

Meeting the Grand Poobah

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Twenty years, several shirt-sizes (and one wife) earlier, my husband, Captain Dick, had submitted an article to San Francisco's legendary sailing magazine, *Latitude 38*, and was given a "Roving Reporter" tee-shirt. "Do we have the Roving Reporter shirt?" he's now asking me.

"What's the emergency?" I ask as I rummage through my locker. Of course I'll have it. It's my favorite tee-shirt, well-worn, roomy and a great color. (Of course, you have to overlook the bleach splotch around the navel area where I unfortunately leaned into my cleaning.) It's my lucky hand-me-down, now that it no longer fits Dick.

"Richard Spindler, the publisher, is here at the Isthmus! Put it on and come ashore so we can show him. It's an antique and I think he'll get a kick out of it!"

"Ta-da!" Sure enough, it's right on top of the pile and pretty soon I'm parading around like a rock star through the tiny outpost of Two Harbors, my 'antiqued' chest proudly swelling. We are told to look for a tall, handsome, broad-shouldered guy with tousled blond hair. That's not much to go on. However, we are determined and give it a stab. No Richard. Nor is anyone aboard his enormous catamaran later that afternoon when we dinghy out to his anchorage.

The next day I ask Dick half-jokingly if I'm required to wear the shirt, again. He pretends to toy with the idea, but let's me off the hook. We're off for a tour of the USC Wrigley Science Center, a fascinating informational session led by three incredibly dedicated graduate students, being presented on Saturdays at 2 pm throughout the summer.

Afterwards, we are leaving the USC area when we spot activity aboard Richard's catamaran, *Profligate*.

“Quick,” he cries. “Let’s grab the shirt!”

That’s what I love about Dick: He’s so “in the moment.” Whereas someone else might be too shy, too lazy, too afraid of rejection, he never hesitates to connect with other people. I learn from him every day.

So we blast our way over to the mooring area, hardly able to restrain ourselves from speeding through the no-wake zone. I dash on-board, nab our *Latitude 38* artifact and we’re off to the cat.

Clearly, the crew has already weighed anchor and is setting sail. “Honey, they look pretty busy,” I say timidly.

Dick is unabashed. “Ahoy, there!” he shouts, waving our shirt like a burgee.

And there he is...there is Richard! Dick yells over the noise of several motors, “I wrote an article for your magazine and got this shirt, probably twenty years ago! I thought you’d be interested in seeing that it’s survived all this time.”

Richard welcomes us. He doesn’t know a stranger. “You want to come out for a sail?” he asks.

My gosh! We feel we’ve been invited aboard a magic carpet ride. We tie our dinghy to Richard’s buddy’s boat and are gingerly wrestled up the steps aboard one the huge cat’s slapping hulls.

Richard may be at the helm, but it turns out the real captain is his significant other, an exotic beauty wrapped in a sarong and handing out assignments to the crew. A commercially licensed sea captain (up to 100 tons), Doña divides her time between orchestrating the preparations for her own birthday celebration and managing the sail. Sailing the enormous vessel turns out to require several hands. Dick is quickly engaged in helping ease off a sheet as the huge mainsail begins to pick up the wind.

With a gentle breeze of 10-to-15 knots or so, we all get to take turns at the wheel.

“You’re doing great,” Richard encourages me during my turn as I reach for that afternoon’s record of 12.6 knots (only held for a few more minutes as it turns out). I’ll have



bragging rights at the bar I am told. I am elated until I hear that means I'll be buying the first round! I'm pretty relieved when I am bested.

As we are wafted along on *Profligate's* enormous twin hulls, I have a moment to talk to Richard, who is the honorary and volunteer 'Grand Poobah' of the annual Baja Ha-ha. This is the famous 750-mile rally-*cum*-race from San Diego to Cabo San Lucas.

I must confess at this point that I had arrived on-board Richard's boat more than a little awed by his reputation. People tend to speak of him as almost a mythical creature – a long-time bastion of the San Francisco sailing community and surpassing seaman: The Grand Poobah, who possesses all the mystique of *Der Fleigland Hollander* (whose fabled ghostly ship would rip past other vessels as they lay becalmed). But in Richard we find no Wagnerian dignitary, stooping to elevate with a bejeweled hand. He's just a guy – a fellow cruiser.

Our spirits are lifted by the conviviality of the hour and that evening we muse about the draw of our calling. We have experienced another example that it's more than the wheel's kick and the wind's song that lend the cruising life its allure; it has as much to do with the camaraderie of our fellow adventurers. The grandness of the Grand Poobah is that he, like us, is on this same journey, blown by the same winds, fair or otherwise. And, in our way, aren't we all Grand Poobahs of our vessels and our destinies?

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