

On The Water

January 26, 2009

Thomas Bennett

The door slammed as they came out of the bar into the parking lot. The wind tugged at his jacket and they headed for the docks and the water.

“What time is it?” Bobby said.

“About 10 – 10:15 Captain Bonks” he said. Then glanced over at Sandy – who was shuffling along head down – dodging a fender.

“Struck out again Sandy?”

“Kiss off.... Hell, all you had to do was show a little interest!”

“Who’s interested? They weren’t.”

“How the hell would you know – sitting over there looking at your drinks. All you had to do was show a little interest – they’d have gone for it – a little night sail on the Sound? The tall one – she was really up for it. She would have talked her pals into it. All you had to do is get off your asses.”

Captain Bonks chimed in - “Did you tell them we were going to Newport?”

“Yeah - we could have let them in on that later – once we were out of the harbor!”

“Brilliant! Brilliant! What an idiot – with your luck they were underage and its Mann act time!”

“What? – Did you see the butt on her? The tall one - 40 years at least – that wasn’t some teenager! And you probably think the other two were her kids. Christ, what a couple of losers. They’d have gone for it – what do you think they were doing down in this place on a Friday night – playing tiddlywinks?”

Is that what you had in mind? Is that what you call it? Tiddlywinks – is that the new word for it! Yeah brilliant – in this breeze they be throwing up ten minutes out of the harbor. How hot’s that make you?”

“No, no – we’re heading east – right? Off the wind – nice steady smooth run – in the moonlight. C’mon Bobby, you get it – a few drinks in the cockpit – then maybe we’ll let Mr. Intellectual drive – he can have the smart one, the one with the glasses! Then you and me Bonks - maybe we go down below for a little comfort, to relax, you know... and, you know - one thing leads to another.

What a vivid fantasy life you lead Sandy – you sucked up enough in there you couldn't get it up if you wanted – and now you want a few more? Wow, that'll impress the hell out of them!

Bobby Bonks chimed in – “Enough bull – Sandy try to stay awake until we get around Shippan Point and get the chute up. How about it Mr. Navigator – can we carry her?Mr. Intellectual – I like that.”

He thought –

“I think so – it feels steady about 12 to 15 knots – about 240 degrees so it's almost a run to Newport. My guess is this high is running off to the South East below us – so we'll either run out of wind somewhere just past New Haven or she'll start to back on us and we'll end up reaching or even having to beat up into Newport.

Bonks replied. “So let's try and stay south – go through the Gut instead of behind Fishers Island and up past Stonington. Then even if it backs we can still ride her off the wind.

Ok skipper – works for me.

Sandy stumbled at the top of the gangway down to the floating docks – “Damn – who left that there?”

“I should never buy you that many – next time I'm buying dinner only – you get your own drinks”

“Kiss off -- skipper always pays the freight!”

“Ah, so sad, so down – love's labor lost!” Again!”

“Yeah, He's so cute when he's had a few – the girls just fall all over him don't they?”

“Shut up asshole – I'll throw your ass in ...”

“Doubt it Sandy – Sailor's rules - I don't go in the water – just on it!”

Shut up both of you.

Tom, get the diesel. Then get the main ready and loose the starboard roller sheet.

Sandy get the port sheet ready for the roller, then get the chute up on deck to port and lay out the pole to starboard – if you can find it - doofuss.

Fuck you

“Ah’ the harmonious crew – mutiny before dawn no doubt! In the meantime I’ll take first watch. Tom - I’ll get you about two – two thirty. Sandy you’re up at five because you’re worthless right now. That’s why you do it isn’t it – so you get the night off?”

Yeah, yeah .. just going for a little gusto – you know!

Oh, yeah, I forgot.

He stepped up on the rail and it sank slowly, then caught – and he remembered that was how it had started.

But he caught himself, and moved into the cockpit, found the key, and cranked the diesel. It caught and he moved to take the cover off the main – then found the main halyard fastened to the rail, loosed it and screwed it tight into the fitting at the top of the main – then took the slack out of the halyard. Then eased the starboard roller sheet.

Bonks, we better wait to haul her until we’re clear of the dock.

Ok. Sandy – all laid out?

Yep.

Sandy – we’re gonna skip the jib - get to your bunk.

What – you’ll need me to set the chute.

Doubt it – we’ve done it before.

Who drives?

The auto – go ahead – get some rest – it’s not that far to the corner – we’ll motor with the main.

All right, all right.

Twenty minutes later they had the main up - it and the engine kept her at about seven knots and they had cleared the breakwater and were coming up to the big left East at Shippan.

Still want the engine?

Yep – want to keep the speed up to lighten the apparent wind on the chute. We’ll cut her as soon as the chute lifts.

Ok.

He set the auto for about 120 and eased the main so she would speed up down wind and reduce the blow on the chute.

Then he began hauling the spinnaker halyard while Bonk watched, waiting to lift the sock.

“Ok. You’re up – wow this moonlight makes it easy.”

He tied off the halyard and Bonks hauled the sock up quickly freeing the spinnaker.

– and it filled, popped, then set.

