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SAILING INTO HUMILITY

by Silver Donald Cameron

"I did not like it," said Marjorie, "when the only part of you I could see above the water was the soles of your little feet."

I didn't like it much, either. The rest of me was underneath Magnus, grappling with a heavy mooring line wrapped around her propeller, the result of pure stupidity. Mine.

We were moored in Blackhall Gut, a narrow finger of water tucked away in the western end of Merigomish Harbour. This huge harbour — winding passages, clusters of wooded islands, broad sheets of water— must be among the most beautiful spots in Nova Scotia, which is saying a lot. A favourite haunt of Pictou County boaters, Blackhall Gut is utterly sheltered, and magically serene.

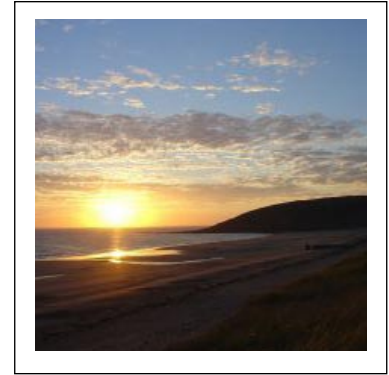
Under the surface, though, Merigomish consists of narrow channels running through broad, shallow mud flats which are almost exposed at low tide. The tides pour in and out of these channels at speeds of up to five knots, which is our boat's usual cruising speed. To conquer a tide like that, her Yanmar diesel has to run almost wide open.

Such tides are common in Northumberland Strait. A few days earlier we had inched into Tracadie Harbour against the ebb-tide, creeping past the breakwater with the engine roaring. We were the first cruising yacht ever to visit East Tracadie. Everyone is intimidated by tides like that racing through a channel which is sometimes only four feet deep — almost exactly what Magnus draws.

But fishermen in 45-foot boats charge in and out of Tracadie at all states of the tide — and once inside, you are in a glorious island-studded estuary, tied up to a fishing wharf with plenty of water alongside, and a warm-hearted community to welcome you. One of the great pleasures of cruising is to visit delightful places that can't easily be reached in any other way.

Handling a vessel under power, however, is an art I have barely begun to learn, though every Maritime fisherman apparently can charge up to a wharf, throw the engine in reverse, gun the motor and stop the boat just millimeters from the pilings. Not me. I can steer the boat forward tolerably well — but when I put her in reverse, I don't know what's going to happen.

That's how we went aground in Tracadie. A fisherman leaving the berth we were in ties a line to the bow, and lets the boat tick over in forward gear with the rudder turned towards the wharf. The stern swings out, and he backs her clear. I tried to back away without swinging the stern out, couldn't do it, hesitated, then tried a tight circle inside the dredged basin — and missed. Magnus lodged herself on a sandbar, pinned by the falling tide. There she sat for the next twelve hours, tilted far over on her side, till the returning tide lifted her off.



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THE COVE

A Divine Coastline Between Sea & Sky



Meanwhile we accepted the hospitality of Kevin and Cathy DeCoste, who live at the head of the wharf, and are well-supplied with tea, coffee, beer, burgers and good humour. The next morning, along with various neighbours and relatives, they came down to the wharf, helped us turn the boat around at the wharf, and watched us safely out the channel.

Our grounding in Merigomish, by comparison, was a trifle. We poked our way in during a spectacularly beautiful thunderstorm — golden sunlight slanting under the black clouds overhead, the water like dancing silver, double rainbows and a deluge of rain. Navigating inattentively, looking about for a spot to anchor, I was carefully watching the depth-sounder. It was showing nearly 18 feet of water when we ran aground.

The side of the channel was like a wall, and Magnus had run right over it. But the tide was rising. We rowed an anchor out astern, and led the anchor line forward to the windlass. Within half an hour we had winched her off.

Then a passing power boater, Reaud Harris, led us to the Pictou Yacht Club guest mooring in Blackhall Gut, where we slept very peacefully. As we left the next morning, Marjorie dropped the mooring line overboard. I put Magnus in gear — and immediately heard the clunk-clunk-clunk of the mooring ball banging under the boat. I had wrapped the line around the propeller. It took me three hours — and five dives — to unwrap it. All Marjorie could see was the soles of my feet.

I later told the story to two Pictou sailors, Ann and “Trap” Stright, who had loaned us their truck to do shopping and laundry.

“What galls me, Trap,” I said, “is that I knew better than that.”

“Sure you did,” nodded Trap. “So did I, when I did it. We all knew better. What’s that got to do with it?”

Sailing is a spiritual education. One of the lessons it teaches is humility.