

(2/7/09 ~ 1170 words)

The Night the Boat Danced
By Sandy Nichols Ward

It was July 30, 2008, my fourth night on a 14-ft cruising sailboat named 'Serenity.' My friend Shemaya and I had enjoyed a beautiful day of sailing from Annisquam River and Wingersheek Beach to the coastal waters of New Hampshire, covering about 15 miles in five easy hours. We chose to anchor in the mouth of Hampton Harbor, safe behind the breakwater yet conveniently outside the drawbridge. We planned to leave before dawn to avoid fighting the current of an incoming tide, so we wanted to remain close to the harbor entrance. We dropped anchor and settled in, or tried to, for the night.

Our anchorage position gave us an excellent view of the drawbridge and its operation. Fishing boats large and small, recreational boats, and tall tourist boats (whale-watching? fishing? Or just out for an evening tour?) passed by. We watched the drawbridge open and close, open and close. As the wake of each passing boat reached us, we rocked and rolled rather dramatically in the waves. We told ourselves that this was temporary, that traffic would soon subside. But even as daylight faded into twilight, huge touring boats kept heading out of the harbor.

I became adept at standing with my feet firmly placed on the cabin sole, my forearms braced along the top edges of the companionway and my hands ready to grab hold as the next large wave approached. As the boat rocked, I flexed in place, keeping my eyes on the horizon or the line of bridge lights for perspective. It was almost fun. My years of folkdancing probably helped. Shemaya and I laughed about this dancing action; she and I had originally met at a folkdance.

Shemaya was lying, as usual, on her custom-made bed in the cockpit, where she sleeps, eats, navigates and sails. Health problems prevent her from climbing down into the cabin, or standing for more than a few moments, but she is an experienced sailor well accustomed to the motions of her Peep-Hen, this small cruising sailboat. In June she had sailed from Hartford down the Connecticut River to Long Island Sound and into Narragansett Bay. Some years ago in another sailboat she had sailed solo for two and one half months along the coast of New England. This month she had started in Danversport and was hoping to reach Maine. I had come aboard in Salem to crew and assist her for a week. I had enjoyed a previous week with her in Narragansett Bay, and had returned eagerly. But now I was quite tired and we both needed rest.

Another large boat approached and, to our surprise, slowed down before passing us. That seemed a nice gesture, which we appreciated. But the Captain startled us with a loud announcement through his megaphone, "You are going to go aground!" The tourists standing at the rails of the three decks on his commercial boat looked in our direction as he increased speed and headed out of the harbor, leaving us in mental, as well as physical, turmoil. We pulled out the charts again and measured depth with a lead line. Plenty of depth for us, we concluded. The captain didn't know that our little sailboat

draws only 12 inches and has a flat-bottomed box keel that allows us to explore shallow water and settle at low tide onto mud or sand. We had, in fact, gone aground the previous night on a sandy shore and slept peacefully throughout the process. Still, the tour boat Captain's ominous warning rang in our minds and we realized the potential dangers of this rocky location, especially with the large waves we were experiencing. We consulted the Tide Tables and decided to stay awake until the tide turned. We wanted to watch what position we'd swing into, and measure the depth there.

As the boat bobbed and danced, we discussed our options. We could move further into the harbor, either by lowering our mast to go under the bridge or by requesting that the drawbridge open for us. We debated the idea of a more sheltered location versus the inconvenience of a delay in the morning. Suddenly a sharp crackle sounded to starboard! What was that? A flash of light on the shoreline and another crackle! People seemed to be setting off fireworks in two locations on the south shore. We divided our attention between watching for big waves on one side and for amateur fireworks on the other. Then we heard the whoosh and whistle of a professionally-launched rocket. It rose high above the shore to our north. Beautiful fireworks entertained us for the next hour. Perhaps we were not in the right position for peaceful sleep, but we definitely had a perfect position for viewing these fireworks. Wow! This delightful surprise kept us happy while we waited for the tide to change.

We have since learned that Hampton Beach puts on a fireworks display every Wednesday evening to attract tourists. No wonder there were so many tour boats heading out past our anchorage at the mouth of nearby Hampton Harbor as the sun set! They returned after the fireworks ended and we endured another series of big wakes, but at last the boat traffic subsided. We welcomed the chance to rest and not worry about the big waves.

Our boat, however, kept dancing. We became aware of other forces acting on the hull. The incoming tidal current was strong and turbulent as it rushed past us. Swells from the open ocean began to reach us as the tide rose over rocks near the harbor entrance. The rhythm of the dance changed from the intermittent rocking, rolling action caused by the boat wakes to more persistent, chaotic motion. We wiggled and jiggled in unaccustomed ways. We shuddered and shimmied. Held by the anchor line, we swooped and swayed in response to eddies in the current. It was quite a ride! We were fascinated by the complexities of the motions. Eventually the tide began to go out, pulling our boat around 180 degrees. We measured the depth in our new position and decided it would be safe to stay there for the remainder of the night. Safe, yes, but restful, no! The dance of the boat continued for the next two hours. We could not sleep until the water level fell below the entrance rocks and our boat at last floated calmly at anchor. As planned, our alarm clock rang at 0400 and we prepared to leave the harbor before the next incoming tide. We weighed anchor at 0446, sailed quietly out past the buoys at the harbor entrance, and soon experienced a lovely sunrise. We had barely had three hours of sleep -- not enough for the long day ahead, but at that moment we savored the rose-colored sun and the light breeze helping us sail northward. We also marveled at the past night's events -- the unexpected fireworks and the complexity of tidal currents -- and decided to call it "the night the boat danced."



Bio: Sandy Nichols Ward grew up in Danvers, Massachusetts, and remembers sailing (as crew and ballast) in her father's 16-foot Town Class sloop in Marblehead Harbor in the 1950's. In the summer of 2008, she returned to sailing at the invitation of her friend Shemaya Laurel. Both Sandy and Shemaya live in Holyoke, Massachusetts.