And suddenly the beautiful lift of the hull began as he cut the engine, eased the pilot more easterly, and Bonks trimmed the great sail for more speed.

“Go below, toss my foulies up, they’re on the nav station – and get some rest. I’ll take her and wake you after 2:00.”

He dropped down the companionway, found Bonk’s foul weather gear and tossed it into the cockpit; then heard Sandy snoring in the V-berth.

He reached for his earplugs, pulled his own foulies up around his knees, and lay down on the cabin sole just behind the mast. He’d slept there a thousand times – it was the most stable place in a sailboat – and was quickly asleep.

It had been like magic.

His father had said – “Go ahead step on the rail and then into the center of the sailboat.” It was only about twenty five feet long but it seemed pretty big to him. And he stepped on the rail and it scared him as it started to sinkand then it stopped - almost seemed to push back a little against his foot.

“Step, step – into the center” his dad said. So he did. Then his dad followed him into the boat.

He asked him – “I thought it was sinking ... or tipping – like the canoe?”

And his dad had explained – “This boat has a keel – that’s a large heavy part of the boat that runs along the bottom and extends further down into the water.”

His father used his hands to show the idea to him. “And when you step on the edge it forces the keel away from your weight - and as it moves that way it compresses the water on the away side and creates low pressure on the side you’re on – just like when you put your hand out the car window and angle it up and down.”

“But you said that was like a wing.”

“Yes, it is. And this is like a wing too – on some boats it’s very much like a wing” His Dad had pulled the nub of a pencil out of his pocket and drawn on the seat.

And he began to understand – and he sat on the rail and leaned out, feeling the dip and then the resistance to his shifting weight.

“And now we are going to fly this sail in the same way a wing works,” his father had said.

And his father had pulled up the simple sail and they moved away from the dock.

As they picked up a little speed his father had handed him a rope tied to the bottom back end of the sail and said – “I’ll keep steering, but you pull this rope in and out – get the feel of it.”

And he felt it – there on Lake Mendota slipping away from his grandfather’s dock in Madison. And he fell in love with the quiet, the wind, the water – no engine – just graceful natural motions. The physics of it all had nearly made him one – a physicist like his father – but the accident had broken the spell – an ungrounded freezer on the land had taken his father – and broken the spell.

Many years later a slender young woman had asked him to sail with her in West Falmouth. And at first he held back – afraid to say no, but also somehow afraid to step onto the small boat. But he stepped – after all we do lots for what seems like love – and he had started again. Slowly, uncertain, anxious about it somehow.....

Somebody shaking his shoulder! ...Bobby? .Already?

“You awake? “You’re up.”

Kept his eyes shut. He remembered her – the dream was better.

“Wake up, I’m pooped!”

The bilge smell – stale mold, diesel fuel, wood polish. And he opened his eyes to darkness, then red glowing lights from the nav station.

“She feels fast” he said.

“You awake?”

“Yeah, maybe still a little buzzed.”

“Yeah, - me too. Christ I shouldn't drink so much we goin' sailing. You want a beer? Take the edge off?”

“No!”

“You're turning into a real pussy. What's that matter with you?”

“Yup! Get in your bunk – maybe you'll feel better!”

He pulled his yellow foul weather pants up, pulled the suspenders over his shoulders. Bobby started to take off a sweater – damp cotton, sweat spread over the diesel fumes.

“The auto pilot's holding right East – winds still 240 at 12 knots. Port Jeff in about a half I'd say. Chute's fine but maybe you should loose her a little – run more to clear Point No Point. Wake Sandy at 3:00! We need all hands for the Gut ... I guess near 5.00 or 6:00.”

“Got it. Sleep well. See you at 5.

He climbed up the companionway into the moonlight, and the night opened, from the dark and the vague sense of swells, to light and sound and movement. The moon's trail shimmered across the water to starboard - the spinnaker loomed to port. A few lights glimmered on the Long Island shore, but it was mostly sounds – the swishing of water along the hull, the burbling of the wake around the rudder as the following sea lifted the boat and she near surfed. The wind whistled as he caught both his breath and his balance at once.

He went to the wheel, loosed the pilot, and rolled the wheel gently to the left and the right, watching the knotmeter, feeling for speed. Faster to the South, but they needed some North before Port Jeff – then they could head more south, so he reset the pilot at 5 degrees northerly and started for the main sheet.

“Where's the harness?” The thought stopped him as he reached for the sheet. He ducked below into the cabin, grabbed the harness, came back up, and buckled it to the jack line to windward.

Then he reached for the main sheet and eased it gently, watching the red needle edge upward ever so slightly, tied it off and went for the spinnaker sheet.

He played the big sail by hand, easing it out 'til it curled and snapped. All the while his eyes were accepting more and more light. Then he tightened it back in 'til it was smooth at the leach. All the while he watched the red speedo light, as it ticked up and down, and he played the big boat for smoothness, for speed.

And suddenly he was somewhere else. And feeling the little boat lift to the sail and the voice saying – “Feel them, the wings, how they come together.”

That was it and he snapped back present again - Here there was the light and the darkness and the wind. And the hull lifted and glided through the moon lit waters, and the wings worked, and he was on the water again.