

Gawanus Harbor By Night (From Tales of Cape Ruth, by F.M. Goldfarb)

Summary:

Sailing a Jim Brown designed Searunner 31 Trimaran up New York Harbor and the East River to Oyster Bay, Long Island, without a working motor, at night.

Story:

1. The Awful Truth

Moonraker was a Brown designed open-wing Searunner 31 built around the Huntington area of Long Island in the 1970's by an engineer. She was well built and reasonably well cared for, but for some unknown reason she ended up needing a new owner.

I had just gotten a new job, met Ilene, the woman I would marry a year later, and got a call from a full time teacher and part time multihull yacht broker on long Island whom I had bought my Brown Searunner 25 from years earlier. He said he had a great boat, a "must-see", and since my new fiancé was a sailor who had worked on wooden boat restoration down at the South Street Seaport in New York City, we decided we'd go "must see" the boat.

Long story short, we bought it, and with the help of oh-so happy to go sailing friends, we sailed and motor sailed from Oyster Bay, on Long Island Sound, through New York City, out to a boatyard in Far Rockaway. (Luckily it was not as far as that kingdom in "Shreck" called "Far, Far Away"). Moonraker spent her first winter on our watch there. We kept the name "Moonraker", which is one of the uppermost special sails used on old square riggers, to satisfy the maritime gods. We also really liked the name.

Next spring we had lots of fun getting our new trimaran ready for the trip back to Oyster Bay, where we were renting a mooring for the season from the local yacht service. In short order the time came to leave the boatyard, and so Moonraker, all spiffy and clean, and ready to go, was gently placed back in her natural environment and we prepared to leave the following weekend. Our plan was to leave with the tide, motor sail north through Upper (New York) Bay, up the East River (which is really an estuary), through the infamous and well-named Hell Gate, under the Whitestone and Throggs Neck bridges, and drop anchor for the night in Little Neck Bay, at the westernmost end of Long Island Sound. We'd then proceed on to Oyster Bay the next day.

Of course every sailor knows how plans tend to become "Plan B" (and C, and D, and so on) all too often, and so did ours.

2. Getting Underway:

Planning to leave the dock early afternoon the following Saturday, we managed to leave closer to 5:30 pm, which still gave us plenty of time to get upriver, out into Long Island Sound, and drop the hook for a good nights sleep, and not worry about the tide.

Moonraker had the standard Searunner adjustable cutter rig, with a permanent jib-stay, removable inner staysail stay, mast just forward of the forward companionway, permanent and two running backstays on what the British called “Highfield: levers, which let you tighten the runners as needed when the wind piped up, you were heading downwind in a blow, and anytime extra mast support was needed. For this trip we had set the full mainsail and our number 2 genoa jib (the “genny”), a good all around light to moderate wind strength sail. We also had the two cylinder Kermath Sea Twin motor on. This was also known as the Universal Atomic Two, a small gas engine specifically meant for marine use. The centerboard was fully down, with Moonraker drawing about 6’-6”.

We made nice progress past the railroad swing bridge, which was opened promptly upon our request, John F Kennedy airport across the Bay, the Cross Bay Bridge overhead, and finally Rockaway Point, across from Sheeps Head Bay. Across the outer harbor Staten Island and the Highlands of New Jersey were clearly seen. Night was falling, and so on went our running lights for the first time! Under the Verrazano Narrows Bridge and up into the Upper Harbor. The lights of Brooklyn to starboard, those on Staten Island to Port, and Manhattan lay ahead lit up like an amusement park welcoming Moonraker to her waters.

One reason we were going to drop the hook in Little Neck Bay was that the weather report had possible showers late at night, and we wanted to have one if not two hooks down in case a squall came through.

3. Why I Should Always Listen to My Wife:

Motor sailing up the harbor a noise from under the cockpit said in modest terms that the motor was not a happy thing, and suddenly decided to go on strike, and stop. We were southwest of Governors Island at the time, right where big ferry boats like to go through on their way between Manhattan and Staten Island, and we were now strictly a sailboat. Quickly slowing us down, I went below to stick my head and part of my body in the port side storage area which was our engine room, the centerboard case occupying dead center between port and starboard storage, making both areas somewhat narrow, and I’m a decent sized guy.

“Sweetie, come up here and take a look” my wife called down. Going quickly back to the cockpit I looked and saw to Port a large number of lights which weren’t too far off. “Oh, that’s Governors Island” I said, hold this course, which was heading East then. Back under the cockpit to ask and try to cajole the engine to start again I went.

