

The article below by GSA member Drew Jones appeared in the January 2004 issue of Chesapeake Bay Magazine.

### **Headline about article in CBM:**

#### **Reader Rendezvous**

*Night Sail*-It was broad daylight when Drew Jones left the slip for an afternoon sail. But between the wonders of the day and the vagaries of nature, he found himself wrapped in the magic of the night-time Bay long before he made it back home.

### **Night Sail**

By Andrew (Drew) Jones

Night adds to all that it touches. Whether it is romance or loneliness, hilarity or grief, peace or terror, if it occurs within the grasp of night it has a wonder and power that cannot be experienced during the day. Maybe it is because we are used to dreaming at night. We expect reality to bend and twist in the wind like it does in our dreams. When night arrives, the ordinary and mundane take on a magic hue as we wait for the miracles to begin. Unfortunately, night can be capricious. She enjoys mischief as much as wooing. Night's spell, when cast upon something as simple as a trip from the South River to Bloody Point can turn it into the memory of a lifetime.

I am a member of a sailing club that has a small collection of boats. The largest sailboat, a 26 foot Laguna Windrose, is available for charter only after passing a variety of informal training sails. I was on my last sail with a small group from the club, hoping by the end of the afternoon to have my certificate in hand. We hadn't intended to sail after the sunset, but the winds were perfect. The boat slid effortlessly through the warm summer water being driven along by a surprising east wind. The normal routine was to head toward Thomas Point Light and then choose a direction. No one felt like beating all the way to the lighthouse, so the decision was made early to head southeast, close hauled, for Bloody Point. The sun was getting low and we should have been heading back in, but the steady wind was seducing us to go further. The night spell had begun to take hold, and we were following with willing abandon.

I had been so lost in the splendor of sunset, that I hadn't noticed Tom tying lines to the stern cleats. I was completely dumbfounded when he dropped the ladder and climbed overboard. The boat, which was making a steady 5 knots, groaned slightly as he jumped in, grabbed the line that was dragging in the water and began to bodysurf. It may have been that the approaching night had spoken some sort of incantation, or it may have been the blinding sun that was setting right over our stern, but the silhouetted surfer seemed transformed into a porpoise. He sank from sight leaving only the flashing wake of the taught line as it pierced the surface of the water. An uncomfortable few moments later he breached, spun, and sounded again. On and on he flashed, cutting the sunset's reflection in two. The others, grumbling about the boat losing speed, had obviously seen him do this before. But I was under the spell of the coming night and knew I had seen my first merman.

The growing dusk and the approaching shipping channel cut the swim short as the porpoise became a man again and reluctantly climbed aboard. We were almost completely across the bay, and the magnificence of this stretch of water was overshadowed by the flamboyant sun making a grand exit. It seemed that everything worth watching had been in our wake, and my neck was getting stiff from being craned around so long. When I turned to look forward I got my first view of the dusk-dimmed outline of Bloody Point lighthouse. The stars were beginning to show, the western horizon was still glowing after its tryst with the sun, and we were suddenly coming about.

Carefully lining up Thomas Point and Bloody Point lights we ran the narrow path toward home. Almost as if the night was making one last grasp to keep us away from the dock, the wind died. Since we had left the shelter of Selby Bay we had enjoyed a rollicking 15 knot wind. Now we bobbed in a dead calm. I thought nothing of it since I was happy to float the night away beneath the stars, but the more experienced crew suddenly set down the drinks and became carefully tense. They were all staring intently toward the south. A set of lights to the west of Poplar Island was moving toward us with astonishing speed. The wind had died and left us drifting inside the eastern edge of the shipping channel. It was decided that we would motor east and wait out the freighter's arrival before dashing across the channel.

A black shadow the size of a city block came gliding past us with nothing more than a low rumble to announce its arrival. Like some sort of Greek god, its crown of running and deck lights were tangled into the star filled sky. As the stern of the monster slipped past us, John turned on our hand spot. Suddenly a harsh shaft of brilliant light shone on the rusted stern. Its godlike grandeur seemed stripped away and for a moment and it became nothing more than a lumbering freighter heading toward Baltimore with a load of cars. I felt embarrassed for the ship; like the Wizard in Oz, its secret was exposed. The light was only on for a moment, but night would not allow the offense to go unpunished. Our little boat was thrashed by the massive wake of the ship, and I learned to treat the sanctity of the night with respect.

We motored across the channel, humbled by our encounter with the ship and humiliated to be motoring after so many hours of glorious wind. The night was quick to forgive and soon a moderate breeze kicked up from the East. The motor was silenced, the sails unfurled and we raced along through a star-flecked sky that seemed to hang low all about us. The peace of the night seemed to have blown in with the cool east wind. The bay slept and the lights of the eastern shore were the only reminders that we were not the only humans on earth. I was at the tiller again and assumed we were done with night's mischief, but she was not through with us yet.

We were almost to the mouth of the South River when we heard the first throaty growl somewhere beyond Thomas Point. A second growl joined in and came drifting with the breeze along with the dull, heavy slaps of hulls on the chop. The sound floated away with a slight turn of the wind, but soon returned closer and more ominous. This time, mingled into the cacophony, were loud voices that didn't invoke images of sobriety and moderation. Two large powerboats were on a reckless race toward the South River and we were right in their way. There are times when the fear of offending the night is subordinated to the fear of floating in a debris field with a bunch of drunken yahoos. The time had come and the hand spot was pulled out again and blazed against our mainsail. It made a billboard so bright that even the blurriest eyes would know something was ahead.

The growls turned to a purr and the boats swung a wide arc away from us. As quickly as it had begun, the night was still again. The light was quickly turned off so as not to arouse any new mischief.

The wind was almost dead astern, and we ran into the South River surfing down the growing swells. Turning into Selby Bay we found that a gentle breeze had managed to make it over Turkey Point giving us just enough wind to gently glide in. As we moved further into the enclosed harbor we kept expecting the wind to die, but night had turned generous again. We spoke in whispers as we silently drifted past the docked boats. The sleepy glow of lamplight came from a few portholes, but most were still and silent. As we got closer to shore, I began to notice a hissing sound that I could not identify. It followed us all the way into our isolated cove where our dock sat in the darkness. It seemed inevitable that we would need to turn the motor on and shatter the peace, but we made the turn, dropped the sail and floated into our slip on the silent wind.

It was almost midnight as we began to unload the boat. The hissing continued at the end of the dock, but we were too tired to try the riddle. With our arms loaded we headed down the dock marveling at the wondrous night that we had enjoyed. Night had swept us home with a gentle kiss and overlooked our weak moments when we had used the spotlight. Or so we thought. I was brought up short by the back of Bill who was stopped on the dock. I hadn't been paying attention because I was trying to stuff my signed certificate into my pocket before the precious piece of paper blew out of my hand. He was staring into the darkness at the parking lot. A geometrically perfect wall of rain was falling at the end of the dock. It was a slow steady rain that looked like it would last for hours. We were going to get drenched crossing the last 5 yards to the cars. Night had one last piece of mischief to play on us, but it was a small price to pay for all the wonder she let us enjoy.

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