

Broach!!!

By Robert Brodgesell

As dawn came up over the eastern horizon, it brought with it the promise of a glorious day to follow. It was quiet and still and even the gulls had not yet started their noisy morning chatter.

The water was as smooth as glass, it looked as if I should be able to step off the boat and walk on it, and the color was changing from dark gray lead to silver and then to gold as the dawn progressed.

My little pilothouse sloop, anchored at Sandy Island, just south of Comox was rocking to my movements only and the anchor rode hung straight down.

I was late. Normally I like to be underway before daylight, but this morning seemed to be especially beautiful and I thought, what's the hurry.

We were heading to Nanaimo and motoring, or sailing, we would get there some time after lunch. An orange fire ball rose in the east as I handed up the anchor and, glancing sideways, I noticed a ripple disturbing the water surface and felt the touch of a breeze on my face.

After stowing the ground tackle I switched on the radio to the weather channel, the engine still on idle, and was informed of a gale warning in Georgia Strait. I looked out and around and thought we may get some north-westerly later on, but I don't believe the gale part just yet.

We motored out and, clearing the islands, moved some distance out into the Strait, then set a heading for Nanaimo.

By now the winds had freshened, blowing about ten straight down Georgia over our stern. I put the jib out on a whisker pole and after hoisting the main swung the boom out to starboard, opposite the jib, going wing on wing, and shut down the engine.

The little boat put a bone in her teeth and we began to move at something close to hull speed. It felt good, I enjoyed it so much, I didn't notice the wind increasing by the minute.

I stood in the pilot house holding the wheel, the door wide open, when I began to realise, that the wind noise seemed to have become very loud and we were beginning to surf a little, as the larger waves passed under our keel. Now I remembered the gale warning from this morning and switched to the weather channel. The Ballenas Island was reporting north westerlies at twenty, gusting to thirty-five and the Ballenas being in my path, I knew I

had to shorten sail, which meant leaving the wheel to go on deck.

I had not had the boat very long at that time but I knew the only thing she did not do well was keeping on course without a firm hand on the wheel, especially in a rising following sea. My new auto pilot had been ordered but had not arrived yet. It was at this time that I should have turned beam on and struck down all sails, but I didn't. I didn't heed the elements' warnings.

The winds were really increasing now and it took almost a full turn on the wheel every time we were surfing to counteract the yaw. A normal sloop would have been very much overpowered at this stage, but this pilothouse boat does not have a large sail area and was still quite controllable. However, if I let go of the wheel the main would come across and probably take out the traveller, if not worse. I was afraid to turn beam on to the seas now.

I had a tiger by the tail and a little hot point of worry began to glow in the back of my mind.

We were east of the Ballenas, I was getting spray over the canoe stern, we were going much too fast and I had trouble keeping the boat before the wind so as to keep the main out where it was pressed against the shrouds. On the port side the whisker pole was also pressed against the lower shroud and the jib looked ready to rip. I almost wished it would. I could now see the Hudson Rocks marker and thought perhaps I'll be able to ride the tiger for another twenty minutes to get around Horswell Bluff where we would be safely gliding into Departure Bay.

The noise outside was horrendous and looking out the side ports, I could see the spray flying past and the waves racing by. Fascinating, beautiful, exhilarating and scary.

It happened about half a mile north of the Hudson Rocks. Just as I thought we were going to make it there was a sound like a rifle shot. The plastic fitting in the pole had broken off where

it was attached to the mast. At the same time the boat slued to port and went down on her side.

The jib now backing, restrained by the sheet, only made matters worse and the pole, now attached only to the

jib, gone wild, did it's best to destroy everything within it's reach. Now I had to get out on deck and tame the two demon sails flogging in the gale, but first I had to get that loose whisker pole.

I went out onto the heaving, slanted deck, harness on, and worked my way forward, close to the flailing pole and studied it's movements for a few moments, but there didn't seem to be a pattern. I had to connect on the first grab, if I missed, it would probably break my arm. I said to

Oceanus, the god of oceans, "Look, I have made all the mistakes for this day already, so please don't let me make any more."

And he granted my wish.

I grabbed the wild pole and managed to hold onto it long enough to unhook it from the flailing jib, then cleared the sheet and furled the jib by brute force directly on the furling drum. Then I hauled down the main, all the while praying that nothing would jam and that I would stay on deck.

And the boat righted.

We still had about a hundred yards to spare, before being driven onto the Hudson Rocks. The trusted diesel fired on the first turn and the tiger became a pussy cat. We motored around the rocks, around Horswell Bluff and into Nanaimo Harbour.

After tying up to a friendly dock I opened a bottle of wine and gave thanks to Oceanus, pouring half a glass over the side to share with him.

I had learned a lot on this day and in a way I shall never forget.