A few minutes later Ilene called down quite urgently, “GET YOUR ASS UP HERE, FAST!” Knowing that my soon to be wife was a woman to be reckoned with, and hearing the urgency of her voice, no sailor ever moved faster from engine room to cockpit than I did just then. Looking around I saw some docks, which clearly were not on Governors Island. We had more than enough maneuvering room, which we quickly did a “Come About” in and slowly headed back out into the Upper Harbor. Checking the Chart it seems I made a slight error when I said those lights before were on Governors Island. They were really on a large barge working on the Brooklyn side of Buttermilk Channel, which separates Brooklyn and Governors Island, and we had inadvertently sailed into the mouth of what becomes the Gawanus Canal, a well known

commercial channel where it's said bodies tossed in by mobsters simply vanish, as if dissolved by all the chemicals illegally dumped there over the years. The chart called the dock area we had visited "Gawanus Harbor", and so fair a place I never needed to ever visit again.

4. A Leisurely East River Cruise Past the United Nations:

Taking stock, the weather report spoke of improvements with no rain, the current would be going up the East River towards the Throggs Neck Bridge until slack water around 1am, and the wind would allow almost a dead run "uptown". At that point of the trip it would also have been as difficult to go someplace else and drop the hook for the night, or find someplace to tie up until morning. So, we went for it.

Under full main and number 2 Genny, both "wung out", on a port tack (mainsail to starboard) we sailed under the Brooklyn Bridge, Manhattan and Williamsburgh Bridges, viewing the brightly lit skyline as we went by power plants, apartment complexes, the Empire State Building, paralleling the heavily trafficked FDR drive. Approaching Roosevelt Island we made sure to take the West channel, as a bridge over the East side channel wouldn't have sufficient clearance for safe passage. We were making fantastic time as well, since we had a strong 4 knot current helping us all the way to Long Island Sound.

Passing the United Nations, just across the street from where I was working at the time, we flew under the Queensborough Bridge (also known as the 59th Street Bridge), and past Roosevelt Island between the boroughs of Manhattan and Queens, we made a slight turn to Starboard as we rounded the Northernmost tip and jibed the Mainsail onto a broad reach. We were now on a Starboard tack that we held for the rest of the trip.

5. The Gates of Hell:



Just ahead lay the Triborough Bridge and the Hell Gate Bridge/New York Connecting Railroad Bridge. Both spanned the infamous "Hell Gate". Hell Gate has a well deserved reputation, and I had been through it numerous times, but never strictly under sail without a working motor. It's a narrow waterway through which I had seen wind and current go the same direction there, yet watched waves going the other way! Years back, watching a parade of "tall ships" heading towards lower Manhattan, I saw several Dutch Botter Jachts, each around 40 feet or so, go through Hell Gate. These are beamy sailboats with flattish bottoms, use huge lee boards, and have very large and well rounded bluff bows and sterns. At a certain point each Botter Yacht's captain had quite a fright as his vessel suddenly turned 90 degrees from their intended direction of travel, dragged by the eddies and current a short distance, and then turned just as suddenly 90 degrees back to their

original course. The last boat's captain was uncertain if he would be run over by the roughly 150 foot long sailing vessel immediately astern of him. Luckily all went well for him!

The satellite photo shows the route from the tip of Manhattan to the Throggs Neck Bridge at the upper right.

We had the Sea and Weather gods with us that night, as I had never seen such calm conditions at Hell Gate, especially while sailing my new trimaran through it without a working motor!

Sailing between North and South Brother Islands, past the prison on Rikers Island, past La Guardia Airport, and then under the Bronx Whitestone Bridge, it was only another few minutes before we passed under the Throggs Neck Bridge, which marked the Western end of Long Island Sound. It was still only just passed midnight and we'd made our way to Long Island Sound without further incident.

6. Deciding to Forego Sleep and Continue to Enjoy Sailing

Since the night was now so beautiful and we had great sailing so far, we decided to go all the way and sailed from the Throggs Neck Bridge to Oyster Bay. Adjusting sails to a beam reach we now had a nice easy sail, if not exceptionally fast, in light air.

7. Where Oh Where Can Our Mooring Be!

5:00am. Okay, so now, after sailing all night, heading in toward first Cold Spring Harbor, making the turns past the expensive Seawanhaka Yacht Club on the extremely expensive spit of land known as Center Island, we finally entered Oyster Bay, with a light rain washing the grime of New York City off Moonraker. In retrospect I suppose it wasn't such a bad welcome.

