

Night Passage

Our night was moonless.

We left together in early evening light from Rio Vista, westbound toward Suisun Bay, with our destination that night to be Carquinez Straits. Dad had 'heard' that to best avoid the long pounding beats through the shallow waters of Suisun and San Pablo Bays was to pass at night, without the strong winds of midday. Transit with a night ebb tide was the easiest passage, and we were light handed. The two of us left dock in darkness from Rio Vista on the Ericson 23; slow motoring with only mainsail was the strategy.



This was August 1969, at the conclusion of our two-week family boating vacation. My Dad was a champ at putting together family fishing, camping and boating vacations. This year was a big year with the sloop, fourteen foot runabout with outboard motor, eight foot sailing dinghy and our two family cars for a fourteen day cruise/camp in the Sacramento / San Jouquin Delta. That inland maze of islands and sloughs connected to San Francisco Bay.

During the day, my mother and sister departed towing the runabout, while my brother Larry, at sixteen years old, drove the family car, alone, with the El Toro dinghy atop, in caravan, back to South San Francisco. I was fifteen years old, between ninth and tenth grade. My young Dad was forty years old.

Dad and I had been sailing many times together, I was by then, very comfortable sailing. Dad is a water man, a real one. Always comfortable on a boat and around water, he does not seem to care about waves, spray and the inherent discomforts of the sea.



Doug racing Why Knot with full crew in powerful midsummer air

Dad was cheerful and talkative as we left, likely perceiving and attempting to lighten up my quiet dourness. I had been on boats in darkness, but not in open water with waves and winds. My salty Dad had things in order with necessary provisions, charts, lights and his undying gumption. He exhibited complete calm, the Doug kind.

Two hours into the motor sailing I recall sitting close to the transom, bobbing up and down with the waves as the moving humps slipped underneath. I looked at the inky black water just two feet away, coming up to meet me and receding away in regular periods. Looking about at the distant shorelines, in all directions were the lights of roadways, industrial facilities and the occupied waterfront.

We motored up the channel, buoy to buoy, our tiny white stern light showing the world that we occupied our little space on that black surface. I was terrified.

Dad is present in the moment, chatting about the waves and great family vacation he just provided. Unaware of my fear, he is nonchalant, unaffected. Looking toward the bow from my spot, bobbing above the black surface, I gripped the stern turnbuckle as my heart raced. I was clearly out of my comfort zone. We did not wear life-jackets, normal for us; unheard of today.

West of the Antioch bridge, in an unguarded moment, a deep low-frequency horn sounded across the water in a long, long blast. UUUNHHHHHHH - UUUNHHHHHHH! The blast shot a wave of terror through my body as I turned back toward the sound. The giant black freighter hulk was a safe distance away, yet the scale and relative speed of this leviathan was frightening. From high atop the bridge of the ship our tiny low intensity stern light was visible to the freighter. In the absence of that tiny light we may have been run over.

Doug turns coolly, “there’s a freighter coming”, he deadpans; pushing the helm hard over. My palpitations were likely observable, yet I was with Dad, and said nothing. The black hulk of steel

overtook us quickly, likely empty, leaving us bobbing in her wake, at we puttered along at a fast walking speed.

The freighter turned us around, so to speak. After making a “spin move” to clear the channel and allow the freighter to pass, we lined up again and continued to motor on. We were navigating from buoy to buoy by dead-reckoning, without illuminated compass (or any compass).

The spin move caused us to lose our bearings in the dark night. Peering about at the industrial shoreline, the division where water met land could not be discerned. The shoreline road lights formed a string of pearls, one could not see the hills above or the shoreline separating water from land.

We motored, but not confidently. Where is that damn channel buoy? Perhaps I take license with inclusion of the word “damn”, but the term helps to convey our moment. The channel buoys are spaced as much as a mile apart and equipped with a light and bell. Our little Why-Knot did not have an electrical system with an illuminated cabin or compass, just running lights. Having always passed in the daytime, we confidently used line of sight and dead-reckoning to set our course in the past. Consequently, we did not determine a compass bearing for the next buoy when passing our last channel marker

Why Knot was turned about, running blind. We could not find the channel buoys due to shore lights and darkness. Dad and I went through the “where is that channel mark” moment again, then made a call to go “that way”, and so we did.

Puttering along for a bit of time, the shore lights slowly grew larger. We both realized a few moments later that we were no longer moving; stationary with the motor running. Uh-Oh! We were aground!

