

Sailors Reflect on Life Afloat

Poupette Smith

The Gift

One by one, the southern Grenadines passed by to windward. The sky filled with squall after squall as dusk fell and *Firefly*, our 39-foot S&S cutter, bashed her way north in the 30-knot northeasterly tradewinds. It would have made for a thrilling daysail with the prospect of a cozy anchorage ahead, but my husband, Leo, and I were Tortola-bound, merely bypassing these islands. Sailing close-hauled, despite heavy seas, we managed 7 knots under jib alone.

I emerged fully outfitted in foulies to begin my watch just in time to catch Leo's "Oh, no!" as he stared off to port. Looking in the same direction, I spotted something bobbing up and down in the breakers: a pair of islanders waving frantically from a small open launch. They had tied a bright red T-shirt to an oar as a distress signal. Soon they'd be enveloped by the darkness, with only South America—several hundred miles to leeward—as a possible landfall.

Piracy at sea is no joke—a friend once advised: "Insist they swim naked toward you so they can't hide weapons"—and I suddenly felt extremely vulnerable. *Firefly* is our home and carries neither a gun nor a dog. Yet how could we ignore these people? We decided to assist, but to report our intentions to a third party and deny the strangers permission to board.

Leo started the engine while I rolled up the jib and hailed the square-rigged cruise ship *Sea Cloud* by VHF. (We'd spoken to *Sea Cloud* earlier when her 30,000 square feet of canvas crossed our bow.) I related our circumstances, and they offered to relay our position to the St. Vincent Signal Station on shore.

Meanwhile, Leo and the fishermen had exchanged shouts and agreed that *Firefly* would tow them to Rosebank at the far end of St. Vincent. Bequia was closer, but beating there was out of the question. How we'd locate tiny Rosebank in the darkness was beyond me.

I circled slowly, mindful not to tangle



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Firefly's prop as Leo tossed them our longest line. An hour later we were sailing again, but 1.5 knots slower because of our tow. Our backs presented perfect targets.

The men bounced about in our wake, drenched and bailing continuously, but I still didn't want them aboard. Our cockpit wasn't much drier anyway. "Someone has to bail," Leo pointed out.

I plugged in the spotlight and occasionally checked astern, wondering if straying offshore in open boats was a necessary risk for such fishermen. One of the fellows wore no jacket, so I dug out a spare and placed it in a bag with sodas, which Leo let slide along the 100-foot line.

We identified Kingstown's loom to starboard and radioed the St. Vincent Signal Station to confirm *Sea Cloud's* report. "I hope you know what you're doing," warned the operator. "Why not drop them off in Kingstown?"

"It's to windward," said Leo. "We're sailing north anyway, which is closer for them." It seemed my fears were justified.

We eventually found smoother water in the lee of the island, and I decided the men needed something hot af-

ter such a dowsing. I made soup and poured it into glass jars, wrapped these with towels and placed the lot with some crackers and cheese in a canvas bag. Leo wanted to hand it over the transom in exchange for tips on approaching rocky, harborless Rosebank, so before he pulled them in, I retrieved our loaded flare gun and Mace, and stood guard in the companionway.

St. Vincent's west coast tends northwest then northeast, and we were in for another bumpy ride beyond Layu. I couldn't believe the fishermen wanted to continue in this miserable fashion. Did they regularly power at 15 knots in big seas, or did they have some other ulterior motive?

Rosebank lay nestled behind crags, and *Firefly* sailed within a mile of shore to avoid Bottle and Glass Rocks. As our eyes flicked between the depthsounder and the invisible coast, a cacophony erupted from astern, "In here, mon! Good water, no reef!"

Thirty miles and six and a half hours after finding them, we pulled the men in before releasing them—one final vulnerable moment—but they were eager to row home, and we had barely exchanged names

before Sydney and Sandy said, "We's got a present for you." In thanks, they handed us the only thing they had on board: A big fat watermelon. 🍉



Writer and translator Poupette Smith started working on boats abroad in 1974. She cruises *Firefly* with writer Leo Lindstrand

