

Day 2. The Disaster.

Saturday, December 2, 2000.

Somewhere south of Ensenada Mexico

If something can go wrong, it might not go wrong, but then again it might...and you better have a plan...

We motored all night without a breath of breeze, bundled up in winter ski clothes while on watch to ward off the nighttime chill. Midmorning our Perkins 4236 engine began to labor and started to run hot. Sean reduced the RPM and went to check the engine room. He pulled the first Racor and stared in disbelief at the gooey, black substance dripping from the filter. It was as if the filter had been plunged into a vat of tar. He replaced both primary Racors and pulled the secondary. The secondary looked fine, so it seemed as if the gunk had not gone through the engine. Maybe we were okay. Clearly we had a problem and it would be foolish to continue until we knew for sure that we had fixed it. By this time we were out of range of Vessel Assist, some miles west and south of Ensenada. After a hurried consultation accompanied by big sighs, we turned her around and headed back toward the US and San Diego. Just as we pulled abreast of Ensenada, the boundary cut off for Vessel Assist, our engine died. Dead, nothing, nada, no start, no run, ...no good news here.

We called Vessel Assist via VHF and they told us they could come get us but we had a while to wait as the only available local operator was busy with another vessel and would not be able to reach us until mid afternoon. We gave them our co-ordinates and began sailing back up at about three knots. Mid afternoon came and went. So did dusk, dinner and nightfall. Finally Vessel Assist arrived about ten pm, and the lone operator secured us to his boat, threw open his throttle and started hauling us back at about nine knots! We traveled all night and made Harbor Island, San Diego about dawn. As the sun streaked sky lightened and turned from black to grey to lavender, pink, purple and blue we got our first real look at our white knight.

The Vessel Assist skipper was about twenty-six and looked as if he hadn't seen sleep for days. The edges of his thin T-shirt rippled in the chilly morning air as he untied the towlines. We were all bundled up in fleece and turtlenecks and just as I was wondering why he didn't have a jacket on I got a glimpse of his feet and queries about the cold suddenly seemed insignificant. His feet were black and smudged with soot. Little licks of carbon made their way down his ankles and around his toes. Then I saw his shoes. Charcoal lumps of size 10 Nike's sat in a stream of sunshine on a stern deck marked by the unmistakable remains of a fire. He told us that one of his batteries had caught on fire and as he tried to stomp the flames out his shoes caught on fire as well. He was able to stamp the fire out, but his shoes were crispy casualties and he had no spare pair. He had no jacket because he had gone to work the morning before for a daytime shift and had not expected to need one. His replacement had not shown up and he had now been working for over 24 hours with no sleep. We hastily signed a receipt and wished him sweet dreams.

The fuel dock at Harbor Island had been alerted earlier by Jessica's dad David and was standing by to help with our predicament. We had also called our mechanic in Newport and he was on his way down to San Diego to troubleshoot for us.

Our mechanic arrived and descended upon the engine room. We had picked up a load of dirty fuel and could only say a little thank you to the fates that we were able to get back to the US to deal with it. All of our fuel had to be pumped out and discarded, and the fuel tanks cleaned and filled with new fuel. That of course was only after we figured out what was wrong with the engine and fixed it. Some hours later the engine was pronounced fit, the fuel tanks were filled and with a bit more somber air we set off again for points south.