Now we had to find our mooring. We decided to rent a mooring from the local Yacht Service this year and see if we like Oyster Bay enough to buy a mooring and keep Moonraker there in the future. We had asked for a mooring location somewhere further from the docks where we could have a bit more room to swing and if we wanted to, to sail easily on and off the mooring, as I had done with my 25 footer from my old club on City Island. We knew the general location and the number, but still had to find it.

The morning sun had now joined us and the light rain had gone away, so we spent a while going up and down the lines of mooring on "our side" of the harbor until we finally found our mooring. Problem was somebody had their 37 foot monohull swinging on our mooring! Dropping the hook close by we then made the mistake of feeding a family of swans that came around. When we stopped, Mom and her two Cygnets swam over to our anchor rode where Mom began instructing her progeny in the fine art of gnawing a nylon anchor line. Dad meanwhile was flapping his rather large and potentially dangerous wings (they can break your arm if you get hit by one), all the while making nasty hissing sounds, and appearing to be considering doing his pirate thing and board the vessel whose inhabitants had the misfortune to stop feeding his family bread bits! After a little convincing with the help of a long oar I had on board the Swan family took their leave and swan off to find another "mark". Ilene and I were ready to hit the sack by

then, and so folded up the sterncastle seats, made up the nice double berth there, and had our first sleep aboard while the sun shown brightly above, but outside, the nice cozy cabin.

8. The Mooring and the Non Sequitur:

Around 1:00pm that afternoon we awoke to find that the 37 footer hanging from our mooring was gone, so we quickly began making ready to hoist anchor and sail over and pick it up. As luck had it, just as we were ready to hoist anchor that boat returns, heading once more for our mooring. An older woman (Mom) was by the bow, apparently ready to grab our mooring again. A younger woman (the daughter) was by the mast, and by the wheel in the cockpit aft was “Dad”.

Looking at them on their boat, getting ready to again prevent us from rightfully and finally resting in harbor on our very own (rented) mooring, I called out to “Dad”:

“Ahoy there! That’s our mooring your heading towards!”

Dad stopped his boats forward motion, looked at his wife and daughter, then called back:

“Someone’s on my mooring!”

After looking at Ilene and thinking for a few seconds I looked back at Dad and called back:

“So TELL HIM TO MOVE.”

Dad, looking more pensive now, looked forward to his wife, spent a second or two looking at his daughter, then turned once more towards us and said:

“Someone’s on his mooring!”

Since I really didn’t care who was on his mooring, I once more looked at Ilene, who looked back at me with the same amount of chagrin I must have been showing. Once more I looked at Dad, and called over:

“So Tell HIM to MOVE!”

Looking one more time at his wife and then his daughter, Dad finally came across and said the one thing that told me that while Dad could afford a boat that must have cost between \$100,000 and \$150,000, he simply didn’t have that much common sense. Pointing to our mooring, he calls back with:

“Mooring numbers are out of sequence!”

At that point the very last thing I wanted to hear was a total non sequitur. Had he actually said something that made sense, like “The Yacht Service put me on your mooring.” I’d have asked him to contact them and have them move him to some other mooring. I might have asked if he’d

mind us sailing over and rafting up until the Yacht Service moved him elsewhere. But no, he could afford a very nice, expensive boat, yet make absolutely no sense whatsoever.

At this point I called over to Dad:

“If you have a problem go to the Yacht Service by the docks and ask them to help you. We’re putting our boat on our mooring NOW!” At which point Dad motored off, presumably to have the Yacht Service relocate him to a more suitable location.

Ilene and I finally raised sail, raised our anchor, sailed over to our mooring, and completed the trip we had started late afternoon the day before.

Later on we found out that several boats had entered Oyster Bay and indiscriminately picked up several moorings. The Yacht Service had then put several boats on temporary moorings, one of which was Mom, Daughter, and Dad on their very nice monohull. Of course, Dad never once had mentioned this fact during our earlier discussion.

Coda:

At the next New York Boat Show we sashayed up to the Universal Motor Company’s booth and told the representative there about our Universal Atomic Two/Kermath Sea Twin. He put both hands over his head, as if to protect himself from falling engine parts, and walked towards the back of the booth. A few seconds later he returned, apologized, and said “That was our only mistake.”