

The Third of April

The weak sunrise breaking through the dense forest of aluminum masts softly brightens my aft cabin and the gentle drip of the accumulated night dew on the deck above me tap tap taps me awake. I know this day. It is the Third of April and I have been waiting for it. I harbor a fondness for the Third of April. This April Third I will sit back on the deck of my current boat, a comfortable old trawler, sip a glass of champagne, and slip back many years to an earlier Third of April. Just as I have done lo, these many years, and will continue to do with every Third of April left to me.

I was healthy and indestructible in those days. I had survived the Sixties, both the elation and its Southeast Asian legacy. I had re-discovered my childhood fascination with sailing. It had brought me to Chicago on the shores of Lake Michigan on a sunlit clear April morning. My friend Pete and I had often sailed together, him the dedicated and consummate racer, and me the sometimes racer, but more often the gunk-holing cruiser. We made a decent team however, and so he had asked me over the winter to commit to another serious campaign this racing season. Pete had bought a different boat this past winter, because it would rate well in the fleet and he wanted to do the bullet trick for the season, best in class, best in fleet, best in everything. And he felt he had that chance with this particular boat. But as with any serious endeavor, one must have equipment expertise, and for a racing sailor with a new boat, that means time on the water under every and all conditions. We needed to get the boat rigged soon, so we could work out the crew bugs well in advance of the start of racing season. Hence, this year's very early trip to Chicago. And the Third of April IS early during any year on this inland sea. All of April is generally cold and some years the ice will extend out from the shore for a mile or two throughout the entire month. This year the ice was only a dirty gray remnant along the shoreline, nothing much to worry about. There might be a floe or two floating about but since the boat was just under thirty feet, its slower speed presented no serious danger.

The boat had wintered under cover in the Chicago boatyard and so Pete had asked them to prepare her for us, and put her in the water so we could sail her to her new home, Milwaukee, a mere 96 miles due North. But when we arrived at the boatyard an hour before opening, we could see her gleaming blue hull still sitting up high nestled in the wooden and steel cage cradle. She was supposed to have been launched yesterday and been in the water waiting for us. I remarked to Pete that at least they had done a nice job on the topsides and the bottom, and Pete said only because he'd come down two weeks before and done it himself. Of course he would do that, being the perfectionist that he is about racing, he wanted to look for any errant blisters. I should have guessed. Even from this distance, peering through the cross hatching of chain link fence, I marveled at her lines. She was as pretty and as fast looking as Pete had described her. The thin fin keel swept aft cleanly, but

between it and the smallish rudder, she sported an awkward outboard motor lower unit, connected to an inboard engine.

Ahh haaa, the light bulb lit for me. That's why Pete was able to get the rating he's bragged about to me these past months. Good rating or not, overcoming that bulbous underwater drag would not be a walk in the park. We would have to sail above our rating every regatta, every race, every minute, until the line horn sounded, I mused to myself. Pete, of course, expected to do that with every boat he raced anyway, so he saw this stubby under-hull object quite simply, as a gift to us, from the rating committee. To him it was clearly, an edge to exploit. And the smallish rudder, I asked? His reply was the same as every other time in our lives when I asked the hard race question. "Sail faster," he would say to me and it was his stock answer. Uuh huhh... to me that smallish rudder meant many more nearly out of control death rolls, and just a whole lot of white knuckles, while we tried to control her close reaching with the chutes. It would be an interesting season. I knew that much for certain.

But she did look pretty, patiently waiting for us to put her in the bosom of her mother element. I stared hard at her form, her sinuous lines. I lusted to feel her respond to my fingers on her tiller, to feel her move and lift under me, in a fresh spring breeze. I felt that familiar rush. She had captivated me. I was catching the fever. It had been a long winter and I was sick and tired of battling all the bad ice and blowing patches of snow this winter with my little DN iceboat. I needed soft, liquid water gurgling, surging past the leeward rail. I needed to feel that peculiar sea motion and test my sea legs again. And this Third of April, with a steady 12 knots out of the west northwest, looked close to perfection.

We waited for the yard to open, held our breath as the crane lifted her clear of her cradle, and then gently set her upon the murky brown of the Inner Harbor. There is always a frail vulnerability about a boat out of its element. The weight balance when running her on to her railway cradle is critical, being closer to art than mechanics. Only the most seasoned and experienced yardman is trusted to spot boats for the cradle. Looking eggshell-like whether supported by two thin strips of kevlar or riding the railway on a cradle, my mind easily imagines the swift slip and sudden crash to the hard concrete. If this yardmaster had misjudged ever so slightly, over she goes, cracking not only hull, but any plans we might have of getting to know her and ready her in the month left to us before the start of race season. But there she playfully bobbed in the slight harbor chop, smiling at us, we both thought, anxious to test herself against the rest of her new fleet. She was anxious for her personal rendezvous with destiny in our little corner of the sailing world.

