made Refleks, lulled the Clarkes with a month's worth of dutiful onboard toastiness—until, on an overnight passage, the cute can of Sterno earned its new name with a display of alarming pyrotechnics.

The Clarkes continue to explore the Caribbean on board *Osprey*.