

Sailing with Rob B.

My doctor friend and colleague, Rob, asked me to help him sail his sloop from East Sound, Orcas Island to Bellingham Harbor in the town where we live.

Rob is an excellent plastic surgeon, a very nice guy and, by extension, likely an excellent master of his saltwater sailboat.

I immediately said "Yes."

I own a sailboat which was and is a well fitted, cutter rigged, Cal 37. At that time I had been sailing her for about 8 years, 60+ days a year, mostly single handed. I felt confident that I could be helpful crew.

We flew to Orcas Island and took a cab to the marina.

My friend's sailboat was an attractive but ancient boat, a wooden sloop with no rail or lifelines.

The motor was a single cylinder.

While Rob set about getting the motor running, I asked for the charts.

Rob replied that he did not have any charts, but that he has sailed in these waters and knew them well. I was surprised, yet I allowed his reassurance to override a previously immutable rule. I also thought that it was his boat and that he would not risk its loss.

Bob had difficulty getting the engine running. I asked to see the engine manual. Again, I learned that there was no manual on board. Well, he did finally get her running.

We got the sails ready, motored near the mouth of the bay and hoisted the sails, killed the motor and began our journey.

Not five minutes later, on the tack Rob recommended, we went aground atop a large submerged rock our navigator was somehow unaware of.

I positioned the mainsail to heel the boat further over and we were able to slip off the rock. The keel

rather than the planking had taken the impact. So far so good.

I then kept us in well marked channels for the most of the rest of the journey.

The foresail was a full 170% genoa. It was the only foresail the boat possessed.

Here I remind you, because I am reminded--there was no stanchions nor lifelines on the vessel.

We made good time. The wind was rising. We had no way to reef the main nor the genoa. His sails were either up or down. Interesting. Well we had a motor, even if a finicky one. We could always douse the sails and hopefully motor home.

We headed through Obstruction Pass, between Orcas Island and Blakely Island. Now we were into Rosario Strait, with her strong currents and higher winds. Exhilarating and a little anxiety provoking everything considered.

For about 20 minutes all went well enough. Then in the increasing wind, the halyard parted its attachment at the head of the genoa. The head of the sail dropped to approximately the midpoint of the forestay, creating a makeshift spinnaker, billowing ahead of the bow, filled by what had by now become a stiff breeze.

It was now getting dark. In front of us was the west facing, 1,600 foot, abrupt, stone face of south Lummi Island. The current was running north at about 3 or 4 knots. We needed to go south to clear Carter Point at the south end of Lummi Island.

The wind was from the west, driving us directly toward the sheer face of south Lummi Island. As it happens, this sloop, like most sailboats cannot come up into the wind with a spinnaker set. She could only proceed in the direction the wind chose.

This impromptu gennaker was a problem for us. In the dusk things were getting tense on this little boat. She was about 32 feet in length. We were racing at hull speed toward our demise. This was undeniable.

Did I tell you, there were no life jackets aboard. Incidentally, another immutable rule broken.

I went forward to try to haul the headsail down and onto a deck with no restraints for a doused sail nor for a sailor (a questionable designation at this point). There was no way to overpower the wind which filled the sail. So I told Rob to release the jib sheet. Which he did. Now I could manage the sail and proceeded to bring her aboard and lash her down with a line I had brought forward from the cockpit.

Well, while we were problem solving, the little boat was progressing apace and had become perilously close to the rock face. Too close really. So, while still securing the sail, I commanded Rob to start his little engine and get us away from the rocks. He did. Nice.

Then the engine stopped dead and would not restart.

Well, with the foresail out of the wind, at least the main could turn us away from the rock face. Good. But, we could only go north due to the effects wind and current. We were at hull speed going the wrong direction in the gathering darkness.

So, I dropped the mainsail and we drifted without steerage in a major shipping lane. Oh did I tell you there were no running lights on the boat? Oh, and no radio.

With a little inspection the cause of the engine failure became clear. When I told Rob to release the jib sheet, and he did, well, this very long line trailing in the water to leeward became entwined with the spinning propeller shaft until she could no longer spin.

Well the good thing is that this smallish boat had a full keel and the propeller was almost visible from the stern. So, Rob held on to my feet and ankles as I immersed my head and chest in the rather cold ocean—cutting at the line with a kitchen knife we located in the cabin.

Believe it or not, we were thus able to remove the encumbering line, start the engine, turn southward, clear Carter point, and begin to relax after a couple of hours of sailing. In our relief we failed to keep proper watch and were nearly run down by a ship us-

ing Hales passage—an unusual route by no means illegal one. That was surprising.

Eight miles later, on a firm dock, I knew a joy I had never experienced before, all thanks to Rob, his little ship, and my judgement.