Loading gear, sails, and supplies for a twenty hour trip, we rushed, knowing good weather was not common this time of year. Although we would be out nearly 24 hours, both of us considered this sail as though it were a sprint. After a few muttered comments from the boatyard workers about the foolishness of being out on that lake, this early in the year, we slipped our dock lines and glided smoothly and

silently out into the channel under main and 170. It was later than we had hoped, but we passed through the outer harbor jetty entrance, outward bound, at exactly noon. We close reached due North under cloudless skies so clear, the horizon could have been drawn with a palette knife. Our luck was holding, as the wind continued to blow steady at 13 knots, mostly out of the west.

The weather reports predicted mild April weather for another day or two. Of course, mild, in April, on this lake, this far north, is a euphemism. Southern sailors don't easily understand the dynamics of near-frozen water. On this April Third, the sun shone brilliantly and the air temperature on shore was 73 degrees. The water temperature, however, on this Third of April, was 38 degrees, only six degrees above ice. If one of us fell overboard, we would have only six and one-half minutes, 390 seconds, before hypothermia would shut down vital life systems. Offshore the air temperature would remain 70 degrees until about 30 inches above the surface. Then it would drop precipitously to 40 degrees or colder. To deal with this phenomenon we had prepared accordingly, long johns, insulated underwear, parkas, gloves and wool socks, all under our foul weather gear. Certainly, ample enough precaution to deal with the cold.

For three hours the wind blew steady and backed slightly to give us a broad reach, allowing our new lover to impress us with her ability to truly fly over this flat water. I was already day-dreaming about the end-of-season awards dinner. That was how fast she felt under us. As the sun lowered, the warmth left us and we began the layering process trying to stay one step ahead of the chills. The wind began to lighten and our speed dropped accordingly, but nothing could match the drop in temperature. By eight o'clock, we both knew the wind was not going to last the night. Clouds now obscured the stars and ten miles offshore we were chillingly aware of our frailty in an alien environment. Not frightened, since both of us had done ocean passages, we simply became more aware. We wisely gave up on the concept of the two of us staying awake the entire trip and decided on four hour watches at the helm while the other would sleep below in relative warmth. Pete took the first watch, 8pm to midnight and I would take the 12 to 4am shift. I went below, crawled into the down sleeping bag and promptly nodded off, waking only once when I heard sails slatting.

About one half hour before my watch, I got up, made a cup of hot soup for the two of us and went topside to relieve Pete exactly ten minutes before the start of my watch, as is my long standing custom. Nothing could have prepared me for the sight that greeted me in the cockpit. Although seemingly deathly still, we ghosted along over water so flat and opaque, I thought it oily, new asphalt. The water gave off wispy tendrils of mist that rose eerily, wavered, and then disappeared, merging into the surrounding blackness. Stunningly beautiful, frighteningly silent, but I could feel we were approaching near zero boat speed. Pete looked the perfect Jack Frost. The near freezing temperatures caused the mist to condense as white hoarfrost on most surfaces. Pete was no exception. His yellow foul weather now looked as if it were the expensive white gear type. His mustache in the faint light reflecting from

the instruments, appeared painted with whitewash. I laughed as he took the hot cup, his arms and legs moving as though he were 80 years old, stiff from the penetrating, damp cold. We commiserated briefly about the state of the wind and decided simultaneously to crank up the iron genny. We had more than enough fuel on board to motor the entire distance, so as the cold froze our fingers, the hardcore sailor in us melted, and we opted for spending less time out here in the cold, in spite of the spectacular beauty surrounding us.

The chatter-clatter of the engine shattered the tranquility, but the boat surged ahead with speed we'd not experienced in hours. Pete went below to thaw out and grab some shut eye while I settled in to fight the ever encroaching cold, going so far as to wrap a towel around the wooden tiller so it would not freeze to my gloves. Motoring is not pleasing to the senses of the sailor, and it was no different this night, and except for the vain attempts to delay the coldness from seeping into every joint of my body, the four hour watch dragged unendingly. I knew I too looked the Jack Frost image, but the cold had not stopped at the surface. I was chilled throughout the whole of my being. At one point my teeth chattered so violently, I had trouble reading my wristwatch. I could not fathom why the hands on the watch moved so slowly! Surely they too were frozen and my helm duty had been up many hours ago? Ghostly images appeared to me in the near blackness, always fading away as we approached. It was then I began to seriously question my fitness to stay at the helm. Staring at the compass, I had difficulty keeping the boat on course, even though we were motoring over an amazingly flat and lifeless sea.