Cool headed sailor Dad says, “we’re aground”. This is perhaps ten p.m., a mild wind is blowing and no boats are in sight. No panic, Dad tells me to go to the bow and “squat-jump” to rock the boat fore-and-aft, while he jumps up and down on the transom holding on to the backstay. The outboard screams as the prop lifts from the surface when cresting, then yields muffled power gurgles when plunged below. The pumping, rocking, motor abuse and rudder movements eventually free us from the muddy grip. Clearing ourselves from this grounding was a feat in itself, most times a keelboat must be dragged out from mud. Boatman Doug got us off the muck.

Why Knot motored the opposite direction from the point of our grounding, she was again in open water, deep enough to float, but without a bearing. We still could not identify the channel buoys. Dad centered us in the inky blackness to reconnoiter, a wise move. During our navigational reorientation we motored in a wide arc, peering about for that elusive red or green buoy marking the channel. Landmarks meant nothing in this moonless black, where land disappeared and shoreline merged into darkness. From our low vantage point channel lights were lost amid a Christmas tree of industrial shoreline.

Our sloop circled about, Dad driving alertly from the stern on the starboard side. I was across the cockpit and forward, close to the companionway on port side. Suddenly and without warning we crashed “hard aground”, all-at-once. At time of impact, Doug was leaning forward looking into

the darkness. The slam tossed my skipper Dad off his seat, hurling him into the companionway bulkhead just across from me. Holy Shit!

Dad did not blink. Doug Bishop unfolded himself and got back to the helm, mentioning something like, “went hard aground that time”. He immediately asked, “are you OK, pal?” Dad seemed to dust himself off in an instant, no comment about himself or any indication of recovery from pain, but the slam must have hurt.

Reflecting now, over forty years later and many more days on water, reveals how fortunate we were in avoiding injury and emergency. Dad did not hit his head, which would have left me as skipper on night watch. Also, I was not sitting on the starboard side, and was thereby not crushed into the bulkhead and gear by his hurtling body.

Our sloop, ‘Why Knot’ had just slammed aground with the hardest impact that I have ever experienced, by far.

Yet Why Knot was clear of the mud! Our keel had just collided with a seamount, submerged piling, wreck or unmovable sea monster; but our tiny boat, mainsail up and little putt-putt puttering, just came around and gurgled off into the inky blackness.

“There’s that damn light”, or a “there it is” must have been the word of the moment. In truth, absence of compass using ‘dead reckoning’ coupled with ‘line of sight’ was our navigation method. The blackness of night blended the waterline and sky, industrial backlighting of the Antioch waterfront swamped the buoy lighting from our low-angle field of view. Our spin move to avoid the freighter had messed with our orientation, without illuminated compass we got a little spun around and could not find the channel. That hard grounding scared me to the core; but I was with Dad and he was cool headed.

We were OK, and soon found our way back to the channel center. Uneventful motor sailing through San Pablo bay was the next order, as we connected the channel buoys, perhaps three nautical miles separating each one. Sometimes that steel buoy would gong from the bell or bark from a lazy sea lion.

Our third grounding that night is a blur. Perhaps low tidal mud flats close to the bridge, the entrance to Gas House cove or elsewhere during the night. A soft push grounding, moving along silently we both realized the boat was stationary, an unnatural condition for a sailboat. Sailboats do not remain stationary unless acted upon by external forces, Uh-oh, there must be an ‘external force’ working here. Rocking and rolling with engine gunning freed us from a soft grip.

Glen Cove Marina is on the North East shore below the Carquinez Strait bridge. This tiny marina was a key a pit stop for us in our voyage to South San Francisco and a waypoint for many over-nighters and soggy houseboats. The time was three something a.m. The docks were packed tight that night; we puttered about inside the marina for a tie-up spot. We made three passes looking for a tie-up opening before going aground, inside the marina! Dad looked at me in disbelief and we both just went, “No Way”.

Why Knot was stuck in the mud inside the Glen Cove marina ten meters from the dock. Doug

was getting tired, but recovered within the tiniest blue moment. I took my position at the bow pulpit, dropping into deep squats and leaping to buck her, while Doug rolled port to starboard, gunning and twisting the tiny outboard. We broke free. Doug pointed Why Knot straight to the dock and “nosed in”. There was no spot, we parted space by stretching slack dock lines and making fast, stern rafted to a houseboat. Safe in harbor.

Why Knot was underway at first light. Doug likely took off after a few restless hours, while I slept.

Perhaps the most enduring vision of my father, is waking that morning from my the bunk to see him looking straight at me, while helming our sloop. A father and son moment like none other.