

The turning of the world

Peter Reason is taken by the tides



The flooding spring tide carries my little yacht Coral up the river Tamar, through the wide and busy Hamoaze, where warships are moored in the dockyards and the big chain ferries clank across between Devonport and Torpoint, to the confluence with the St Germans River, a wide expanse of water with extensive mudflats and tidal lakes just below Brunel's famous railway bridge. I steer Coral round the marker buoy into the narrow channel up this tributary, deep enough for her after half-tide.

After about two miles, the river narrows and the banks steepen as it sweeps round a big curve. On the outside of the bend, alongside a cluster of dark pine trees high up the bank and a patch of light-coloured rock on the foreshore, is a small area where the water deepens to some thirty feet at high tide. This is the Dandy Hole, where even a deep-keeled yacht can remain afloat as the tide flows away leaving mudflats all around. It's a suddenly quiet place, away from the bustle of the main river.

Once I am sure Coral is in the right place I drop the anchor and look about to make sure it is holding. The south shore rises abruptly from the water, densely covered with stunted oak and a scattering of pine and alder, the lowest branches hanging over the river. Today the trees are blown around by the breeze, their spring-fresh leaves dancing in a pattern of pastel greens. In contrast the north bank rises in a gentle slope, cultivated fields criss-crossed with lines where a tractor has systematically passed. Just above the shingle beach at the water's edge stands a row of hawthorn trees in the full white of May blossom.

By early evening the river is full to the brim and the stream no longer pulls Coral against her anchor chain. The fresh westerly wind has died back. All is still. There is a twittering of birds

in the trees, from time to time the caw of a crow. And is that an owl I hear call? The sun drops behind the hills, the long shadows cast by trees and hedges deepen; soon, only the high points on the undulating fields catch the light. At this liminal time between day and night, is it my imagination, or can I sense the movement of the Earth as it rolls eastward?

Finally, the sun disappears behind the trees up the river. Directly above, the fattened crescent of the waxing moon appears in the darkening sky, three days past new, Venus shining next to it. "Of course," I say to myself, "spring tides. The sun and the moon are on the same side of the Earth, pulling the water together." I have known this for many years, but today I see it so directly I can almost feel it.

I sit in the cockpit, watching the turning of the world for nearly an hour. I am poised, as it seems is everything around me, waiting for the next move in the rhythm of days and nights, ebb and flow, wind and calm. Even Coral is waiting, swinging quietly this way then that between wind and the remaining tide. And then, ever so gently, water begins to flow downstream. The pressure on her keel becomes more powerful than the force of the light breeze, and she begins to swing. For just a few moments she catches, broadside across the river as if holding the moment of anticipation, reluctant to commit herself; and finally firmly points her bow upstream. The ebb has begun and night has finally closed around me.

Now the new phase has set in I feel released to go about my evening chores. I go below to get ready for the night. **R**

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