Numbness took over my limbs and my brain. My eyes took many long seconds to report what they saw, while my attempts to move hand or foot took even longer. I prayed for Pete to relieve me. Asking to be relieved early was incomprehensible, of course, because manhood demanded more of one than simple giving in. Nevertheless, I silently begged him to give me the same ten minutes at the end of the watch that I had given him... or more! I fixated on the closed hatch door and willed him to climb up through it with a cup of hot anything. Were it not for the fear of my tears freezing, I would have cried. Would he never show up?

And then with a suddenness I could not have been happier about, the hatch cover flew back, the mystical hatch opened and my savior, Pete, came shooting out. I just KNEW he had over slept his watch. Now, here he was trying to make it up to me by roaring out of the cabin without having put on his foul weather gear. I would have preferred he had taken slightly longer and made something hot, since I didn't think I could light the stove with my numb fingers. But never mind, at least he was here to relieve me. Now I could go below and find that warm spot I had left in my sleeping bag four hours earlier. In another split second or two, it would be his hands freezing to the tiller, while I scraped the ice off my own gloves below.

But Peter flew past me and past the tiller in a flash, and went directly to the aft lazarette, ripping open the lid and burying his head in the compartment. He popped up a mere moment later and began furiously pumping the long manual bilge pump

handle. This action did not take any long moments for my frozen senses to process. While he was still only one or two pumps into the action I had already turned the boat towards the now out of sight and distant shoreline. Fully thirty seconds passed before I had my fear under enough control to use my voice. "Just how much water is down there," I asked in a shaky voice. "A lot," he replied in a voice as shaky as my own.

The long list of bad things that can happen on a boat was rapidly scrolling across my conscious as we both labored intently, him on the bilge pump and me going over our options, based on what the problem might be. The freezing cold was no longer of any concern to either of us. Cold was not the problem. The problem was we had a hell of a lot of water on the wrong side of the hull and we didn't know how it got there. If... IF... we could control the water coming in... if, if... we could keep the engine from drowning... if, if... we could get the boat on to the shore... if, if, if. The decision tree for each crisis resolution blossomed with many branches in my mind, but all of them dependent on keeping the boat from sinking. The thoughts of those six and one half minutes it would take each of us to die in the icy water, although present, were not all-consuming. The human spirit reacts with action as long as it perceives hope. And after all, we were not yet in the water. If we went in the water, then... then, there would be more than enough time to think of death, but not while there was still so much to do.

After a moment of two, I lashed the tiller and went below to bail with a 3 gallon pail. He had not led me astray. There was a great deal of water above the cabin sole. Had we not noticed a slow lessening of the interior waterline, we would have been forced to send a mayday call. It had only a slight chance of success, since it would take the Coast Guard at least an hour or two before they could launch a boat or call a chopper stationed a hundred miles away. This was still winter. Sailors shouldn't be out on the lake this early in the year! Thirty hot sweaty minutes later we had the water level below the floorboards and we were able to determine the source of the incoming water. A winter-rotted seal between the outboard and inboard thru-hull had given way. More than likely due to the vibration of the engine, since it had not leaked while we had been under sail for those earlier hours. The automatic bilge pump had been wired incorrectly and blew the fuse the first time it went on. So, while Pete slept only inches from the leak, the boat quietly filled herself with water until upon his awakening, he swung his legs off the bunk and dunked them up to his knees in 38 degree ice water. No surprise to me he woke up fast. Determining we could handle the incoming water, we opted to continue our journey, albeit closer to shore. It ended without further incident in our slip at the yacht club.

I would like to report that the two of us had an epiphany that night and forever and the rest of our lives, thought deep thoughts about the meaning of life. Didn't happen that way... at least for Pete. We rarely mentioned the incident in the ensuing years, except to laugh at ourselves at the club bar over a beer. For my part, I had faced mortal danger a few times before that Third of April, and I have faced mortal danger a few more times since that Third of April, but as the years slipped by, I did

have an epiphany. I came to recognize that eventful day as a defining moment in my life.

In the immediate aftermath, I was forced to face several harsh truths about my character. Truths that still haunt here and now as I sip my champagne, sitting contentedly on the aft deck. I think about them. They remain with me. I have learned the lessons over and over and yet they are the same. Three little things that define me and my life. First, I will always be terribly frightened in the face of danger. Second, I will always think I am brilliant enough to get myself out of whatever my stupidity has gotten me into. And third, perhaps the worst revelation of all... I'm not as brilliant as I think I am.

I am ecstatic to make it to each new Third of April. To me, each new Third of April means I might be wrong about myself. I'd like to think that's a possibility. It's why I relish this date and will forever treasure each and every Third of April.